

## **Faith in Humanity**

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ABSTRACT: History and literature provide striking examples of people who are morally admirable, in part, because of their profound faith in people's decency. But moral philosophers have largely ignored this trait, and I suspect that many philosophers would view such faith with suspicion, dismissing it as a form of naïvete or as some other objectionable form of irrationality. I argue that such suspicion is misplaced, and that having a certain kind of faith in people's decency, which I call faith in humanity, is a centrally important moral virtue. In order to make this view intuitively more plausible, I discuss two moral exemplars – one historical and the other literary – whose lives vividly exhibit such faith. Then I provide a rationale for the view that having such faith is morally admirable. Finally, I discuss cases in which someone's faith in humanity can lead her to make judgments that are, to some degree, epistemically irrational. I argue that the existence of such cases does not pose a serious objection to the view that having faith in humanity is a moral virtue. Rather, it makes salient important limits on the role that epistemic, as opposed to practical, rationality should occupy in our ideals of how to live.

## I

Many of the people we regard as moral exemplars have profound faith in people's decency: When segregationists bombed a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four little girls, Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted that "somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and worth of all human personality".<sup>1</sup> Returning to his work in psychotherapy after spending two and a half years in Nazi concentration camps, Viktor Frankl adopted as a guiding principle the view that "if we treat people as if they were what they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming".<sup>2</sup> During his campaign to secure civil rights for Indians living in South Africa, and later to secure independence for India, Gandhi urged his followers to treat as "an article of faith" the view that there is "no one so fallen" that he cannot be "converted by love".<sup>3</sup>

That these and other moral exemplars have such faith is no accident. As I will argue, having a certain form of faith in people's decency, which I call faith in humanity, is a centrally important moral virtue. But despite the fact that history and literature provide striking examples of people who are admirable partly because they have such faith, moral philosophers have

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Eulogy for Martyred Children", in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), p. 222.

<sup>2</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul*, Third ed., trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), p. 8. Frankl attributes this principle to Goethe.

<sup>3</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 77.

largely ignored this trait.<sup>4</sup> And I suspect that if they were to consider such faith, many philosophers would view it with suspicion. For some, the phrase “faith in humanity” conjures images of someone who is simply naïve, and as a result, vulnerable to being exploited, or worse, likely to bring it about that other people are harmed. More generally, philosophers prize rationality, and rightly so, and they may dismiss faith in humanity – or for that matter, any sort of faith – as an objectionable form of epistemic irrationality, whether or not practical considerations commend it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Some philosophers commend traits that are similar to the faith I have in mind, but also, as I will explain below, importantly distinct from it. Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls each possessed and endorsed a kind of faith in the possibility of people’s living together in peace, provided that the right sorts of social conditions obtain. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762); Immanuel Kant, “To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” (1795); and John Rawls, “The Law of Peoples”, in *The Law of Peoples: with “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 1-128. Julia Driver claims that a virtuous person exhibits “blind charity”, a disposition to see the good in people, but not the bad (“The Virtues of Ignorance”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 [1989]: 381 and 382).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Wolf expresses a different kind of skepticism about such traits. She claims that a moral saint, someone who is “as morally worthy as can be”, will “look for the best in people” and “give them the benefit of the doubt as long as possible” (“Moral Saints”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 [1982]: 419-422). But she argues that such traits prevent the saint from having or appreciating certain goods that are worth having or appreciating. So, although having faith in people’s decency is part of living a morally admirable life, this trait, together with others that a moral saint possesses, may prevent one from living certain other kinds of lives that are admirable, all things considered. Since my aim is only to show that having faith in humanity is *morally* admirable, I will not discuss this concern here.

But I will argue that such suspicion is misplaced, and that having some measure of faith in humanity is central to moral life. In Section II, I will explain what it means to have faith in humanity, and in Sections III and IV, I will present two sorts of arguments for the view that having such faith is a moral virtue. First, I will discuss two exemplars of this virtue, one historical and the other literary. By describing people whose lives vividly exhibit faith in humanity, I aim to make more plausible the intuition that such faith is morally admirable, and to show that certain grounds for skepticism about such faith are inapt. Of course, not everyone will share my intuitions. So I will also provide a rationale for the view that having faith in humanity is a moral virtue. Roughly, I will argue that such faith is morally significant because having faith in people's decency tends to prompt them to act rightly, helps one avoid treating them unjustly, and constitutes a morally important form of support for them.

## II

Faith in humanity has both a cognitive and a volitional element, and I will begin by providing a rough characterization of each.<sup>6</sup> Turning first to the cognitive element, when someone

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<sup>6</sup> I borrow these labels from Robert Adams, who argues that it is morally important that we have “moral faith” – roughly, faith that achieving certain morally important aims is both possible and worthwhile – and that such faith has cognitive, volitional, and emotional elements (“Moral Faith”, in *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], pp. 373-389). Though I do not claim that an emotional element is essential to faith in humanity, my characterization of faith in humanity is indebted to Adams' discussion of moral faith. Also, my characterization of the cognitive element of faith in humanity is indebted to Simon Keller and Sarah Stroud's accounts of a form of faith that good friends have in one another. See Keller's “Friendship and Belief”, in *The Limits of Loyalty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 24-51

who has faith in humanity morally evaluates other people's actions, motives, or characters, she tends to give them the benefit of the doubt. She has a kind of optimism about people, generally laying the burden of proof with those who believe that people are base or expect people to act wrongly. This optimism is not merely a vague sense that "people are generally pretty good", which has little bearing on her treatment of particular people, nor is it a tendency to judge that, generally speaking, humans are capable of living together in peace, given favorable social conditions. Rather, it is an attitude, or stance, that she adopts toward the particular people she encounters, or whose circumstances she considers, and it helps determine how she thinks about and interacts with them. We might say that someone who has such faith tends to believe in people, trust in them, make presumptions in their favor, or see them in a favorable light, morally speaking.

How a person's faith shapes her particular judgments varies considerably, depending on the person and her circumstances. Nevertheless, part of having this virtue is having at least two characteristic dispositions of belief. First, when someone who has such faith forms expectations about people's future attitudes or actions, she tends to be relatively slow to judge them harshly. Such expectations are always uncertain, and when someone who has faith in humanity forms such expectations, she tends to judge, even in the face of reasons for doubt, that people will act decently, provided that they receive the right forms of encouragement. In some cases, as reasons to doubt people's decency mount, her faith may simply dispose her to hold on to the belief that right action is attainable for these people, or in other words, a live possibility for them. But to be clear, she does not assume that people will behave well with ease or without assistance. To the contrary, she may judge in

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and Stroud's "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship", *Ethics* 116 (2006): 498-524.

some cases that people can act rightly only if they, or the people around them, make considerable sacrifices.<sup>7</sup>

Second, when someone who has such faith makes judgments about people's past or current attitudes or actions, she tends to be acutely sensitive to evidence of people's decency, including evidence that others are likely to overlook. Of course, judgments about, say, people's past or current behavior are often more certain than predictions about their future behavior. But assessing evidence for such judgments is still more complicated than it initially appears. Other people's actions, motives, and especially their characters are almost always opaque to us, at least to some extent.<sup>8</sup> And when we evaluate another person's past or current attitudes or actions, we often have to interpret partial or ambiguous evidence concerning what she has done, how her actions fit into broader patterns of behavior, how and to what extent her actions serve her aims, or how these aims evolve over time. So even a reasonably careful and clearheaded person could easily overlook evidence of people's decency. But someone who has faith in humanity is especially sensitive to such evidence. She tends to look for, recognize, and focus on the good in people, and as a result, she is somewhat more likely than her peers to judge that people are decent, or that they have behaved well.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> One of King's best known expressions of his faith in humanity is his claim that although "the arc of the moral universe is long ... it bends toward justice" ("Where Do We Go From Here?", in *A Testament of Hope*, p.252). But he also warned that "human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God" ("Letter from Birmingham City Jail", in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 296).

<sup>8</sup> Stroud ("Epistemic Partiality", pp. 506-507) emphasizes this point.

<sup>9</sup> This marks an important difference between blind charity, as Driver describes it ("The Virtues of Ignorance", pp. 381 and 382), and faith

These two patterns of judgment are more closely related than they may initially appear. One cannot coherently judge that someone will behave well in the future – even if one believes that the person’s good behavior depends on her getting assistance from other people, or on other favorable occurrences – unless one also believes that the person is now disposed to respond to her circumstances in the right ways. So a person’s sensitivity to evidence of others’ past and present decency may support her favorable expectations about their future attitudes and behavior.

But being disposed to exhibit these, or any other, patterns of judgment is not, by itself, sufficient for having the virtue of faith in humanity. Imagine someone who tends to be slow to judge people harshly, or quick to judge them favorably, simply because she does not bother figuring out whether their apparent goodwill is misleading. And suppose it does not matter to her whether people turn out to be decent, except when her own wellbeing depends on their acting rightly. Such a person does not have faith in humanity. Rather, to have such faith, she must be invested in the possibility of people’s living morally decent lives, and in their realizing that possibility. It has to be important to her, in itself, that these people act rightly, and this concern should lead her, at least in some cases, to encourage people to behave well, to try to set a good example for them, to be disappointed when she encounters salient examples of serious wrongdoing, and so on. In short, as I said above, faith in humanity has not only a cognitive aspect, but also a volitional aspect, and as I will argue below, both of these elements help make such faith morally admirable.

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in humanity. The former trait, as its name suggests, is a sort of blindness, a failure to see people’s undesirable behaviors, motives, or traits. But faith in humanity is, in part, a kind of sight, an acute sensitivity to evidence of others’ decency.

This account of faith in humanity has two important caveats, the first of which concerns the epistemic rationality of such faith, and the second, the impact of such faith on one's behavior. First, someone who has the virtue of faith in humanity is often disposed to make judgments that one could rationally reject – for that matter, being so disposed seems necessary for having faith of any sort. Furthermore, as I will explain below, a virtuous person's faith can lead her to make judgments that are to some degree epistemically irrational, given the available evidence. But even so, having faith in humanity does not involve being blind to evidence of people's poor character or behavior. Someone who has such faith may judge, say, that a colleague who regularly interrupts and ignores female colleagues is sexist and rude, or that a politician who often abandons unpopular views on pressing social issues lacks integrity. More generally, someone who has such faith always stands ready to view people favorably, but she may judge, without any failure of virtue, that someone has acted or will act wrongly, that he has some grave vice, or that some aspect of his character cannot yet be redeemed, when she has decisive evidence to support this judgment.

Furthermore, although a virtuous person's faith in humanity sometimes disposes her to make irrational judgments, it does not always, or even typically, do so. Setting aside cases in which one has decisive evidence that someone is morally decent, or that she has acted, or will act, decently, there are at least two types of cases in which such faith disposes one to make rational judgments. In the first, the available evidence rationally permits one to view someone's attitudes or behavior in either a more favorable or a less favorable light. Or it permits one either to make a judgment about someone, whether favorable or unfavorable, or to remain agnostic. In these cases, a person's faith simply helps determine which of two or more permissible beliefs, or epistemic stances, she adopts. For example, one person may find her neighbor vexingly brusque and inconsiderate,

while another person, who has had comparable experience with the neighbor, finds her refreshingly forthright, albeit ungraceful at times. It may be that each makes a clearheaded assessment of the limited evidence available to them, but their judgments diverge because their divergent temperaments, backgrounds, or imaginative powers render different aspects of the neighbor's behavior, or different interpretations of that behavior, more salient. In that case, each may be rationally permitted to make her judgment, though one judgment may be less imaginative or charitable than the other.

In the second sort of case, one's initial evidence does not, by itself, make rationally permissible the judgment that someone will act decently, but adopting this judgment plays an essential role in enabling one to treat the person in certain ways, and this is apt to result in her acting rightly. To take another, related example, a teacher's belief that her student – who may have considerable native talent, despite his relatively weak academic record – can perform well in some challenging course may prompt her to spend time reviewing relevant material with him, to encourage him to take prerequisite courses, and so on. The student may perform well largely because of the teacher's efforts, and because he has worked hard to meet her expectations. In William James' words, this is a case in which “faith in a fact can help create the fact”.<sup>10</sup>

The second caveat is that someone who has faith in humanity is vulnerable in certain respects to losses she will incur if people in whom she has faith turn out to be base, or if they have acted, or will act, wrongly. Again, it seems that having faith of any sort involves risks, or in other words, involves being vulnerable to losses one will incur if one's judgment turns out to

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<sup>10</sup> William James, “The Will to Believe”, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1897), Section 9.

be wrong. When someone has faith in humanity, her vulnerability derives partly from her being invested in the possibility of people's decency. She cares whether people live morally decent lives, and as a result, she may suffer the pain of disappointment when people in whom she had faith, and whose behavior is salient to her, commit serious wrongs. And if she makes personal sacrifices in order to encourage people to act rightly, but these people act wrongly instead, the fact that her efforts fail can, by itself, make her life go worse, quite apart from any emotional pain it causes her.

Beyond this, a person's faith in humanity can sometimes lead her to trust people who go on to mistreat her, or mistreat others. So having such faith can increase one's own risk of suffering material losses, and it can also leave others at risk of being mistreated.<sup>11</sup> Later on, after I discuss two exemplars of such faith, I can better explain how a virtuous person responds to such risks. But for now, I will make two preliminary points. First, faith in humanity is not the only excellence of character – nor is it the only moral virtue – that carries great risks. Someone who cares deeply about other people renders herself vulnerable to emotional and material losses she might incur if those people betray her, or suffer some great misfortune.<sup>12</sup> A community of

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for comments that helped me clarify this point.

<sup>12</sup> It may be that caring deeply about someone involves, not only prudential risk, but also moral danger. Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett ("Friendship and Moral Danger", *The Journal of Philosophy* 97 [2000]: 278-296) argue that, even in friendships we rightly admire, someone's concern for her friend may lead her to exhibit moral failings. For example, she may tell a lie to help her friend escape some difficulty, or she may come to find her friend's minor moral vices exciting or alluring. Troy Jollimore (*Love's Vision* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011], pp. 146-161) argues that, even in *morally*

people whose sense of justice leads them to treat people accused of crimes as innocent until proven guilty may be less able to prevent violent crimes than a less just community that lays the burden of proof on the accused. And a benevolent person may, without any failure of virtue, try to help people in cases in which the results are inevitably uncertain – say, attempts at matchmaking or the provision of aid to poor communities whose cultures and economies are very different from her own – and as a result, risk doing more harm than good in some particular cases.

For that matter, the two attitudes that one might adopt as an alternative to faith in humanity – namely, cynicism about people’s decency and the disposition to remain agnostic until one has decisive evidence about people’s character – also involve certain kinds of risks. Of course, cynics and agnostics are less vulnerable to betrayal than their more trusting counterparts, and they may be better able to defend themselves and others when people try to mistreat them. But as I will argue in Section IV, someone who adopts either of these attitudes risks committing a serious wrong herself: mistreating the people whose decency, or capacity for decency, she fails to recognize. And she risks missing opportunities both to prevent people from acting poorly and to enter into meaningful relationships with them.

The second point is that even though someone who has faith in humanity cannot eliminate these risks entirely, an otherwise virtuous person who has such faith does try to reduce her own and other people’s risk of suffering material losses. As I will explain in Section III, she takes care to determine whether and to what extent possible expressions of faith – say, failing to guard

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admirable relationships, one’s love for someone can make one blind, in certain limited respects, to morally important needs and interests of other people.

against theft or injury, relying on someone to help carry out some aim, or trying to reform someone's character – would leave her or other people vulnerable to loss. She acknowledges such risks openly, and she tries to avoid expressing her faith in certain ways when the associated risks are too great, or when the risks are moderate but the ends to be achieved are not sufficiently weighty. In short, someone who has such faith does not cultivate cynicism about people or dampen her interest in them in order to shield herself from the pain of recognizing that they are base, or that their actions are seriously wrong. But she does take significant steps to protect herself and others from physical and psychological harm, financial loss, and other bad results of people's poor behavior.

### III

To illustrate this account of faith in humanity, and to provide intuitive support for the view that having such faith is a moral virtue, I will discuss two moral exemplars who exhibit the trait. The first is Mohandas Gandhi. Though he exhibited such faith throughout his life, Gandhi's faith was, in some respects, most striking during his early campaign to gain civil rights for Indian immigrants in South Africa.<sup>13</sup> When Gandhi arrived in South Africa in his mid-twenties to practice law, he found that the Indians living there, many of whom had arrived to work as indentured laborers, endured systematic discrimination and almost constant harassment. White South Africans had passed laws that severely restricted Indians' voting rights, property rights, freedom of movement, freedom of religious expression, and employment opportunities.<sup>14</sup> And Indians who failed to

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<sup>13</sup> For a brief overview of Gandhi's South African campaign, see Louis Fischer, *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World* (New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 1954), pp. 20-49.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 24-25.

treat whites with sufficient deference were harassed, or even beaten.<sup>15</sup>

Gandhi responded by developing a style of nonviolent resistance to injustice that he would continue to refine throughout his life, and which he and others would use to gain civil rights for Indians in South Africa, and later to secure India's independence from Britain.<sup>16</sup> Practitioners of this form of nonviolent activism, called "Satyagraha" or "soul force", used picketing, strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience to persuade white South Africans to treat them with appropriate respect. But their aim was not to coerce their opponents. Rather, they tried to eliminate injustice by converting the people who supported it. They faced the possible consequences of their protests – imprisonment, beatings, and even death – with love, rather than violence and hatred, and they believed that they would thereby lead South Africans to recognize, and eventually end, the injustices that they endured.

Gandhi's commitment to nonviolence rested on a deep, two-fold faith. First, he had faith in the white South Africans who accepted or even supported discrimination against Indians. He believed, with relatively little experience on which to base his judgment, that if Indians were willing to endure the sacrifices needed to make their plight salient, they could lead white South Africans to acknowledge that the laws were unjust and to overturn those laws. In Gandhi's words, a practitioner of Satyagraha must have "faith in the inherent goodness of human nature, which he expects to evoke by his truth and love ex-

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> In *Non-Violent Resistance*, Gandhi describes in detail the aims, methods, and justification of Satyagraha, as well as the extensive preparation that practitioners must undergo in order to use these methods effectively.

pressed through suffering”.<sup>17</sup> But Gandhi also had faith in the Indians who carried out his campaign. He believed, again without the aid of much experience, that these vulnerable members of a minority population could face insults, imprisonment, injury, and even the risk of death in order to convert people who mistreated them. And the success of the South African campaign resulted, in part, from the fact that Gandhi recognized the potential of his Indian followers and inspired them to live up to his expectations.

Another exemplar of faith in humanity is the character of Alyosha Karamazov, the young hero of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>18</sup> The narrator states that Alyosha “lived all his life, it seemed, with complete faith in people, and yet no one ever considered him naïve”.<sup>19</sup> He adds, in a somewhat overstated passage, that Alyosha believed that “no one ... would ever want to offend him” and treated this view “as an axiom, given once and for all, without argument”.<sup>20</sup> Early in the novel, Alyosha encounters “a small gang of schoolboys” who are throwing rocks at one of their classmates – a small, sickly, but defiant boy named Ilyusha – who is returning their fire.<sup>21</sup> The boys explain that Ilyusha had stabbed one of their friends with a pocketknife, and when Alyosha approaches the lone boy, both to protect him and to hear his side of the story, Ilyusha hurls rocks at him and bites his finger to the bone.

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<sup>17</sup> Mohandas Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance*, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House, Inc., 1991).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

Alyosha later learns that the conflict began when the boys mocked Ilyusha's father, a poor man who had been cruelly beaten and humiliated by Alyosha's reckless older brother. Alyosha visits the boy's family and gets to know them, and when he discovers that Ilyusha's illness is getting worse, he comforts the boy by reconciling him to his classmates, casually bringing them together one at a time. Alyosha's faith in the boys is expressed by his belief that, despite their initial hostility, it is not only possible, but also worthwhile to reconcile them to Ilyusha. And this faith transforms them. With Alyosha's prompting, the boys eventually develop a deep "friendship and concern" for Ilyusha, which brings the sick child "enormous relief".<sup>22</sup> And in the novel's closing scene, at Ilyusha's funeral, Alyosha urges the boys always to remember how their "good and kind feelings" for Ilyusha united them and, at least for a while, made them better people.<sup>23,24</sup>

Thinking about Gandhi, Alyosha Karamazov, and other exemplars drawn from history and literature provides intuitive support for the view that having faith in humanity is a virtue. These figures' faith in people's decency seems part of what makes them both inspiring and morally admirable. This faith is not just a neutral trait that they happen to share, much less a barrier to virtue that they somehow overcome. Imagine, contrary to what actually occurred, that when Gandhi arrived in South Africa, he judged that white South Africans were hope-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 539.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 775.

<sup>24</sup> This episode illustrates Alyosha's disposition to hold on to the expectation that people will act rightly, but there are also notable cases in which he demonstrates his acute sensitivity to evidence of people's present decency. See, for example, the section of the funeral scene in which he points out what is fine and worth emulating in each of the schoolboys (Ibid., p. 774 and 775).

lessly unjust and that the Indian immigrants were not sufficiently disciplined to bring about reform through non-violent activism. And imagine that he managed to win civil rights for the Indian immigrants through a series of aggressive and sometimes violent confrontations with South African authorities. We may find this imagined Gandhi courageous, resourceful, and, perhaps, reasonable in his assessment of other people's characters and abilities. But he seems to lack a morally admirable quality that the actual Gandhi, who acted partly out of faith in the possibility of people's decency, exhibited.

Furthermore, we can appeal to these exemplars to respond to the first source of skepticism about faith in humanity that I described above. Some may be wary of such faith because they believe that having it involves being naïve and, as a result, too vulnerable to being exploited, or too likely to bring it about that others are harmed. And some literary representations of traits related to faith in humanity may seem to strengthen this worry. Consider the character of Jane Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, who tends to see the good in people, but not the bad.<sup>25</sup> Jane's sister Elizabeth, the heroine of the novel, rightly admires Jane, but also seems surprised and sometimes irritated that someone with Jane's "good sense" could be "so honestly blind to the follies and nonsense of others".<sup>26</sup>

Or consider the character of Dorothea Brooke, the endearing heroine of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.<sup>27</sup> Dorothea's eagerness to find a worthwhile project to which she, a young woman in a Nineteenth Century provincial town, can contribute leads her

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<sup>25</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Driver ("The Virtues of Ignorance", pp. 381 and 382) cites Jane Bennet as an exemplar of blind charity.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Ch. 4, par. 9.

<sup>27</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-2).

to have a kind of faith in Mr. Casaubon's talents, and in the good she might accomplish by marrying him, and by helping him complete his grand treatise on ancient mythologies. But shortly after her marriage to Casaubon, the lonely, unhappy Dorothea rightly suspects that Casaubon's research does not have anything like the significance that she had hastily attributed to it, and that, if anything, her marriage has narrowed her prospects of benefitting people around her.<sup>28</sup> Such cases may suggest that although faith in humanity is an aspect of certain personality types that are agreeable on balance, it is, by itself, a form of naïvete that is a nuisance at best, and at worst, a danger to the person who has it and to people around her.

But Gandhi's life and Alyosha Karamazov's story show that a virtuous person can have deep faith in people's decency without being naïve. And they show that although a person's faith can lead her to act in ways that expose her or people around her to great risks, she need not exhibit any failure of virtue if she incurs these risks in the right way. As I said above, there are cases in which having faith in humanity makes one more likely to trust bad people, and so, less likely to prevent them from mistreating oneself or others. In short, faith involves risks. But unlike someone who is simply naïve, someone who has faith in humanity tends, first of all, to be aware of the risks she takes. She takes care to identify ways in which possible expressions of faith – say, refraining from guarding against harm someone might cause, relying on someone, or trying to reform him – might leave her or other people vulnerable to loss, and she acknowledges these risks to herself and to others. For example, Gandhi had faith in the South African authorities, but he also warned throughout his career that attempts to reform unjust governments might simply enrage them and provoke brutal re-

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., Ch. 20.

sponses.<sup>29</sup> And although Alyosha has faith in the schoolboys, he is also acutely aware of the cruelty and depravity of which even ordinary people are capable.<sup>30</sup> So he surely recognizes that when he takes the boys to visit Ilyusha, they might subject their classmate to further violence and insults.

Someone who has faith in humanity can take such risks without exhibiting any failure of virtue, provided that – again, unlike someone who is simply naïve – she takes these risks in a responsible way, limiting which risks she takes and how she takes them. She does not simply allow herself or others to become hapless victims of any wicked or negligent people who happen to be in the vicinity. Rather, she accepts her own and other people’s risks of being severely mistreated – whether on some particular occasion or in certain kinds of circumstances – only when it seems to her that there is something of sufficient moral importance at stake. For example, by leading protests and acts of civil disobedience in South Africa, Gandhi risked provoking the government to clamp down even more severely on the Indian immigrants living there. But he took this risk in the course of his careful, tireless efforts to gain civil rights for that same population of immigrants, and he garnered support among the people who might be affected, for better or worse, by his actions. Similarly, when Alyosha takes the schoolboys to visit Ilyusha, he exposes Ilyusha to the risk of having additional injuries and insults heaped upon him. But Alyosha brings the children together because this is his only hope of comforting the dying boy, whom he has grown to care about.

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, *Non-Violent Resistance*, Sec. 2, in which Gandhi describes the evils that non-violent activists may have to endure.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Alyosha’s response to his brother Ivan’s accounts of animal torture, war crimes, and child abuse (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 239-246).

When someone who has such faith does take on the risks associated, say, with relying on someone or trying to reform him, despite reasonable doubts about his reliability or capacity for reform, she does not take on these risks all at once or irrevocably, at least, not when she can help it. In other words, when she comes to believe that someone is morally decent in some respect, she does not simply charge ahead blindly in her dealings with him. Rather, in her ongoing interaction with him, she remains sensitive to new evidence concerning the quality of his character and the badness of the results that will occur if he turns out to be base. And if it becomes clear to her, say, that these results are too bad or the likelihood of their occurrence too high, she may try to end her reliance on him, or abandon her attempt to reform him. Gandhi exhibited this kind of sensitivity to evidence and willingness to adapt throughout his campaigns for reform in South Africa and India. He subjected his various methods, which he described as his “experiments with truth”, to constant scrutiny, and he revised or rejected methods that proved unsuccessful.<sup>31</sup>

This means that stories like those of Jane Bennet and Dorothea Brooke do not show that faith in humanity is merely a regrettable aspect of certain otherwise admirable character types. Rather, these stories remind us, first, that all forms of faith in people involve risks. But, as I just argued, this is not a serious objection to the view that faith in humanity is a moral virtue – someone who has such faith avoids failures of virtue, not by avoiding risks entirely, but by taking the right sorts of risks in the right ways. Second, these stories remind us that people who have some measure of faith in others’ decency, including some people we rightly admire, can slip sometimes into naïvete or excessive idealism, say, because they lack experience or because they are in the grip of some strong desire or emotion. But,

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Mohandas Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Part 2.

again, this is no objection to my claims. After all, benevolence is a virtue, but a benevolent person who falls into the grip of sympathetic concern may be unable to give some needy person the harsh treatment he requires to recognize and improve his poor condition. Similarly, having a sense of justice is a virtue, but someone's sincere desire for justice may be distorted temporarily into a desire for revenge when someone she loves is seriously injured or insulted. In short, someone who has faith in humanity can slip sometimes into related, but morally *undesirable* traits, and she may need vigilance and luck to avoid doing so. But this is true of most, if not all moral virtues, and so, cannot provide grounds for denying that faith in humanity is morally admirable.

#### IV

I have argued that thinking about certain moral exemplars, like Gandhi and Alyosha Karamazov, provides intuitive support for the view that having faith in humanity is a moral virtue. But some may not share my intuitions about these examples, and some of those who do may not trust these intuitions without some further rationale. Furthermore, even if we grant that having such faith is a virtue, identifying a rationale for this view may help us better understand the role that such faith plays in moral life, and it may place the view on surer footing. So I will now describe three considerations that provide such a rationale. While the first and second considerations identify morally important results of having faith in humanity, the third is non-instrumental – it identifies a respect in which having such faith is morally admirable in itself, quite apart from the results. To be clear, I believe that showing that manifestations of a trait are apt to produce desirable results on balance – or at least, showing that they are not apt to produce very bad results – is essential for showing that the trait is a moral virtue. But in some cases, claims about the results of having the trait provide only part of the story. In particular, having faith in humanity is

morally admirable, not only because it tends to produce good results, but also because it partly constitutes a certain morally important relation, namely, a kind of harmony or solidarity, between the virtuous person and other members of the moral community.

First, having faith in people's decency tends to encourage them to act rightly. Roughly, when someone's faith in humanity leads her to believe that people will act rightly, or to hold on to the possibility that they will do so, this is likely to result in her treating them in certain ways – ways in which she would not otherwise have treated them – and such treatment tends to prompt them to behave well. This is an instance of a broader social phenomenon that is both familiar from experience and widely discussed by social psychologists: one's beliefs about people can prompt them, for better or worse, to act in ways that confirm one's expectations. The most obvious examples of this phenomenon are cases in which someone knows what another person expects of her and deliberately conforms to that person's expectations. One such case is that in which the student whose teacher believes that he can perform well in some challenging course works especially hard in order to please the teacher, or to avoid disappointing her, and his hard work results in his performing well.

But there are also cases in which someone's beliefs about people prompt them to act in ways that confirm her beliefs, without their intending to confirm the beliefs. The following types of cases are especially important, though there may be others as well. (1) When someone's friends, family members, or other members of her community view her in a certain way, whether favorable or unfavorable, she may begin to view herself in that way – or in other words, to internalize their view of her – and act accordingly.<sup>32</sup> (2) When people form expectations about

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<sup>32</sup> One study showed that simply telling elementary school students to refrain from littering had only modest, short-lived effects. By con-

someone's behavior, they may send subtle behavioral cues, and she may respond directly to these cues by adopting the very behaviors they expect.<sup>33</sup> (3) When people expect someone to behave in a certain way, this may determine what opportunities they give her, or withhold from her, and her exposure to these opportunities, or lack of access to them, may result in her adopting the expected behaviors.<sup>34</sup> (4) If someone realizes that people expect her to behave poorly, she may react in certain ways that shield her from the shame or disappointment of confirming their low expectations. For example, she may come to

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trast, teachers' labeling the students as "neat and tidy people" had greater and longer lasting effects. See R.L. Miller, P. Brickman, and D. Bolen, "Attribution versus persuasion as a means of modifying behavior", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31 (1975): 430-441.

<sup>33</sup> In one classic study, C.O. Word, M.P. Zanna, and J. Cooper showed that if a white interviewer expects a black interviewee to perform poorly, the white interviewer will send negative, non-verbal cues – for example, she may sit relatively far away, make relatively little eye contact, and so on – and this may cause the interviewee to perform poorly ("The nonverbal mediation of self-fulfilling prophecies in interracial interaction", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 10 [1974]: 109-120).

<sup>34</sup> The following example comes from Robert Merton's essay "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy", in which he coined that now ubiquitous phrase: In the late 1940's, some Northern whites supported policies that excluded blacks from their labor unions, on the grounds that black workers were more likely than whites to cross the picket line. But these union leaders failed to recognize that blacks who went to work for strike-bound employers often did so *because* they had been excluded from union jobs, and were therefore desperate for work. As more blacks gained admission to unions in the decades that followed, fewer crossed the picket line. See "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy", *Antioch Review* 8 (1948): 196 and 197.

care less about how she behaves,<sup>35</sup> or she may create obstacles to behaving well so that she can blame her poor behavior on the obstacles, rather than her character or capacities.<sup>36</sup> But her reacting in these ways is likely to result in her behaving poorly, just as people predict. One's faith in people's decency is apt to prompt them, in one or more of these ways, to act rightly, and it also tends to help one avoid subtly prompting them to act wrongly.

The influence of a person's faith in humanity on others' behavior may be either large or small-scale, and both sorts of influence contribute to the moral significance of such faith. In some important and striking, but relatively rare, cases, the faith of a few people prompts others to make large-scale social reforms, like extending voting rights to a disenfranchised population or providing access to education to members of an impoverished community. Gandhi's life illustrates this sort of influence, as do the lives of many other social reformers. It may be that, generally speaking, one cannot produce large-scale social reform unless one has some measure of faith in leaders who have created or enforced bad laws, in citizens who have accepted such laws, or in disadvantaged people whose efforts are needed to carry out the campaign for reform. By contrast, in other, more common cases, someone's faith in people's decency does not lead to large-scale reform, but rather encourages some of the people

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<sup>35</sup> This is one of the mechanisms by which stereotype threat undermines the performance of highly qualified women and minority college students. For an accessible overview of stereotype threat and some of the studies used to identify it, see Claude M. Steele, "Thin Ice: Stereotype Threat and Black College Students", *The Atlantic Monthly* 284(2) (1999): 44-47 and 50-54.

<sup>36</sup> See E.E. Jones and S. Berglas, "Control of attributions about the self through self-handicapping strategies: The appeal of alcohol and the role of underachievement", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 4 (1978): 200-206.

around her to lead morally better lives. The story of Alyosha Karamazov illustrates this second, small-scale form of influence. And although the small-scale influence of faith in humanity may be less dramatic than its large-scale counterpart, it may have similar moral significance. I suspect that there are many cases in which a person's motivation to act rightly in some ordinary circumstance, despite some personal cost, may be subtly reinforced by the actions of a teacher, spouse, parent, or the like who believes in her and treats her accordingly.

Of course, having faith in people's decency does not always have these kinds of desirable effects. Our beliefs about people exert a broad range of influences on them, and although there are cases in which adopting a favorable view of people encourages them to become morally better, there are also cases in which it results in their becoming worse instead. For example, a parent who believes too readily that her child is a good boy may end up indulging his vices well into adulthood. Furthermore, there may be cases in which adopting an *unfavorable* view of people prompts them to act rightly. To take a related example, a guidance counselor who expresses doubts about a student's ability to succeed in a four-year college may spark the student's indignation, motivating her to prove him wrong. So it may seem that, for all we know, having faith in people would have *undesirable* results on balance, or at least, less desirable than the results of adopting a more pessimistic attitude.<sup>37</sup>

There are, to be sure, particular cases in which having faith in someone would prompt her to behave poorly, or being pessimistic about her would prompt her to act rightly. But even so, when someone's faith in people's decency is tempered in the ways I described above – namely, by her sensitivity to evidence about the consequences of her behavior and by her commitment to avoid taking certain kinds of risks – this reduces her likeli-

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<sup>37</sup> An anonymous reviewer raised this objection.

hood of inadvertently prompting people to behave poorly. And we have good reason to believe that, in general, having this sort of nuanced faith in people’s decency has favorable effects on their attitudes and actions, effects that pessimism does not typically produce. Social psychological studies like the ones I cited above have identified a wide range of cases in which, despite the fact that our beliefs about people exert a variety of influences on them, adopting favorable evaluative beliefs about people prompts them, on balance, to behave in ways that confirm those evaluations. These include cases in which people evaluate others’ personal habits,<sup>38</sup> demeanor,<sup>39</sup> loyalty,<sup>40</sup> and academic prowess.<sup>41</sup> In the absence of reasons to deny that charitable

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<sup>38</sup> See Miller, Brickman, and Bolen, “Attribution versus persuasion as a means of modifying behavior”.

<sup>39</sup> In one well-known study by H.H. Kelly (“The warm-cold variable in first impressions of persons”, *Journal of Personality* 18 [1950]: 431-439), college students encountered a guest lecturer who had previously been described to them as having either a “warm” or a “cold” personality. Students’ expectations about the lecturer’s demeanor helped determine how they behaved in class – for instance, students who expected the lecturer to be warm were more likely than their peers to participate in discussion – and the resulting interaction helped confirm their expectations.

<sup>40</sup> See Merton, “The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy”, pp. 196 and 197.

<sup>41</sup> One famous, but controversial study by R. Rosenthal and L. Jacobson (*Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils’ Intellectual Development* [New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1968]) suggests that when teachers expect their students to improve academically, this can alter their interactions with the students in ways that confirm their favorable expectations. In another, more recent study by M. Shih, T.L. Pittinsky, and N. Ambady (“Stereotype Susceptibility: Identity Salience and Shifts in Quantitative Performance”, *Psychological Science* 10 [1999]: 80-83), math tests were administered to Asian-American women, who are targets of *positive* stereotypes about their mathematical ability in virtue of their racial

moral evaluations fit this widespread pattern, it seems reasonable to expect a sensitive, nuanced faith in people’s moral decency to have similarly favorable effects.

By contrast, the negative impact of stereotyping on women and minorities provides a striking case study of the detrimental effects of sustained pessimism about people’s abilities. A wealth of studies shows that being a target of persistent and widely accepted negative stereotypes about one’s abilities generally makes it harder to perform tasks that require the exercise of those abilities, and sometimes makes it harder to perform other tasks as well.<sup>42</sup> So, to return to an earlier example, it may be that a guidance counselor’s pessimism about his student’s prospects can motivate her to succeed, given the right sort of background – say, if her friends or parents believe in her and challenge her to prove him wrong. But it seems unlikely that pessimism will have such favorable effects if *everyone* in the student’s life expresses doubts about her intellectual ability. Similarly, while being a target of pessimism about one’s charac-

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identity, and *negative* stereotypes in virtue of their gender. Subjects whose racial identity was made salient to them performed better, and subjects whose gender was made salient performed worse, than members of a control group, to whom neither identity was made salient.

<sup>42</sup> For an accessible survey of such studies, see Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010). A study by M. Inzlicht and S.K. Kang (“Stereotype threat spillover: How coping with threats to social identity affects aggression, eating, decision making, and attention”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99 [2010]: 467-481) shows that when people who are targets of negative stereotypes about their abilities perform tasks that require the exercise of those abilities, they tend, not only to perform poorly on those tasks, but also to suffer other, lingering ill effects, including heightened aggression, diminished self-control, and diminished ability to focus.

ter on some isolated occasion might, in the right circumstances, spur one to act rightly, these studies support the view that being a target of persistent and widely shared pessimism tends to make it harder to behave or perform well.

Furthermore – and this point is easy to overlook – although there may be cases in which pessimism about people has favorable effects on their attitudes or actions, faith tends to produce such effects in a morally preferable way. When one’s pessimism about someone else’s character prompts that person to act rightly, she is likely to be motivated at least partly by indignation or some other form of anger, and by a desire to prove one wrong. By contrast, when one’s faith in a person’s decency encourages her to act rightly, one comes to share an aim with her – namely, that she behave well – and one becomes invested in the achievement of that aim.<sup>43</sup> Given that concord is morally preferable to antagonism, it follows that the route by which faith leads people to act rightly is morally better than the route by which pessimism prompts them to do so.

A second consideration that lends moral significance to faith in humanity is the fact that having such faith helps one avoid subjecting people to moral condemnation, or other sanctions, that they do not deserve, and thereby wronging them. In other words, having faith in people not only tends to produce the kinds of desirable results that I described, but also helps prevent one from bringing about certain bad results. Someone who has such faith tends to believe, despite reasons for doubt, that people are decent – or at least that decency is attainable for them, if only through the support and sacrifice of friends, teachers, or others who wish to help them act rightly. But as I said above, other people’s actions, motives, and characters are

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<sup>43</sup> The third consideration that helps explain why faith in humanity is morally admirable, which I will discuss later on, is importantly related to this point.

almost always opaque to us to some degree, and as a result, our evaluations of other people are almost always uncertain. So unless someone refrains altogether from making judgments about people's decency – a possibility I will consider below – she is bound to make mistakes. Either she will adopt a more pessimistic view and more or less always err on the side of condemning people too much, or she will have some measure of faith in people and at least sometimes err on the side of viewing them too favorably.

Someone who tends to make only the first sort of error – that of subjecting people to undeserved condemnation – risks badly mistreating the people she wrongly condemns, and thereby wronging them. After all, people tend to care a great deal about securing others' good opinion, not only because this is a means of getting other benefits, but also for its own sake. We might expect a person to be horrified if she discovers, say, that her neighbors or colleagues wrongly believe that she has committed some shocking crime or that she has some detestable vice, whether or not their false beliefs have other bad consequences for her.<sup>44</sup> Arguably, if people care a great deal about securing others' good opinion, one makes their lives go worse to some extent when one wrongly and severely condemns them, whether or not they ever learn about it. And if they do learn about it, say, because one reprimands them, treats them coldly, or tells others how one feels, this may cause them considerable distress. Furthermore, someone who wrongly condemns people may go on to wrong them – or in other words, violate their rights – in other ways, for example, by excluding them from her

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<sup>44</sup> Adam Smith writes that “an innocent man, though of more than ordinary constancy, is often, not only shocked, but most severely mortified by the serious, though false, imputation of a crime; especially when that imputation happens to be supported by some circumstances which give it an air of probability” (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [London: A Millar, 1790], Part 3, Ch. 2, par. 11).

community, ruining their reputations, or even bringing it about that they are punished.

By contrast, someone who has faith in humanity tends to judge that people will act rightly, even in some cases in which they will not, and that acting rightly is a live possibility for people, even in some cases in which it is not. In other words, she tends to make the second sort of error rather than the first, and as a result, she largely avoids mistreating people in the ways I just described.<sup>45</sup> Of course, as I said above, having faith in people can have other kinds of bad results: one may waste time or effort in failed attempts to reform people, one may fail to prevent bad people from mistreating oneself or others, or one's attempts to reform wicked people may simply enrage them, prompting them to respond aggressively. But even so, a person's reasons to avoid the evils that might result from her pessimism trump her reasons to prevent the sorts of evils that might result from her faith.

To be clear, my claim is not that the former evils are *worse occurrences* than the latter, but rather, that a person's reasons to avoid the evils that might result from her own pessimism are of a different and more pressing kind than her reasons to prevent the evils that might result from her faith. If someone is pessimistic about people who are in fact morally decent, then, as I just argued, she may seriously wrong them. By contrast, if she has faith in people who turn out to be base, she may fail to prevent these people from wronging others, but she does not wrong anyone *herself*, provided that she limits the expression of her faith in ways I described above. Roughly, she avoids wronging people as long as she is sensitive to evidence that some expression of faith would have bad results, she takes risks associ-

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas E. Hill, Jr. makes a similar point in "Must Respect be Earned?", in *Respect, Pluralism, and Justice: Kantian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 108-109.

ated with an expression of faith only when there is something of sufficient moral importance at stake, and she takes such risks incrementally if possible.<sup>46</sup> Most people judge – rightly, in my view – that a person’s reasons to refrain from wronging people herself trump her reasons to prevent other, comparable evils from occurring. So, on the plausible assumption that the expected results of faith are not far worse than the expected results of pessimism, it follows that a person’s reasons to avoid the wrongs she might commit if she is pessimistic about people trump her reasons to prevent whatever evils might occur if she has faith in them.

Of course, having too pessimistic a view of people and having too favorable a view of them are not the only attitudes someone might adopt toward other people. Instead, she might remain agnostic, or in other words, refrain from making up her mind

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<sup>46</sup> Some might claim that a person’s faith in humanity leads her to wrong people in at least one type of case that I discussed, namely, cases in which someone acts out of faith and, contrary to what she intends, her actions prompt some wicked person to do serious harm to others. For example, someone might start a campaign to secure civil rights for an oppressed group, but the campaign might fail, prompting the authorities to lash out violently against members of that group. I suspect that, even if she recognizes that her actions *might* produce such bad results, the person who acts out of faith in such a case does not violate anyone’s rights, provided that she takes the kinds of precautions that I described, and provided that her risky behavior is either necessary to help the people she endangers or endorsed by these people. But even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that she violates the rights of people who get mistreated in such cases, the gravity of the violation is surely mitigated by the fact that other people conceive, adopt, and deliberately carry out the aim of mistreating innocents. Because the person who has faith acts with great care in uncertain circumstances and in pursuit of a worthy goal, she bears only limited responsibility for other people’s illegitimate responses to her actions.

whether decency is attainable for people, except when she has decisive epistemic reasons to judge one way or the other. But adopting this sort of agnosticism does relatively little to prevent one from wronging people or mistreating them in other ways. Suppose that someone's neighbors would cause her considerable distress if they expressed their mistaken belief that, because she was so thoroughly selfish, there was no point asking her for help or encouraging her to help others. In that case, they would probably cause her similar distress if they were agnostic about her and they revealed that they could not decide whether or not she was that selfish. Furthermore, when someone is agnostic about people who are, in fact, capable of acting rightly, she may go on to mistreat them in some of the same ways in which one might mistreat them if one wrongly believed they were base, or worse, incapable of acting rightly. For example, she might unjustly exclude them from her community or ruin their reputations. In short, some of the same considerations that make pessimism about people objectionable make this sort of agnosticism objectionable as well.

A third consideration that makes faith in humanity morally admirable is the fact that having faith in people's decency, despite reasons for doubt, is a way of standing by them, in roughly the sense in which one might stand by a decision, an ideal, or a friend to whom one is committed, despite reasons to abandon or denigrate her. The cognitive element of faith works together with the volitional to account for this link between having faith and standing by. Someone who has such faith is not just disposed to view people in a favorable light, but also invested in their confirming her favorable expectations. She *roots* for people to lead morally decent lives, even in the face of reasons to doubt that they can, or will, do so. She thereby ties her own flourishing, in certain respects, to the quality of these people's characters and actions. When people in whom she has faith behave well, despite some personal cost or other obstacle, she may feel satisfaction, and if she has expressed her faith in

them, she may also receive their gratitude, or even the praise of peers who admire her perceptiveness. But when people in whom she has faith behave poorly, she may feel the pain of disappointment, be ridiculed by peers who think she has been duped, or be mistreated by the very people in whom she once had faith. So there is an important sense in which someone who has faith in other people stands or falls with them.

By contrast, adopting an attitude toward people that disposes one to deny that decency is attainable for them is a way of giving up on them, as when a parent resigns herself to the view that, at least for now, her child is hopelessly irresponsible, or when someone cynically dismisses her colleagues' resolutions, say, to start volunteering or spend more time with their children. We might expect someone who discovers that many of the people in her community view her in this way, not only to feel the shame of being condemned, but also to experience a kind of loneliness, a sense that she has been abandoned.

Standing by people in the sense I described is morally admirable given the following view, which is both plausible and familiar, about the role that morality plays in human life: conforming to moral ideals enables a person to live in a kind of community with others, even though their interests and aims may differ considerably from her own.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the world is teeming with people, and their various interests and aims can come into sharp conflict. On the one hand, each of these people devotes special attention to her own private aims, and according to this view, it is appropriate for her to do so. But on the other hand, there is a sense in which each person is just one among others, and no one is any more or less significant than anyone else. These two judgments are deeply plausible and cen-

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Nagel provides an illuminating discussion of this view, from a Kantian perspective, in *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Chapters 1-5.

tral to the living of our lives, and conforming to moral requirements enables a person to live in a way that gives expression to each. Roughly, a virtuous person may pursue her own private aims in some cases, but she limits her pursuit of these aims, adopts new aims, and adopts attitudes in ways that bring her into a kind of community, or harmony, with everyone else. Standing by people, as when one has faith in them; adopting others' interests as one's own, as when one has the virtue of benevolence; and limiting one's pursuit of one's own aims so that others can pursue their aims as well, as when one has the virtue of justice, are all ways in which a morally virtuous person escapes her solitude and enters into this form of community.<sup>48</sup>

As I said above, this third consideration is importantly different from the other factors that account for the moral significance of faith in humanity. The first and second considerations concern the instrumental significance of such faith, which derives from the fact that having faith in people can play a vital role in prompting them to act rightly, and helping one avoid mistreating them. But this third consideration is non-instrumental, or at least, it has an important non-instrumental component. Of course, when someone acquires the kinds of attitudes and aims that bring her into community with others, this tends to have desirable results. For example, it might enable her to cooperate

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<sup>48</sup> There is also another parallel between the virtue of faith in humanity and the virtue of justice. Someone who has faith in humanity adopts a stance toward each person she encounters or considers, and in virtue of this stance, she tends to believe, despite reasons for doubt, that people are morally decent, or that decency is somehow attainable for them. Someone who has the virtue of justice adopts a stance toward each person she encounters or considers, and in virtue of this stance, she tends to believe, even in the face of reasons for doubt, that people have whatever qualities are required for moral consideration. I owe this point to Thomas E. Hill, Jr.'s "Must Respect be Earned?", pp. 106 and 109 and to discussion with C.D.C. Reeve.

with others, and thereby bring it about that everyone's aims are better achieved, or it might help her develop fulfilling relationships with people. But her moral reason to enter into community with people, despite the fact that she has her own life to live, does not derive entirely from the desirability of the results. Rather, it is also part of what she owes to them in light of the fact that their lives matter, that she is just one person among others whose lives are no less significant than her own. Standing by people, as when one has faith in them, constitutes one way of entering into this sort of community with them, and therefore, a way of granting them the sort of treatment one owes to them.

## V

Now I can return to the second, and more general, form of skepticism about faith in humanity that I described in the introduction.<sup>49</sup> Some might argue that being morally virtuous cannot be irrational, but having faith in humanity, or for that matter, faith of any sort, *is* irrational on epistemic grounds. So no matter what practical considerations commend faith in humanity, having such faith cannot be a moral virtue. I have already presented parts of my response to this worry, but it will be helpful to tie these threads together in one place. To begin with, as I said above, having faith in humanity does not typically dispose one to make irrational judgments. Setting aside cases in which a person has decisive reason to view someone favorably, her faith may yield rational judgments when she is rationally permitted to adopt either a more favorable or a less favorable view of someone, when she is permitted either to form a judgment about someone or to remain agnostic, or when her adopting a favorable view of someone is apt to prompt that person to react in ways that confirm her expectations. So con-

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<sup>49</sup> I owe many of the points in this section to Thomas E. Hill, Jr.

cerns about the irrationality of faith in humanity apply to a narrower range of cases than they initially appear to.

Nevertheless, there are some cases in which the kind of faith I commend can yield epistemically irrational judgments, where, roughly, a judgment is epistemically rational to the degree that it is supported by evidence of its truth. To take one possible example, Gandhi, as I said above, exhibited paradigmatic faith in humanity during his South African campaign. But it may be that his belief that the Indians in South Africa could endure the hardships involved in carrying out a campaign of nonviolent resistance, or his belief that if they managed to endure such hardships, they could convert the South African authorities who oppressed them, was unjustified to some degree, given the evidence available to him. In any case, whether or not Gandhi's beliefs were irrational, people often have to decide what to do despite being uncertain about how others will respond. In some of these cases, when there is little to be lost or something of sufficient moral importance to be gained, someone who has faith can, without any failure of virtue, form beliefs about people – especially beliefs about the decency of their future attitudes and actions – that are to some degree irrational, given the evidence. This does not mean that having faith involves throwing rationality to the wind. After all, a virtuous person who has such faith remains sensitive to evidence of people's poor character and behavior, and, crucially, she conforms to the requirements of *practical* rationality. But it does mean that, on the view I defend, there are cases in which a manifestation of someone's moral virtue constitutes a failure of epistemic rationality.<sup>50</sup>

However, this is not, by itself, a good reason to deny that having faith in humanity is a moral virtue. Of course, one has to

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<sup>50</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for comments that helped me clarify this point.

meet *some* standard of epistemic rationality in order to count as being morally virtuous. For example, a person cannot be fully virtuous if she tends to ignore evidence concerning the consequences of her actions whenever she finds such evidence distressing. But even so, the ideal of a morally virtuous character is a practical ideal, concerned with the sort of life one should live, and the moral importance of epistemic rationality does not have absolute priority in determining the content of that ideal. Moral virtue comprises many traits, and just as a virtuous person's benevolent impulses may be tempered, in some cases, by her sense of justice, so her disposition to respond to evidence in ways that are fully justified may be tempered sometimes by other morally important concerns.

For example, provided that she meets some relevant standard of care in gathering evidence, a morally virtuous person may stop gathering evidence and form her beliefs, even if spending more time gathering evidence would make her somewhat more likely to arrive at the truth. She may stop gathering evidence because she ought to pursue some other morally important aim instead, or simply because she prefers to do something else. Or, to take an example that is closer to home, a virtuous person whose child has been accused of some terrible crime may cling to the possibility that her child is innocent, to a degree that is not fully justified by the evidence available to her. Of course, she will not be wholly blind to evidence of her child's guilt, but if she loves her child, she will be invested in the possibility of his innocence, and far more concerned with providing support for him than with assessing the available evidence impartially. So we might expect her to hold on to the possibility of his innocence, at least for a while, even after her reasonable, but disinterested peers have made up their minds that he is guilty.

Perhaps, if we lived in a world in which our evidence was always clear, easy to attain, and sufficient to settle whatever questions we considered, we could always expect morally virtu-

ous people to form judgments that were fully epistemically rational. After all, how one ought to behave depends, in part, on the facts, and in this counterfactual scenario, responding rationally to the available evidence always leads one directly, and without difficulty, to the relevant facts. But in our actual circumstances, evidence – especially evidence concerning the quality of other people’s actions, motives, and characters – is almost always ambiguous, hard to come by, or incomplete. And as a result, a virtuous person’s disposition to respond in fully rational ways to whatever evidence happens to be available can come into conflict with her aims of encouraging people to act rightly, treating them justly, and entering into an important form of community with them. So unless we assume that the moral importance of epistemic rationality is implausibly great, or the importance of these other aims implausibly slight, we should conclude that a virtuous person may sacrifice some degree of epistemic rationality, in certain respects and in certain cases, in her pursuit of these other aims.

So, even on the assumption that having faith in humanity can lead one to make judgments that are to some degree epistemically irrational, such faith is a centrally important part of moral life. If we hope to adopt a moral ideal that can accommodate both the uncertainty of our moral judgments about people and the moral importance of the aims we ought to pursue in the face of that uncertainty, then we must count faith in humanity among the virtues.<sup>51</sup>

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