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Xunzi, Dewey, and the Reinterpretation of Religion

Michael R. Slater*

Abstract

This paper compares the naturalistic interpretations of religion offered by the Chinese Confucian philosopher Xunzi (c. 310-219 BCE) and the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952), and shows how each philosopher reconceived the nature of religious life in fundamentally non-supernatural, ethical, and therapeutic terms. While acknowledging that there are important differences between their respective views—especially on such matters as the nature and scope of ethical knowledge, the nature of ethics, and what form an ideal society will take—and that their views were furthermore shaped by very different historical and cultural contexts, the paper argues that both philosophers nevertheless took this naturalized, ethical and therapeutic conception of religion to be the correct and more profound way to understand religious life, and the best way to develop an appropriate sense of oneness with and reverence for the social and natural worlds that we inhabit. For both Xunzi and Dewey, in short, religious attitudes, experiences, and practices are valuable not because they put us into proper relations with something supernatural, but rather because of their capacity to orient and enrich our lives at both the individual and social levels and put us into proper relations with other human beings and the natural world. Overall, the paper argues that a comparative study of Xunzi's and Dewey's interpretations of religion not only reveals features of their thought that we might otherwise miss, but also helps us to better understand the range of possible forms that a naturalistic interpretation of religion can take.

Keywords: Xunzi, Dewey, religion, comparative philosophy, naturalism

* Michael R. Slater is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Georgetown University. E-mail: Michael.Slater@georgetown.edu

I. Introduction

Over the last three decades a number of studies have been written comparing the views of thinkers from the Chinese and Western philosophical traditions.[1] The best of these studies have not been idle comparisons for comparison's sake, but have rather helped to show that thinkers from very different cultures, times, and places have thought deeply about many of the same philosophical issues and problems, and have also arrived at recognizably similar—but not identical—views.[2] Comparative studies of this sort are valuable for many reasons, but three are especially noteworthy. First, they challenge the cultural chauvinist assumption of many Western philosophers that philosophy has only been practiced in the West, at least in any serious and sophisticated way.[3] Second, they challenge the strongly relativistic assumption of some postmodern thinkers that human beings from different cultures, times, and places—writing, furthermore, in different languages and using different conceptual frameworks—could not have asked similar questions or arrived at similar views, which implies that the very attempt to make such comparisons is impossible and therefore pointless.[4] (A radical particularism of this sort, which affirms the

1 I would like to thank Philip J. Ivanhoe and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this essay.

2 There are too many outstanding works to list here, but notable book-length examples include Yearley (1990), Carr and Ivanhoe (2000), Stalnaker (2006), and Cline (2013).

3 For a penetrating analysis and critique of such attitudes in the discipline of philosophy, see Van Norden (2017).

4 Some postmodern thinkers also seem to be drawn to such views because of ethical worries they have about the appropriateness or propriety of cross-cultural studies. The thinking often goes something like this: since the enterprises of comparative philosophy and comparative religions in the past, and particularly in the nineteenth century during the heyday of Western imperialism, were often practiced with the aim of showing the superiority of the home philosophical or religious tradition (i.e. Western philosophy or Christianity), those enterprises are and must be inherently tainted by this historic association. In my view it is entirely appropriate to worry about and correct for biases in how we study and appraise the philosophical and religious views of other cultures, times, places, and also right to be appalled by the shameful history of Western colonialism and imperialism. Nevertheless, it is an obvious instance of the genetic fallacy to infer that the comparative enterprise *as such* is ethically suspect because past practitioners of that enterprise were biased in favor of their home traditions, or held culturally imperialistic or chauvinistic assumptions, etc.

reality of cultural differences but effectively denies the reality of cultural similarities—and, to be frank, our common humanity—is still widespread in many areas of the humanities today, even if it does not withstand careful scrutiny.) And third, good comparative studies can help us to see aspects of a philosophical issue or problem that we might not have recognized otherwise, and to see different but equally reasonable ways of responding to a common issue or problem (even if we are not equally persuaded by every response). In brief, and at their best, comparative studies of the sort I have described challenge ethnocentric and chauvinistic cultural assumptions on the one hand and strong forms of cultural relativism on the other, both of which are potential obstacles to the enterprise of comparative philosophy; and they also help us to envision new constructive possibilities for addressing philosophical problems, and to assess competing responses to those problems in more informed and perspicuous ways.

In this paper I hope to make a small contribution to this body of literature by examining some of the remarkable similarities—as well as some of the equally important differences—between the religious thought of Xunzi (c. 310-219 BCE) and John Dewey (1859-1952). More specifically, I want to examine their views on such matters as the nature of religious rituals and religious devotion, and the need to think about such matters (or so they argue) along non-supernatural and therapeutic lines, as matters that do not really concern supernatural beings or powers but rather human beings and what creatures like ourselves need in order to flourish. Part of what makes a comparison between these thinkers potentially illuminating is that both argue that religious practices and beliefs should be understood as symbolic ways of representing human emotions, attitudes, values, and ideals, and that these symbolic representations, in turn, serve a range of important practical and therapeutic functions in human life. At the same time, however, Xunzi and Dewey differ in their understanding of the kinds of practical goods that such symbolic representations function to realize and place an emphasis on relatively different aspects of religious life.[5]

[5] To make such claims and comparisons is immediately to invite controversy in the discipline of religious studies, where "religion" itself is a contested term and the category

One of the first things that needs to be acknowledged in a comparative study of two thinkers from very different times, cultures, and philosophical traditions is that there are important—and at times dramatic—differences between them. And it is no exaggeration to say that Xunzi and Dewey were, in many ways, dramatically different philosophers. To give but a few examples, Xunzi was a classical Chinese philosopher committed to the teachings of Kongzi ("Confucius," 551-479 BCE) and to preserving and defending the Confucian Way (*dao*)—with its hierarchical model of organization for society and its traditional rites, roles, and account of the virtues—against its rivals and critics. Dewey, in contrast, was a contemporary American pragmatist philosopher committed to progressive secular democratic values and to the application of the scientific method (or the "method of intelligence," as he preferred to call it) to virtually every sphere of human life, including how we think about philosophy and its problems. And whereas Xunzi believed that the rites, roles, and norms of the Confucian Way had been invented and brought to a state of perfection by a group of sages in the distant past, and that the Way provided the only proper model for human conduct, Dewey believed that no actual human belief, value, or practice was immutably true or incapable of improvement, and that traditions such as Confucianism or Christianity should be open to intelligent modification and even replacement in the light of ongoing human experience and reflection. These are striking and significant

of religion (as it is most often called) is widely viewed by many contemporary scholars of religion as deeply fraught, on the grounds that it is an originally Western concept that does not properly apply outside of a modern Western context, or is bound up in the historic legacy of Western imperialism, or both. Yet, many of the things that we use the concept of religion to understand, such as beliefs about spiritual beings or powers and practices associated with them such as rituals, are also things that Xunzi and other ancient authors discussed, even though they did not specifically use the term "religion" to do so. I shall assume in this paper that Xunzi had a concept of religion, even though he did not use a specific term that is an exact cognate of our term "religion," for the very good reason that he wrote about the nature of what we call religious rituals and argued that they are best thought of not as attempts to appease spirits or to predict and control the course of future events, but rather as ways of ordering and beautifying human life and of promoting moral self-cultivation. For a nuanced response to the view that the absence of a term necessarily implies the absence of a concept, see Bryan Van Norden's discussion and critique of what he terms the "lexical fallacy" in Van Norden (2007, 21-23).

differences, and ones that should be borne in mind in any attempt to compare thinkers who not only inhabited very different historical and cultural contexts, but who also held quite different—and in some cases, incompatible—views about such matters as the nature and scope of ethical knowledge, the nature of ethics, and the nature of a good society.

Nevertheless, both Xunzi and Dewey sought to naturalize the way their contemporaries thought about the nature of religion, and to replace a traditional focus on beliefs and practices associated with a supernatural realm with a therapeutic focus on the underlying ethical and social-psychological function of religious attitudes and experiences (Dewey) or religious practice (Xunzi)—broadly speaking, its capacity to help us lead flourishing lives and to improve our relationships both with other human beings and with the rest of the natural world. Moreover, both philosophers not only took this naturalized and therapeutic conception of religion to be the correct and more profound way to understand religious life, but also as the best way to develop an appropriate sense of oneness with and reverence for the social and natural worlds that we inhabit. These are hardly trivial similarities, and they not only enable us to draw meaningful comparisons between Xunzi's and Dewey's religious views but also to understand better the range of possible forms that such views can take. Careful comparative study can also put us in a better position to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of those views, if we are so inclined, and to suggest ways in which such views might be improved upon and perhaps even defended today.

II. Xunzi

Like other members of the Confucian tradition throughout much of Chinese history, Xunzi identified himself as a *ru*—a learned or cultivated person—who was devoted to the teachings of Kongzi and to the Way (*dao*) of the ancient sages and sage kings.[6] As Eric Hutton observes:

[6] As many scholars have shown, the term "Confucianism" was developed by Jesuit missionaries to China in the sixteenth century, who Latinized a later honorific title

> These *ru* thinkers believed that what the ancient sage and sage kings practiced and taught—and hence what they themselves likewise practiced and taught—was the Way (*dao*), that is, the proper way to live and to organize society. They believed that knowledge of the Way was preserved in certain "classic" texts, which they accordingly treated as revered objects of study. In turn, to live according to this Way required practicing certain rituals (*li*) and exercising certain virtues. The most of important of these virtues are *ren*, which includes caring for others as a central element, and *yi*, which involves a devotion to what is right. On their view, in embodying the Way to the highest degree, one becomes a gentleman (*junzi*) or even a sage. Furthermore, they believed that such cultivated people possess a kind of moral charisma (*de*) that makes others friendly and supportive to them. The combination of these factors, the *ru* thought, explained why the ancient sage kings were able to be great leaders who brought peace and prosperity to the whole world, and hence these thinkers hoped to put an end to the chaos and suffering of the Warring States era by practicing moral cultivation and by getting others, especially rulers, to cultivate themselves.[7] (Hutton 2014, xxiv)

During Xunzi's time this *ru* or Confucian tradition faced a number of external challenges from rival thinkers and schools of thought, including the Mohists and the Daoist teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and many of Xunzi's writings are devoted to the criticism of these rival philosophies and a corresponding defense of the Confucian Way and its rituals (*li*), which for early Confucians included not only special

for Kongzi, "Kongfuzi," and applied it to the tradition devoted to his teachings. Kongzi himself was not the originator of the *ru* tradition, however, and like most later "Confucian" thinkers he understood himself as the inheritor and transmitter of a body of texts, norms, and rituals that stretched back to the earlier Zhou dynasty and to even earlier sage kings that preceded it. Although some scholars of early Chinese history have objected that there was no such thing as "Confucianism" during the classical period, on the grounds that there was no single term used during this period to designate the Confucian tradition, such objections appear to have arisen—as Philip J. Ivanhoe, Bryan W. Van Norden, and others have argued—by confusing the distinction between a *term* and a *concept*. See Ivanhoe (2007, 211-20, especially 216n10) and also Van Norden (2007, 21-23).

7 All references to the *Xunzi* are to the Hutton translation. I have omitted the Chinese characters for the italicized terms in the quotation above, along with Hutton's note that he translates *de* as "virtue" in his translation of the *Xunzi*.

rites or ceremonies but also the traditional social roles, norms, and practices that structured everyday life.[8] Xunzi also believed, however, that the Confucian tradition faced a number of internal threats from thinkers who identified themselves with the tradition but had distorted or abandoned its true teachings and practices—most notably Mengzi—and some of his writings offer trenchant criticisms of their views, particularly on such topics as human nature and moral psychology, the source of Confucian ethics, and the role of ritual in the Confucian program of moral cultivation.[9]

One of the most important and well-supported insights of modern scholarship on Xunzi, however, has been to show the extent to which his philosophical views and writings were influenced, often in subtle ways, by many of the very thinkers and texts that he criticized. This is especially apparent in the case of Daoism. Whereas earlier Confucian texts such as the *Lunyu* (*Analects*) and *Mengzi* ultimately grounded their ethical and political claims by appealing to the authority of Heaven (*tian*), maintaining that Heaven has endowed human beings with a distinctive ethical nature, that it has a plan for human beings, and that it is—at least occasionally—a force for good in the world, such views are noticeably absent in the *Xunzi*.[10] Indeed, one finds there a view of Heaven that has no obvious similarity to the vaguely theistic views found in the *Analects* or *Mengzi*, but which is noticeably similar to the impersonal and amoral view of Heaven that first appeared in Daoist texts such as the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. As Hutton argues, the latter

8 I will follow the conventional practice of referring to the views found in texts such as the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* as "Daoist," although the latter description is sometimes contested by historians today, and to Laozi—the mythical author of the *Daodejing*—as if he were a historical person (which he probably was not).

9 I have self-consciously avoided using the term "morality" to describe Xunzi's ethical views in this paper, so as to avoid certain associations that some readers may have with that term (e.g. a concern with the nature of distinctively moral obligations or duties and the specification of those obligations or duties in terms of rational principles or rules). I occasionally use the term "moral" when describing some of Xunzi's views (e.g. his views on moral psychology or moral self-cultivation) because this is the standard usage in contemporary philosophy, and like most contemporary philosophers I do not mean to draw a technical distinction between "morality" and "ethics" when I do so.

10 For a comprehensive discussion of this issue, see Ivanhoe (2007).

texts used that view "to undermine *ru* thinkers as well as the Mohists, who had both appealed to a more theological conception of Heaven as supporting their moral and political programs; all agreed that humans ought to model themselves after Heaven, but if Heaven is an impersonal, amoral force, then following its model actually leads one away from the *ru* and Mohist ideals" (2014, xxix). Hutton continues:

> Strikingly, Xunzi adopts nearly the same conception of Heaven as one sees in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, but then argues that precisely because Heaven is so different from human beings, it should not be our model for behavior, and instead there is a unique role for human beings to play in the world with its own distinct set of moral standards. In this manner, Xunzi takes this notion of Heaven borrowed from others, turns it around, and uses it to attack his rivals while defending the *ru* tradition. (Hutton 2014, xxix)

Among the most remarkable and unprecedented features of Xunzi's philosophy, then, is its simultaneous break with the earlier Confucian tradition regarding how Heaven and its relationship to human beings should be conceived, and its corresponding adaptation and reworking of an originally Daoist view for distinctly Confucian purposes.[11] Rather than directly arguing against the older Confucian view of Heaven as a mysterious divine being or force that possesses some degree of awareness and intentionality, that has endowed us with a distinctive ethical nature and has a plan for the world, and that sometimes intervenes in the world to reward virtue and punish vice, Xunzi instead espouses a view of Heaven that looks very much like what we mean by "Nature" today, and argues against supernatural ways of understanding human affairs and events in the natural world. As Xunzi writes in his "Discourse on Heaven":

> If stars fall or trees groan, the people of the state are filled with fear and say, "What is this?" I say: it is nothing. These are simply rarely occurring things among the changes in Heaven and Earth and the transformations

[11] I discuss this aspect of Xunzi's philosophy at greater length in Slater (2018).

> of *yin* and *yang*. To marvel at them is permissible, but to fear them is wrong. Eclipses of sun and moon, unseasonable winds and rain, unexpected appearances of strange stars—there is no age in which such things do not occur. If the superiors are enlightened and the government is stable, then even if all these things come about in the same age, there is no harm done. If the superiors are benighted and the government is unstable, then even if none of these things comes to pass, it is of no benefit. The falling of the stars and the groaning of the trees are simply rarely occurring things among the changes in Heaven and Earth and the transformations of *yin* and *yang*. To marvel at them is permissible, but to fear them is wrong. (*Xunzi* 17.136-149; see Hutton 2014, 178-79)

Likewise, in his discussion of religious rituals such as the rain sacrifice and divination he says the following:

> One performs the rain sacrifice and it rains. Why? I say: there is no special reason why. It is the same as when one does not perform the rain sacrifice and it rains anyway. When the sun and moon suffer eclipse, one tries to save them. When Heaven sends drought, one performs the rain sacrifice. One performs divination and only then decides on important affairs. But this is not to be regarded as bringing what one seeks, but rather is done to give things proper form. Thus, the gentleman regards this as proper form, but the common people regard it as connecting with spirits. If one regards it as proper form, one will have good fortune. If one regards it as connecting with spirits, one will have misfortune. (*Xunzi* 17.177-186)

What we think of as religious rituals, then—and this is also true of rituals in general on Xunzi's view—are best thought of as human practices designed to give a proper ethical and aesthetic form to human life. And ritual, in turn, has a fundamental role to play in realizing the larger aim of the Confucian program of ethical self-cultivation at both the individual and social levels, which is to form what Xunzi calls a harmonious "triad" between Heaven, and Earth, and human beings. He writes that when "Heaven has its proper seasons, Earth has its proper resources, and humankind has its proper order—this is called being able to form a triad. To neglect that whereby we form a triad and wish instead for those things to which we stand as the third is a state of confusion" (*Xunzi*

17.33-39).[12] This way of ordering and orienting human life in relation to the world can be understood as religious in character, so long as we are prepared to allow that religious commitment does not necessarily require such things as belief in or devotion to the supernatural.

Xunzi's "naturalized" view of religion and religious rituals has a number of interesting features. First, the reason why it is important to understand the true nature of ritual on his view is not because there is something particularly important about holding true beliefs about the nature of reality; indeed, Xunzi had little if any interest in what we might think of as natural science, and did not defend anything like a modern scientific naturalist worldview of the sort espoused by many contemporary atheists.[13] Rather, he held that it is important to understand the true nature of ritual so that we can understand and appreciate the practical value of ritual for human life.[14] Second,

12 For Xunzi's view that human beings can and should form a harmonious triad with Heaven and Earth, see *Xunzi* (9.290-302, 17.27-49, 19.359-374). The overall sense of the passage quoted above is that the natural world (i.e. Heaven and Earth) displays its own regularity and orderliness, and in order for human beings to live in harmony with each other and with the larger natural world they must follow the Way, above all the rituals which constitute it. The natural forces represented by Heaven and Earth bring us into existence and provide the resources that can sustain us, on Xunzi's view, but without the Way human beings, guided by their natural, selfish inclinations, will squander those resources, descend into a state of chaos, and ultimately destroy themselves. Xunzi, of course, does not show why only the Confucian Way can perform this ordering function in human life. A more generalized version of his view, however, seems both plausible and especially pertinent today in light of the current ecological crisis: namely, that human life is chaotic and destructive without a culture of the right sort, one that not only enables human beings to flourish and live in harmony with each other but also enables us to live in harmony with the natural world of which we are part.

13 Xunzi writes: "A saying goes, 'As for anomalies among the myriad things, the *Documents* does not explain them.' As for unnecessary debates and unimportant investigations, abandon them and do not study them. As for the *yi* [rightness or correctness] of lord and minister, then intimate relations of father and son, and the differentiation of husband and wife, polish and refine them daily and do not let them go" (*Xunzi* 17.169-175).

14 Some contemporary theists might object that Xunzi simply seems to assume the truth of an anti-realist view of religious rituals, one in which the objects of those ritual practices do not really exist, and that it is entirely possible that religious rituals both function to realize certain practical psychological and ethical goods in human life *and* to put us into proper relations with spiritual beings. That point is well taken, but of course it can also be asked whether any theists have ever managed to show in a neutral, non-question-begging way that God or other spiritual beings exist, or even probably exist.

it is not clearly important on Xunzi's view that everyday people be "converted" to this naturalistic view of how the world works and the nature of religious rituals, or to have their supernatural worldview dispelled or disenchanted. What matters, instead, is that learned people (and especially magistrates and rulers) recognize the importance of such rituals for ordering or giving proper form to human life, whether by expressing powerful feelings and emotions, cultivating certain ethical sensibilities and attitudes, or by creating satisfying aesthetic experiences. The rituals should be performed whether we "believe" in them or not according to Xunzi, and their real value does not lie in the effects that they ostensibly produce in the physical or natural world—indeed, they produce no such effects on his view, and are not really about spiritual beings at all. Rather, the real value of rituals lies in the therapeutic effects that they produce in the human social world and in the lives of human beings.

For Xunzi, then, the purpose of rituals is to bring structure, order, and beauty to human life, and to give expression and refinement to a variety of powerful human feelings, emotions, and dispositions.[15] "In every case," he claims, "ritual begins in that which must be released, reaches full development in giving it proper form, and finishes in providing it satisfaction. And so when ritual is at its most perfect, the requirements of inner dispositions and proper form are both completely fulfilled" (*Xunzi* 19.119-123). For example, funeral rituals might appear to be ways of ministering to, or even of guiding or controlling, the spirits of the dead. But on Xunzi's view they really function at a deeper therapeutic level to help the living express and process their feelings of sorrow—indeed, their complex feelings of loyalty, love, respect, loss, and grief—and to move forward in appropriate ways with their lives. He writes:

And I think that most contemporary atheists and agnostics would clearly answer 'no' to that question. Rather than taking a side on this issue here I shall simply point out that reasonable disagreement seems to exist about such matters, which cannot clearly be resolved by the available evidence.

[15] Hutton observes that, for Xunzi, rituals function both to *display* and *cultivate* certain attitudes and emotions in human beings, and also "allot different responsibilities, privileges, and goods to different individuals, and thereby help to prevent conflict over these things among people." See Hutton (2014, xxvii).

> Overall, ritual works to ornament happiness when serving the living, to ornament sorrow when sending off the dead, to ornament respect when conducting sacrifices, and to ornament awe-inspiring power when engaged in military affairs. This is something in which the hundred kings were all alike, and something in which ancient times and the present are one and the same, though there has never been anyone who knows when they began. (*Xunzi* 19.418-424)

In each of the rituals that Xunzi mentions here, an important feeling or emotion is identified as central to the functioning of the ritual in question, and the purpose of the ritual is to "ornament" those feelings or emotions, providing both a context and a means for their proper expression, and a way of making those expressions sacred and beautiful.[16]

The rituals of the Confucian Way are sacred on Xunzi's view, then, but what makes them so is not that they put us into beneficial or appropriate relationships with spiritual beings, but rather that they connect us appropriately to the natural and human social orders; serve to ornament powerful human emotions such as happiness, sorrow, respect, and awe; and help us to become and remain certain kinds of people—ones who are virtuous and have well-ordered inner lives, and who, at the same time, live in harmony with other human beings and the rest of the natural world. If one conceives of religion in terms of the sacred—and there is a venerable history to this way of conceiving religion that includes such important theorists of religion such as Emile Durkheim

[16] I use the word "sacred" here not to denote something supernatural, but rather in contrast to the "profane" or mundane aspects of everyday life. In claiming that rituals are sacred I mean that they are special, solemn practices, to be performed with appropriate emotions and attitudes such as joy, sorrow, reverence, mindfulness, and devotion. Such practices can be and often are associated with beliefs about supernatural beings or realities, but there is no necessary connection between ritual and the supernatural. A commencement ceremony, for example, might or might not involve a prayer or invocation, but the basic function of such rituals in both cases is to create a "rite of passage" for graduating students, one that not only publicly acknowledges and celebrates their achievements but also marks the end of one period of their lives and the beginning of another. Rituals, in this sense, are also distinct from merely habitual and mundane activities that do not have a sacred or special character, such as the act of brushing one's teeth in the morning and before bed.

and Mircea Eliade—then Xunzi's devotion to the Confucian Way would seem to qualify as religious. Indeed, it may even be appropriate to say that ritual participation for Xunzi involves, or can involve, having certain kinds of religious experiences, if we understand these not as experiences of putative religious objects such as spiritual beings or a supernatural dimension of reality, but rather in terms of powerful feelings and emotions that are produced through participation in ritual itself.[17] To participate in the rituals of that way of life does not require believing in the reality of spiritual beings according to Xunzi, nor is that belief required either in order realize the practical, therapeutic functions of ritual. All that is required is acting *as if* the spirits exist, or as Mark Berkson has argued, "a form of sophisticated pretending or play" (2014, 120). This is especially clear in Xunzi's analysis of funeral rituals, which on his view use semblances of life—in some cases, ones that are highly specific to the deceased person—to achieve the two-fold aim that I mentioned previously, namely that of expressing "the requirements of inner dispositions and proper form." As Xunzi explains, the funeral rites "use life to ornament death—they make abundant use of semblances of the person's life to send him off in death. Thus, one treats the dead as if still alive, and one treats the departed as if they survive, in order that end and beginning be given one and the same care" (*Xunzi* 19.377-381).

As a number of contemporary scholars have observed, Xunzi's conception of the nature of ritual has a number of similarities with the structural-functional theory of ritual developed by Durkheim, although it remarkably predates Durkheim's theory by more than two thousand years.[18] There are also, of course, some important differences between

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[17] Durkheim famously describes the heightened feelings and emotions that ritual participation can evoke as a form of "collective effervescence," and like Xunzi he conceives of ritual along broadly humanistic or naturalistic lines, as sacred practices that appear to concern spiritual beings but in reality function to bind the members of a community or society together. For Durkheim's account of the nature of ritual and his sociological theory of the nature of religion, see Durkheim (1912).

[18] See, for example, Radcliffe-Brown (1965, 153-77), Campany (1992, 197-231), and Robson (2014, 135-57). Against both Radcliffe-Brown and Campany, however, Robson argues that "while there may be some significant similarities between Durkheim and Xunzi on certain points, there are nonetheless some key aspects and fundamental points that are significantly different" (139), including Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence" (139-41), Xunzi's normative insistence on both the correct form and correct content of

Xunzi's account of ritual and those developed by contemporary Western social scientists such as Durkheim. To give but one example, Xunzi was a committed member and defender of the Confucian tradition that he reflected upon, whereas modern Western anthropologists and sociologists of religion typically seek to adopt an "objective" and "value-free" scientific perspective on the cultures and societies that they study. Nevertheless, the attempt to explain ritual in broadly natural as opposed to supernatural terms and to view it as a symbolic means of realizing certain valuable social, psychological, and ethical ends is not unique to the modern West.

In addition to reconceiving the nature of Heaven, and in keeping with his naturalized and ethical account of the nature of ritual, Xunzi also offers a novel account of the *origins* of ritual. Earlier Confucian thinkers like Kongzi and Mengzi believed that human beings have been endowed by Heaven with a distinctive ethical nature, a belief that, in turn, lent support to their ethical and political views, including their common belief that Heaven has a plan for human beings and that following the Way enables us to fulfill that plan. Mengzi, however, developed this idea considerably further than anything one finds in the *Analects*, arguing that human beings possess an innate moral or ethical sense and that, as Philip J. Ivanhoe observes, by developing our moral sensibilities we are fulfilling a plan that Heaven has inscribed on our hearts (see Ivanhoe 2000, 17-18). This innate sense, or as Ivanhoe more precisely puts it, "four nascent moral senses: for benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and right and wrong"—is both visible and active in normal human beings on Mengzi's view, and if a person engages in a conscious and concerted effort to cultivate these moral sprouts (*duan*) within the context of a proper social environment she will eventually become virtuous (see Ivanhoe 2000, 18-22).[19] Xunzi worried, among other things, that a view of this sort undermined Kongzi's emphasis on the importance of ritual and the role of teachers

ritual (141), and Xunzi's view that ritual does not—as it does for Durkheim—distinguish the "sacred" from the "profane," but rather encompasses virtually every aspect of life, from special ceremonies to everyday activities (143-44).

[19] For Mengzi's account of the four moral sprouts, see *Mengzi* 2A6.

in learning to follow the Way. He also believed, in stark contrast with Mengzi, that human beings lack any kind of innate ethical sense, and that in order to become good they must turn to social ethical norms and practices that are external to themselves. As Ivanhoe has aptly remarked, on Xunzi's view "we begin life in a state of utter moral blindness" (2000, 32). He explains:

> Morally, in our natural state, we are rudderless ships. According to Xunzi, we have no innate conception of what morality is; we would not recognize it even if we were to see it plainly before us. Prior to acquiring a proper education, moral categories simply are not part of our view of the world, any more than an appreciation of the notion of irony and the other beauties of literature is innately part of our nature. In the pre-social state of existence, we are led exclusively by our physical desires. In a world of limited goods, inhabited by creatures of more or less unlimited desires, it is inevitable that the result is destructive and alienating competition. This is what Xunzi means by his claim that human nature is bad. In order to reform our bad nature, we must sign up for and successfully pursue a thorough, prolonged, and difficult course of learning. We must re-form our nature—as a warped board is re-formed by steam and pressure—so that it assumes a proper shape and can fit into the grand Confucian design. This grand design is a plan for individuals, families, and society, that provides everyone with roles to fulfill, much as the score of a symphony describes for the members of an orchestra the different parts to play. The Confucian scheme was worked out over long periods of time by a series of gifted sages, through a process of trial and error. It alone provides the way to bring human needs and desires into a harmonious balance with Nature's capacity to produce goods. (Ivanhoe 2000, 32)

Although Mengzi and Xunzi were both committed to Kongzi's teachings and to the rituals, norms, and practices that comprise the Confucian Way, they nevertheless differed sharply in their understanding of the origins and normative basis of the latter.[20] To quote Ivanhoe once more, "whereas Mengzi saw these practices and obligations as the refined

[20] I discuss Xunzi's views on the basis of Confucian ethics at greater length in Slater (2017).

manifestation of our nascent moral nature"—a nature that, again, Mengzi believed had been endowed in us by Heaven—"Xunzi viewed them as wholly *artificial*, the accumulated wisdom of past sages" (2000, 33; see also 2014). In short, while Mengzi believed that the Confucian Way and its ritual tradition were ultimately based on—and, indeed, the fulfillment of—a divine plan that was authored by Heaven and inscribed on our hearts, Xunzi maintained that they had their origins in the deliberate efforts (*wei*) of a remarkable group of human beings—the ancient sage kings—who possessed unique insights into human nature and the workings of the natural world, and who used those insights to construct a system of rituals that enabled human beings to live in harmony with one another and Heaven and Earth. As Xunzi writes at the beginning of his "Discourse on Ritual":

> From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and *yi* in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that they two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose. (*Xunzi* 19.1-11)

The philosophical and religious significance of this naturalistic account of the origins of ritual should not be overlooked, for Xunzi's view effectively rejects one of the basic assumptions of the earlier Confucian tradition: namely, that the rituals, norms, and practices of the Confucian Way have—and, indeed, require—a divine or supernatural foundation.[21]

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21 As Philip J. Ivanhoe has shown, early Confucian thinkers like Kongzi and Mengzi not only believed that the rites, norms, and practices of the Way had a divine or supernatural foundation in the will of Heaven, but also—and more strongly—that genuine human flourishing could only be achieved by following the Way that Heaven had ordained. Summarizing his position, his writes: "Without Heaven, Kongzi's faith in classical culture would be transformed into the open-ended search for the best form of culture,

By combining human intelligence and artifice with an extraordinary sensitivity to relevant facts about the natural world, Xunzi believed, the ancient sages created a comprehensive way of life that uniquely enables human beings to lead flourishing lives at both the individual and social levels, and at the same time, to live in a state of harmony with the rest of the natural world—to form a triad with Heaven and Earth, as he puts it. Given his belief that the rituals of the Confucian Way were not accidental historical developments, but rather the deliberate products of an extraordinary group of human geniuses from the ancient past, Xunzi's view that the purpose of rituals is to express human emotions and give proper form to human life should not be understood as a willful piece of historical revisionism, but rather as a sincere attempt to recover the deeper and original purpose of ritual as a central feature of the Confucian program of ethical self-cultivation. (Exactly how and when the erroneous supernatural understanding of ritual arose is, unfortunately, not a question that Xunzi considered. But presumably he assumed, much as Hume did, that human beings have a natural but misguided tendency to believe in supernatural agents which can be corrected through education.[22])

What is more problematic, in my view, is Xunzi's belief that *only* the rituals of the Confucian Way are capable of giving proper expression and form to human life, which for the sake of convenience we might call his commitment to *Confucian exclusivism*.[23] Indeed, this

and Mengzi's belief in the goodness of human nature would be become an ongoing quest for what is good for creatures like us" (Ivanhoe 2007, 219). The situation that Ivanhoe describes here is precisely the kind of open-ended search that Dewey and other contemporary ethical naturalists face, we might add, since they do not believe that the truth about such matters has been revealed to us or implanted within us by a higher supernatural power and is, accordingly, already within our possession.

22 This assumption also informs the naturalistic explanations of religious cognition offered by contemporary cognitive scientists such as Scott Atran and Pascal Boyer, whose work in turn has influenced the views of contemporary proponents of atheism such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.

23 Views of salvation or truth in religious traditions are often categorized by philosophers of religion and theologians as versions of exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism, and this set of distinctions can also be readily applied, I think, to views about the ethical value of traditions, whether religious or not. An ethical exclusivist, in this sense, is one who maintains that one tradition is ethically superior to all others and that the good life for human beings can only be realized by committed members of that tradition. An ethical

aspect of Xunzi's philosophy appears to stand in some tension with his naturalistic view of the nature of ethics, for without a belief that Heaven or some other supernatural agent is the ultimate author of the Way it seems difficult to justify the claim that the Way cannot be improved upon and discloses the objectively best way for human beings to live. Xunzi may have been aware of this problem at some level, and one way of making sense of his account of the origins of ritual is to see it as providing a response to this "grounding" or authority problem for Confucian ethics. Rather than originating in and deriving its authority from the nature or will of Heaven, the Confucian Way instead originates in and derives its authority from a group of legendary culture heroes, the ancient sage kings. This mythical or legendary dimension of Xunzi's account of the origins of ritual and the Way also should not be overlooked, however. In place of Heaven, and in much the same way that they invented medicine, agriculture, and tamed the floods, the legendary sage kings also invented rituals and the Way. This belief seems to function in much the same way as Kongzi's and Mengzi's belief in Heaven by giving the Way a foundation in something superhuman, or at least something beyond the capacity of ordinary human beings; but it is not clearly any better justified than that rival belief, and it is equally unlikely to be convincing to anyone who is not a traditional Confucian. If this is true of non-Confucians in general, it is especially true of contemporary naturalists in particular, who are likely to be skeptical of any legendary account of the origins of human ethical norms, practices, and traditions, as well as of claims regarding the unique authoritative status of a particular, historically contingent ethical tradition. If the Way is not ultimately created either by Heaven or by a mythical group of sages, however, then it would seem to be simply the accumulated work (much of it unintentional) of fallible and limited human beings in

inclusivist, in turn is one who maintains that while one tradition is ethically superior to others, members of other traditions can flourish (although perhaps to a lesser degree), but only insofar as their imperfect traditions conform to aspects of the correct ethical tradition. Lastly, an ethical pluralist is one who maintains that there is a plurality of good lives possible for human beings and of ethical traditions that contribute to the realization of such lives, and that given our current knowledge, we are not in an objective position to say that one ethical tradition is, all things considered, objectively superior to another.

the ancient past, and hence neither perfect nor clearly authoritative as a standard for human conduct.[24]

III. Dewey

John Dewey's religious views were both a response to the larger cultural problems of his day and to his own personal struggles with traditional Christianity. Dewey was raised in what he once described as "a conventionally evangelical atmosphere of the more 'liberal' sort" (1930, 4). As Steven C. Rockefeller has shown, however, Dewey was exposed to a less liberal form of Protestant Christianity at home through the influence of his mother, who was "overzealous in her efforts to save her three sons from sin and to instill in them strong feelings of attachment to Christ," and which contributed to his developing serious emotional problems as an adolescent, or what he later described as "an inward laceration" in his view of himself and the world (1998, 125-26). Dewey would spend much of his adult life working to heal that laceration, and another characteristic feature of his philosophy—its rejection of and attempt to overcome various forms of dualism—reflects a concern for unification that was born out of that personal, existential struggle (see Dewey 1930, 7). That concern initially drew him to Hegel's philosophy, but by the 1890s he had begun to develop an increasingly empirical, experimental, and naturalistic philosophical outlook that was heavily influenced by the ideas of Darwin and William James. Yet by his own account, his acquaintance with Hegel's thought left "a permanent deposit" in his thinking, and the emotional and intellectual demand for unification that Hegelianism once satisfied continued to influence the development of his philosophical views, including his views on religion (Dewey 1930, 8).[25]

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24 Although it is beyond the scope of the present paper, this is precisely how John Dewey thought about the nature of ethics—namely, as a contingent historical product of human biological evolution and cultural development.

25 Dewey goes on to explain that the "form, the schematism of [Hegel's] system now seems to me artificial to the last degree. But in the content of his ideas there is often an extraordinary depth; in many of his analyses, taken out of their mechanical dialectical setting, an extraordinary acuteness" (1930, 8).

Dewey's early work focused, in Robert Westbrook's words, on putting "liberal Christianity on a neo-Hegelian foundation and thereby to protect it from the threat of modern, especially Darwinian, science" (2010, 14). By the early 1890s, however, Dewey's thought began to move in an increasingly secular and naturalistic direction, and his newfound commitments to radical democratic politics and the scientific method gradually replaced his liberal, neo-Hegelian version of Christian theism. As Westbrook observes:

> By 1892 Dewey had made democracy the whole substance of a now barely theistic faith. "It is in democracy, the community of ideas and interests through community of action," he declared, "that the incarnation of God in man (man, that is to say as organ of universal truth) becomes a living, present thing, having its ordinary and natural sense." When Dewey and his family moved to Chicago in 1894, he let his church membership lapse and, much to the chagrin of his mother, refused to send his children to Sunday school. By the end of the decade, even the bare theism was gone, and his democratic faith was wholly secular. (Westbrook 2010, 23)

By the time Dewey took up a position at the University of Chicago in 1894 he was a committed empiricist, naturalist, and secular humanist, and he increasingly came to believe that a radical modification of traditional forms of religion was necessary if they were to adapt successfully to the changing social, political, and scientific environment of the modern world.

Interestingly, Dewey did not view the conflict between science and religion as a "leading philosophical problem," even though he found that conflict to be the source of a "trying personal crisis" that he had to overcome (1930, 7). He writes:

> This might look as if the two things were kept apart; in reality it was due to a feeling that any genuinely sound religious experience could and should adapt itself to whatever beliefs one found oneself intellectually entitled to hold—a half unconscious sense at first, but one which ensuing years have deepened into a fundamental conviction. In consequence, while I have, I hope, a due degree of personal sympathy with individuals who are undergoing the throes of a personal change of

> attitude, I have not been able to attach much importance to religion as a philosophic problem; for the effect of that attachment seems to be in the end a subornation of candid philosophic thinking to the alleged but factitious needs of some special set of convictions. I have enough faith in the depth of the religious tendencies of men to believe that they will adapt themselves to any required intellectual change, and that it is futile (and likely to be dishonest) to forecast prematurely just what forms the religious interest will take as a final consequence of the great intellectual transformation that is going on. As I have been frequently criticized for undue reticence about the problems of religion, I insert this explanation: it seems to me that the great solicitude of many persons, professing belief in the universality of the need for religion, about the present and future of religion proves that in fact they are moved more by partisan interest in a particular religion than by interest in religious experience. (Dewey 1930, 7-8)

As this passage makes clear, Dewey was optimistic that genuine forms of religious experience would survive and adapt themselves to the great intellectual changes that were occurring (and, we might add, are still occurring) in modern Western societies. At the same time, it also shows his awareness of the highly partisan and theological nature of many philosophical defenses of religious faith, and his not unfounded worry that devoting too much attention to the traditional problems of Western philosophy of religion—the existence and nature of God, the problem of evil, and so on—would subordinate properly philosophical concerns to Christian theological interests. Such an approach is in keeping with some of the larger themes and basic features of Dewey's philosophy, most notably his view that philosophy is not primarily a device for dealing with the abstract and technical problems generated by philosophers, but rather "a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men" (1917, 95). But it also reflects his distinctive, pragmatic views on the nature of experience and inquiry.

In contrast to the dualistic conception of experience developed by the British empiricists and perpetuated by their rationalist critics, in which perceiving subjects passively receive "sense-data" from an external world, Dewey followed James in conceiving of experience in broadly Darwinian terms as what is undergone by an organism in

an environment "in connection with activities whose import lies in their objective consequences—their bearing upon future experiences," which can be either harmful or beneficial (1917, 68). To think about experience in this holistic and adaptive way entails a number of far-reaching consequences, including giving up the idea that experience is primarily a form of knowledge (as opposed to action—or more properly, interaction); that it is essentially private and subjective, in contrast to the objective reality that it is about; that it is primarily oriented toward the past, or what has been "given" in experience; that there is a fundamental "gap" between mind and world that needs bridging; that the relations between the objects of perception on the one hand and between the organism and its environment on the other are somehow "unreal" or projective in nature; and that experience and thought, or perception and conception, are fundamentally discrete activities.[26] Dewey famously referred to this conception of experience and the view of knowing that it entails as "the spectator theory of knowledge," and he viewed it as one of the chief obstacles to bringing philosophy in line with the methods and insights of the modern natural and social sciences, including a view of ourselves as fully natural and evolved beings who both inhabit and are the products of the natural and social worlds of which we are parts.

Dewey's theory of inquiry, in turn, is informed by the pragmatic and Darwinian conception of experience discussed above and represents an attempt to displace the fixation that many philosophers have had and continue to have on purely formal methods of analysis in favor of the abductive or experimental method of modern scientific inquiry. Developing lines of thought that were first pioneered by James, Dewey argued that concepts, judgments, and inferences are best understood in functional and teleological terms, or in terms of their use as mental tools or instruments in determining future consequences. He describes his theory of inquiry, *instrumentalism*, as follows:

[26] Dewey argues for these claims in greater detail elsewhere in this essay, and also in his major work on epistemology, *Experience and Nature* (1925).

> The adaptations made by inferior organisms, for example their effective and co-ordinated response to stimuli, become teleological in man and therefore give occasion to thought. Reflection is an indirect response to the environment, and the element of indirection can itself become great and very complicated. But it has its origin in biological adaptive behavior and the ultimate function of its cognitive aspect is a prospective control of the conditions of the environment. The function of intelligence is therefore not that of copying the objects of the environment, but rather of taking account of the way in which more effective and more profitable relations with these objects may be established in the future. (Dewey 1931, 54)

This pragmatic conception of the nature of inquiry, along with the anti-technical and humanistic conception of the nature of philosophy described above, underlies and informs Dewey's pragmatic reinterpretation or "reconstruction" of religion in his most famous work on the subject, his 1933-34 Terry Lectures, subsequently published as *A Common Faith* (1934).

In a larger sense, Dewey's reconstruction of religion is a response to what he regarded as one of the most pressing problems of modern life: namely, how to preserve what is practically valuable about religious commitments—such as having an attitude of devotion to and feeling of oneness with the natural and social worlds that have brought us into existence and sustain us, and providing an overarching and unifying sense of meaning, purpose, and value to human life at both the individual and social levels—while at the same time adapting such commitments to changing values, knowledge, and circumstances.[27] If we think of religion as being primarily or even essentially concerned with the supernatural, for example in terms of submission to the authority of deities or other spiritual beings, then this balancing act can appear

[27] Interestingly, Dewey thought that the most important development in modernity was not the rise of modern science (though this was certainly important on his view), but rather the rise of modern secularism, or the emergence of non-religious social institutions and values. What changed in modernity was "the social center of gravity of religion," and "the thing new in history, the thing once unheard of, is that the organization in question [i.e. a religion] is a special institution within a secular community" (1934, 61). For Dewey's fuller discussion of this issue, see Dewey (1934, 59-66).

impossible: either belief in and devotion to the supernatural must go (and with it, religion), or else modernity must go (and with it, secular humanist values and modern science). This is precisely how most traditional religious believers think about the matter, Dewey claims—and it is also, ironically, how most contemporary militant atheists do as well (1934, 1-3). But the dilemma is a false one, he argues, for we need not assume that there is an essential connection between "religion" and "the religious," or between beliefs and practices associated with the supernatural and the various "religious" functions those historic religions have performed, such as providing the attitude of devotion and sense of meaning, purpose, and value that I described above. Indeed, Dewey will go on to claim that religion has been a "human, all too human" phenomenon all along, and has for much of its history obscured its true ground and motivation. If, however, we think of such things as religious attitudes and experiences instead as any attitudes and experiences that "lend deep and enduring support to the processes of living" (15); and if we think of religious practice or activity in terms of "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" (27), and which furthermore enables human beings to realize a "unification of themselves and of their relations to the conditions of existence" (27), then it becomes possible to emancipate this religious function or aspect of human experience from its historic bondage to traditional, supernatural religions. Doing so will not only allow the religious function to become autonomous for the first time, Dewey argues (2), but also allows us to deflate the supposed conflict between science and religion and, above all, to make human relationships, values, and ideals the highest objects of our concern. Religion, on such a view, ceases to be a way of getting ourselves into a proper relation with something supernatural, and becomes instead (as it has really been all along) a way in which human beings symbolically represent, express their commitment to, and experience a sense of oneness with their values and ideals.

This, in brief, is the basic argument of Chapter I, "Religion Versus the Religious." What he proceeds to argue in Chapter II, "Faith and Its Object," is that religious faith or commitment is best conceived

in broadly ethical terms 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 1934, 33), and that the proper object of religious faith is not something supernatural to be known through some special means such as divine revelation or mystical experience, but rather the values and ideals—knowable through ordinary human experience—around which we orient our lives and that we recognize as having authority over our conduct (41).[28] Finally, in Chapter III, "The Human Abode of the Religious Function," Dewey argues that religious faith and its various components—for example, religious attitudes, experiences, practices, and communities—not only can but should be transferred away from the supernatural and toward ideal human relations and values. Rather than believing in and orienting our lives around something supernatural which is thought to ground and express our highest ethical values and ideals and is "already embodied in some supernatural or metaphysical sense in the very framework of existence" (85), he argues that we should instead transfer our "idealizing imagination, thought, and emotion" to natural human relations such as the relationships between spouses, parents and children, friends, neighbors, and fellow workers, and to the growth of such ethical values as affection, compassion, justice, equality, and freedom (70-87). The real and proper object of religious faith, on such a view, is not a supernatural being or reality (which our best science gives us no good reason to believe exists), but rather our progressive vision of the kind of societies and indeed the kind of world we hope to create. Moreover, such a vision should also include a religious sensibility that Dewey calls "natural piety," or a "just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts," one that acknowledges our dependence on the natural world and recognizes that "we are parts that are marked by intelligence and

[28] Dewey clearly defends a version of a moral interpretation of religion, but he also denies that such things as religious commitments and attitudes are narrowly or exclusively moral in nature. He writes at one point that the religious attitude "signifies something that is bound through imagination to a *general* attitude. This comprehensive attitude, moreover, is much broader than anything indicated by 'moral' in its usual sense. The quality of attitude is displayed in art, science, and good citizenship" (1934, 23).

purpose, having the capacity to strive by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable" (25).[29]

At the heart of Dewey's humanistic reconstruction or reinterpretation of religion, then, is his rejection of supernaturalism and the widespread assumption that in order to lead a religious life or be a religious person (at least in any meaningful sense) one must hold supernatural religious beliefs, or assent to religious doctrines which explicitly refer to or implicitly assume the existence and authority of supernatural beings or powers. Dewey objects to supernaturalism not simply or even primarily because he thinks that it is false and conflicts with a naturalistic view of the world and ourselves, but rather because he thinks that it is at odds with a commitment to human autonomy and the growth of secular humanist values. As he puts it,

> The objection to supernaturalism is that it stands in the way of an effective realization of the sweep and depth of the implications of natural human relations. It stands in the way of using the means that are in our power to make radical changes in these relations.[30] (Dewey 1934, 80)

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[29] Dewey claims that natural piety is "an inherent constituent of a just perspective in life" (1934, 25-26). A religious attitude or sensibility of this sort would seem to be affirmed by many contemporary environmentalists and would no doubt be welcomed by many, although some today might question the anthropocentrism that appears to inform Dewey's view, in particular his assumption that what is *humanly desirable* should guide our relationship with the natural world of which we are parts. In Dewey's defense, it is hard to see how human desires and interests could ever be completely eliminated from our relationship with nature, nor is it clear that such a development would be good for human beings even if it were possible. Nevertheless, it also seems reasonable to think that in some cases we should prioritize the good of other living creatures over our own desires (say, for cheap sources of energy or extensive tracts of farmland), and that any defensible account of natural piety should seek to balance what is good for human beings in the long run with what is good for nature as a whole. Were Dewey alive today I think he would agree, while also pointing out that an ethical value of this sort is also expressive of a human perspective on what it is to be human and what our proper place in the world should be. Thanks to Philip J. Ivanhoe for bringing this last point to my attention.

[30] One way of putting this point is to say that while Dewey objects to supernaturalism on epistemic grounds, his main objection to that view is ethical in nature. For his various epistemic objections to supernaturalism, see especially Dewey (1934, 29-41, 69-70). These objections can be roughly summarized as follows: (1) Many traditional religious claims conflict with our best current scientific understanding of the natural world and ourselves; (2) religion as a human activity is best explained in naturalistic terms, as a

Religion, at its best, has been a means of promoting human values and ideals, but the real "abode" of such values is not a supposed supernatural realm on Dewey's view, but rather the realm of human natural and social relations (Dewey 1934, 80-84). Indeed, he explicitly claims that "the values given a supernatural locus are in fact products of an idealizing imagination that has laid hold of natural goods," and that their reference to "a supernatural and other-worldly locus has obscured their real nature and has weakened their force" (70-71). The real ground of justice or love, for example, is not the nature or will of God, nor a transcendent realm of abstract objects, but rather human nature and experience. And while Dewey does not deny the motivational power of supernatural religious beliefs—for example, that God is perfectly loving and just (and also rewards virtue and punishes vice), or that God guarantees the success of our efforts to create a kingdom of perfect love and justice here on earth—he argues that so long as we persist in holding (probably false) beliefs of this sort, we will be tempted to look to something other than ourselves in our efforts to realize such values and ideals, and will be inhibited in many cases from making changes to our values and ideals in light of intelligent reflection on our experience.[31] Indeed, traditional theism hinders moral progress for two reasons on Dewey's view: first, it typically involves an overly pessimistic view of our natural capacities and a belief in "the corruption and impotency of natural means" (46); and second, it frequently gives

techniques for securing advantages and avoiding disadvantages for human beings from supernatural forces; (3) there is a conflict between the essentially limited and private methods used by religious communities and traditions ("the doctrinal method") and the open and public method of science; and (4) religious and mystical experience are not neutral, non-question-begging sources of religious knowledge, for they always involve interpretation in light of already held religious beliefs.

31 It is beyond the scope of this paper to ask whether Dewey was right to think that supernatural religious ethical beliefs are motivationally deficient when compared to secular humanist and naturalist ethical beliefs, which is both enormously controversial and a question for empirical psychology. Many traditional religious believers, however, would agree with Dewey that many of their ethical values and duties are grounded in their supernatural religious beliefs, and that these beliefs furthermore prevent them in many cases from changing their ethical values, duties, and ideals in light of changing cultural norms and attitudes, for example regarding the permissibility of same-sex marriage, abortion, or euthanasia, or the impropriety of efforts at religious conversion.

rise to an exaggerated, romantic optimism that the lives of human beings and social conditions can be suddenly improved through supernatural deliverance, without the need for sustained, cooperative human effort (46-47). "Belief in a sudden and complete transmutation through conversion and in the objective efficacy of prayer," he writes, "is too easy a way out of difficulties. It leaves matters in general just about as they were before; that is, sufficiently bad so that there is additional support for the idea that only supernatural aid can better them" (47).[32] He continues:

> The position of natural intelligence is that there exists a *mixture* of good and evil, and that reconstruction in the direction of the good which is indicated by ideal ends, must take place, if at all, through continued cooperative effort. There is at least enough impulse toward justice, kindliness, and order so that if it were mobilized for action, not expecting abrupt and complete transformation to occur, the disorder, cruelty, and oppression that exist would be reduced. (Dewey 1934, 47)

One of the most interesting and controversial aspects of Dewey's reconstruction of religion is his account of the nature and role of God in religious life, and it is here that Dewey provides perhaps his clearest example of what a reconstructed form of religious faith looks like. Rather than conceiving of God as an existing supernatural being (and rather than taking the term itself to refer to such a being), Dewey instead conceives of God as a symbol which denotes "the unity of all ideal ends arousing us to desire and actions" (1934, 42), or as he explains shortly thereafter, as "the ideal ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as having authority over his volitions and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagination, take on unity" (42). The main difference between these conceptions, as he sees it, is that in the first case God is taken to have a "prior and therefore non-ideal existence" (42), whereas

[32] As we saw previously, Xunzi also thinks that supernatural explanations involve looking in the wrong place and prevent us from crafting intelligent and effective responses to the challenges we face.

in the second case God is taken to have an ideal and not-yet-realized existence, or more accurately to be a way of unifying and symbolically representing the values and ideals that we hope to realize. To think of God in this second way is not, however, to think of the concept of God as a mere imaginative projection or illusion, Dewey insists, because the values and ideals that "God" stands for have a real power to motivate our conduct and transform us as moral agents. Although his naturalism entails the denial of the supernatural, it does not require that we deny the reality of values and ideals.[33] As he explains: "The aims and ideals that move us are generated through imagination. But they are not made out of imaginary stuff. They are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience" (49). Like works of technology and art, values and ideals are the ongoing, experimental, and collaborative products of human effort, and emerge "through seeing, in terms of possibilities, that is, of imagination, old things in new relations serving a new end which the new end aids in creating" (49). It is for this reason that Dewey goes on to claim that his ideal conception of God is best understood as the "*active* relation between ideal and actual," and is "connected with all the natural forces and conditions—including man and human association—that promote the growth of the ideal and that further its realization" (50-51). The concept of God, in short, is a way of symbolically representing the complex and open-ended social process whereby human beings, working together and making use of pre-existing natural and social conditions, imagine and seek to realize new

[33] Dewey writes: "What I have been objecting to, I repeat, is not the idea that ideals are linked with existence and that they themselves exist, through human embodiment, as forces, but the idea that their authority and value depend upon some prior complete embodiment—as if the efforts of human beings in behalf of justice, or knowledge, or beauty, depended for their effectiveness and validity upon assurance that there already existed in some supernal region a place where criminals are humanely treated, where there is serfdom or slavery, where all facts and truths are already discovered and possessed, and all beauty is eternally displayed in actualized form" (1934, 49). If by "real" one means "mind-independent," of course, then Dewey is not a realist about ethical and aesthetic values or truth. But he clearly rejects the view of some contemporary anti-realists that values are "unreal," in contrast, say, to the objective reality disclosed by modern science. Indeed, the very belief in a "real world" of this sort is implicated in the spectator theory of knowledge that Dewey rejects.

values and ideals. And to have faith in God, in turn, is to have faith that the highest values and ideals we can currently imagine are realizable. On Dewey's view this process has always been operative in human religiosity, albeit at a largely unconscious level and mixed together with belief in the supernatural. Where Dewey's account of religion differs from naturalistic theories of religion such as Marx's or Freud's, however, is that it does not simply seek to explain (and discredit) religion, but also to preserve and improve the function of religion in human life by fully naturalizing it.

In contrast to his reconstruction of the concept of God, Dewey suggests that the traditional, supernatural conception of God is best thought of as a hypostatization of ideal qualities, one that reifies those qualities "due to a conflux of tendencies in human nature that converts the object of desire into an antecedent reality" (1934, 43). Although supernatural religious beliefs of this sort are still widespread and appear to be grounded in human nature, specifically in the way our minds work, they have become intellectually dubious and are increasingly difficult to defend (41, 44), and as we have already seen, they also limit our confidence in ourselves and impeded the full development of our capacities.[34] As he explains:

> Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing. Dependence upon an external power is the counterpart of surrender of human endeavor. Nor is emphasis on exercising our own powers for good an egoistical or a sentimentally optimistic recourse. It is not the first, for it does not isolate man, either individually or collectively, from nature. It is not the second, because it makes no assumption beyond that of the need and responsibility for human endeavor, and beyond the conviction that, if human desire and endeavor were enlisted in behalf of natural ends, conditions would be bettered. It involves no expectation of a millennium of good (Dewey 1934, 46).

[34] In addition to conflicting with a scientific and naturalistic view of the world and ourselves, Dewey claims that traditional theistic belief continues to be challenged by the problem of evil, which dissolves once belief in God is given up. See Dewey (1934, 45).

Dewey's "common faith" has God as its object, then; but such a faith does not conflict with either a commitment to naturalism or to secular humanism, and indeed is not only fully compatible with such views but in fact entails a commitment to them.

The main challenge facing Dewey's reconstruction of religion, in my view, lies in convincing traditional religious believers on the one hand and secular humanists on the other to accept a naturalized and secularized form of religious faith. The former, of course, will tend to find Dewey's naturalism and secular humanism objectionable, and many of the latter will tend to see religious faith of any sort as something outdated and extraneous, even a fully naturalized and secularized version such as Dewey's that is not epistemically or morally objectionable in the manner of traditional religions. Dewey's best response to such objections, I believe, lies in convincing the former group that their supernatural religious beliefs and practices are problematic on both epistemic and moral grounds, and in convincing the latter that the conjunction of naturalism and secular humanism is deficient as a philosophy of life, and needs at the very least some way of cultivating a sense of natural piety.

IV. Xunzi and Dewey in Comparison

We have seen how Xunzi and Dewey each denied many of the religious beliefs of their inherited cultures and traditions, and viewed traditional, supernatural ways of thinking about such matters as the nature of religious practice or religious faith as problematic in certain respects. Rather than simply rejecting those problematic features of their inherited traditions, however, both advocated that we conceive of human religiosity instead along broadly naturalistic and ethical lines—as concerning the practical, ethical and psychological needs and interests of human beings—and argued that this changed understanding of the nature of religious life not only captured what was most important and valuable about it, but also that this was the real function of this aspect of human life all along. Each, in short, offers a naturalistic account of the nature of religion, and combines it with

an account and defense of why participation in religious life is valuable for human beings, which is still a timely matter for us today. According to both Xunzi and Dewey, religious attitudes, experiences, rituals, and so on are valuable not because they put us into proper relations with something supernatural, but rather because of their capacity to orient and enrich our lives at both the individual and social levels and put us into proper relations with other human beings and the natural world. Moreover, both also defended in their respective ways the need for a common form of "faith" or commitment in order to realize an ideal society and the full potential of human beings—to the Confucian Way in Xunzi's case, and to the progressive values and ideals of democratic secular humanism in Dewey's.

These are substantive similarities, but as we have also seen there are many points of difference between Xunzi's and Dewey's reinterpretations of religion, which is unsurprising given their very different philosophical views on other matters and the equally different social and historical circumstances in which they lived. In addition to the differences that I mentioned at the outset of this paper, we find that Xunzi gives us an account of how to remain within a tradition and find a sense of meaning and purpose through membership in it without explicitly advocating for the "disenchantment" of religion among traditional religious believers.[35] The goods of religious life—more specifically, the goods made possible by following the Confucian Way—can be achieved by both traditional believers and enlightened naturalists alike on Xunzi's view, and while Xunzi clearly thinks that the latter have a deeper and more accurate understanding of such things as the nature and purpose of religious rituals, he seems to assume that most people

[35] To put this point somewhat differently, even if Xunzi implicitly believed that it would be better, all things considered, for every member of the Confucian tradition to hold a naturalized view of the nature of ritual, he does not explicitly advocate a program of disenchantment in the manner that Dewey does, and seems more willing than Dewey to tolerate traditional understandings of religious practices as being concerned with spirits, at least in the case of "common people." (Things are different for the gentleman, on the other hand, who should understand *apparent* references to spiritual beings in rituals as a matter of "proper form," and not as practices that *really* connect human beings with spiritual beings. See *Xunzi* (17.176-86). Thanks to an anonymous reader for pressing me to clarify this point.

will never come to such an understanding and appears unbothered by it. I suspect that this is due both to his recognition of the great disparities in education that characterized his society and his acceptance of hierarchical social distinctions that were not only commonplace in his society but were also basic to the Confucian Way. But it also arguably reflects a kind of pragmatic realism about how likely it is that most members of his society—and perhaps *any* human society—could become enlightened naturalists, which ironically is absent in Dewey's advocacy for a pragmatic, secular humanist "common faith."[36]

For Dewey, on the other hand, this feature of Xunzi's account is simply not a live option, at least not when it involves tolerating and participating in religious traditions and communities which deny the autonomy of ethical values and ideals, take an inappropriately dim view of our natural capacities, and threaten to inhibit the growth of democratic and secular humanist values and ideals. Although he does not advocate that liberal theists abandon their religious communities and traditions, for example, and regards the subtle reinterpretation or downplaying of many traditional theological doctrines by liberal Christians and Jews as a positive advance, he nevertheless thinks that such groups face internal tensions—or as he puts it at one point, an "unstable equilibrium" (Dewey 1934, 74)—between many of their inherited supernaturally based religious beliefs, attitudes, values, and ideals and their newer, naturalistic and secular humanist ones. The best course of action for such persons is not to operate with a dualistic system of thought and practice, he thinks, but rather to "rest the case upon what is verifiable and concentrate thought and energy upon its full realization" (72)—in other words, to fully naturalize and secularize their religious thought and practice. Whereas it is entirely acceptable on Xunzi's view to participate in traditional rituals and act "as if" spirits and other supernatural beings exist—indeed, participating in

[36] Dewey, in contrast, is arguably naïve in assuming that most people can become enlightened naturalists, and one of the obvious dangers facing a progressive optimism of this sort is that it sets up an expectation that is likely to be disappointed and can breed resentment toward those who "fail" to become enlightened (as well as a corresponding sense of alienation by traditional religious believers that can fuel their opposition to secular humanism). Thanks to Philip J. Ivanhoe for these observations.

the rituals appropriate to one's social position is obligatory for the *junzi* or Confucian gentleman—for Dewey to engage in traditional religious practice with this sort of counterfactual understanding is neither tenable in the long run nor does it contribute to the open-ended improvement of our values and ideals. For Xunzi, in contrast, the very idea that the Way can and should be improved upon or abandoned in favor of something better is unthinkable, and his view that the ancient sages perfected the Way seems to be incompatible with Dewey's open-ended, fallibilistic, and progressive view of the nature of ethics.[37] Some might be tempted to explain this contrast simply in terms of historical and cultural differences or to see Xunzi's view as a "dead option" today, but one sees a similar contrast at present between the ethical views of traditional Christians, Jews, and Muslims on the one hand (especially those who ascribe to versions of divine command ethics) and Dewey's contemporary, secular humanist heirs on the other.

There are also striking differences between the scope and object of Xunzi's and Dewey's respective reinterpretations of religion. Although Xunzi advocates a naturalized understanding of the objects of religious devotion and practice—rituals, for example, do not really concern spirits or how to relate to them in advantageous ways—the foci of his analysis are the particular rituals of the Confucian tradition. He does not explicitly endorse or offer a general naturalistic theory of the nature of religion, one that explains what religion is "really" about and which denies the existence of supernatural beings or realities as such, with the implication that supernatural religious beliefs are uniformly false and reports of supernatural religious experiences are uniformly erroneous.[38] (It is not difficult, of course, to take the

[37] This is not an entirely uncontroversial claim, and some contemporary scholars of Chinese philosophy might be inclined to dispute it on the grounds that Xunzi (and perhaps other classical Confucian philosophers as well) implicitly endorsed a version of ethical pluralism, despite what his writings might appear to say. One might also argue, of course, that Xunzi's views could be modified so as to make them compatible with certain versions of ethical pluralism, but this would be not so much an interpretation of Xunzi's views as it would be a constructive (or reconstructive) proposal for how to amend them. For a recent example of a pluralistic reconstruction of Xunzi on this matter, see Hagen (2007).

[38] There are important social and historical reasons for this difference. Dewey wrote at a time and in a cultural context in which appeals to the epistemic authority of religious

next step and develop such a theory based on his account.) Dewey, in contrast, intends for his denial of the supernatural and his distinction between religions and the religious dimension of human experience to apply universally. Furthermore, Xunzi does not argue, as Dewey does, that an ideal, symbolic religious object which unifies our values and ideals is needed to orient religious life (or more modestly, that there is something practically desirable about such an object). The values and ideals of the Confucian Way are embodied in and expressed by its rituals on Xunzi's view and acting "as if" the spirits exist is simply a way of giving proper form to ritual practice. There is no need to have faith in Heaven or its plan for human beings, as Kongzi and Mengzi both assumed, and in order to realize a harmonious "triad" between Heaven, Earth, and human beings we only need to focus on following the Way; the impersonal forces of Heaven and Earth will go on of their own accord.[39] To put this point a bit differently, on Xunzi's view the only thing we need to have faith in is the Confucian Way itself, which

experience were commonplace among defenders of traditional Christianity, and in which there had been more than a century of rational criticism of religion and scholarly attempts to explain religion along naturalistic as opposed to supernatural lines (which were, understandably, viewed in turn with suspicion by many traditional religious believers). In that context traditional forms of religious belief and practice were under threat from a variety of sources, most notably the rise of modern science, modern secularism, and modern biblical scholarship; and the view that religious experience could be an independent—and perhaps even privileged—source of religious knowledge (e.g. knowledge of God) arose in part as a response to the increasingly widespread view that religious faith does not have a rational basis, and that attempts to provide rational support for belief in God in the form of theistic arguments were inconclusive at best and abject failures at worst.

39 Xunzi does not consider, however, whether most people in his society would have *benefitted* from a belief in the providential oversight of Heaven in human affairs, or from the belief that the Confucian Way is grounded in the nature and will of Heaven. The former belief obviously offers a stronger consolation that the course of human life will go well than Xunzi's naturalism affords, and the latter provides a stronger justification for accepting the Confucian Way over its rivals (for the very simple reason that Heaven on the traditional view is a higher source of authority than the sages). That Xunzi does not entertain such views—and, indeed, seems to reject them—is perhaps the best evidence we have that he found such views untenable, at least for well-educated and reflective persons. Why not indulge them, however, in the case of the uneducated masses? Xunzi does not seem to have considered this possibility, but it is interesting to consider if for no other reason than it allows us to ask how much he cared about the importance of holding true beliefs, which is a matter of longstanding concern in Western philosophy.

he believed had been invented by an incomparable group of sages in the distant past and provides not merely the best but the only proper way of orienting human life. This last-mentioned feature of the Way helps to explain the religious devotion, reverence, and at times awe that Xunzi displays towards it, for on his view (and to borrow Dewey's language) it effectively embodies and unites all of the values and ideals that are needed for human beings to flourish.[40]

For Dewey, in contrast, such a way of orienting human life must be understood not as an actually realized phenomenon, but rather as an open-ended and fallible ideal that we constantly seek to realize and improve upon. Owing in part to his Protestant background and the cultural predominance of liberal Protestantism in early twentieth-century America, Dewey presented his "common faith" as a naturalized and secularized version of monotheism, and seems to have retained the liberal Protestant ideal of working to create the kingdom of God on Earth, a place of perfect peace, justice, equality, and fellowship in which all the ills of human life have been vanquished—albeit in a transposed, secular humanist form. Although it is possible to appreciate these historically and culturally specific aspects of Xunzi's and Dewey's accounts of religion without considering them in relation to each other, I believe that reading their accounts together highlights these differences in ways that we might otherwise tend to miss. And perhaps more importantly, reading their accounts together draws our attention to philosophical problems and potential solutions to such problems that are difficult to imagine apart from comparative study.

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In this paper I hope to have shed some new light on Xunzi's and Dewey's thought through a comparison of their religious views, and in the process to explore more deeply the various forms that a naturalistic reinterpretation of religion can take, which is an issue of interest to many contemporary philosophers of religion and scholars of religion. Much more could be said about these matters, of course, and no doubt

40 Thanks to Philip J. Ivanhoe for this point.

other revealing comparisons and contrasts could be made between other aspects of their respective philosophies, as well as between their views and those of other philosophers, theologians, and scholars of religion. But those are explorations for another day.

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