

## A DEWEYAN ANALYSIS OF FUNDAMENTALISM: RIGID HABITS VERSUS THE RELIGIOUS

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It is no controversial claim that religious dogmatisms that are beyond revision are not compatible with the philosophy of the Classical American Pragmatists. The philosophy of John Dewey not only rejects fundamentalism, but it gives a manner to analyze it so that we might see how it is not only an unfounded system of belief but that it is a system of belief that has political and social consequences far beyond the culture-war issues such as abortion and school curriculum. Fundamentalism<sup>1</sup> becomes a habit which guides behavior and co-opts the individual not only to have certain beliefs, but to insure that it is impossible to develop habits and new ideas which are able to cope with the continually changing world. Without the mental habits to deal with a changing world, individuals cannot adequately react, and this results in potential disaster. To the end of this argument, I will show how John Dewey's religious philosophy, primarily in *Human Nature and Conduct*, shows that beliefs such as fundamentalism are not religious in character. From this analysis we will see that fundamentalism is best understood as a habit. These habits render the individual incapable of novelty (in a full and fruitful sense) decrease the potential of inquiry, and seriously endanger the survival of communities.

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey holds that there is a "difference between religion, a religion, and the religious, between anything that may be denoted by a noun substantive and the quality of experience that is designated by an adjective" (4). Any common ground between religions "reduce[s] the terms of the definition to such a low common denominator that little meaning is left" (5). Individual religions are "relative to the conditions of social culture in which peoples lived" (6). As religions beliefs are products of cultural ideas, already there is a latent rejection of fundamentalism since fundamentalism holds to an ahistorical revelation, not a historical process of development. However, there is a commonality in human experience that Dewey does categorize as religious. Dewey is "not proposing a religion, but rather the emancipation of elements and outlooks that may be called religious" (8). While religions "take on a load that is not inherent in them, a load of current beliefs and of institutional practices that are irrelevant to them," the religious is a particular kind of outlook on and orientation to experience (8). Upon the establishment of belief into a specific religion—a set of dogmas, dependent on culture, time and history—religion overtakes the religious sentiment that might have been operative in the formation of the beliefs in the first place. The adjective "religious," "denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal" (8). Here we have the commonality, not in belief or dogma, but in the very experience of the world that gives birth to religion.

The religious outlook is important in the harmonizing of self to the world. One factor of this is the understanding and the formation of what Dewey terms the "whole self." He holds that "neither observation, thought, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification of the self which is called a whole. The *whole* self is an ideal, an imaginative projection" (14). The religious attitude leads to "the unification of the self throughout the ceaseless flux of what it does, suffers, and achieves, [and] cannot be attained in terms of itself" (14). While the religious attitude leads us to this point, the danger of formalizing it into a religion becomes ever more a problem. This is the major tension between the religious attitude, which enables a person to experience some part of the universe and a

religion which dogmatizes the result of the experience into something static. Dogmatized religion is unresponsive to further inquiry and therefore morally dangerous. In many ways it contradicts the initial feeling and religious attitude in doing so, as it formalizes and removes the ability to have certain types of experience, to inquire further into our world.

The moral aspect of the religious experience, however, is strong and provides vitality. Dewey writes,

[T]he artist, scientist, citizen, parent, as far as they are actuated by the spirit of their callings, are controlled by the unseen. For all endeavors for the better is moved by faith in what is possible, not by adherence to the actual.... The inherent vice of all intellectual schemes of idealism is that they convert the idealism of action into a system of beliefs about antecedent reality. (17)

This type of idealization so freezes and simplifies the experience of the religious that it not only contradicts the experience but renders it ineffective. This is the problem of conflating the experience of the unseen into the supernatural.

Dewey holds that this type of faith empowers our inquiry and ability to gain more understanding of the world, because

it trusts that the natural interactions between man and his environment will breed more intelligence and generate more knowledge provided the scientific methods that define intelligence in operation are pushed further into the mysteries of the world, being themselves promoted and improved in the operation. There is such a thing as faith in intelligence becoming religious in quality. (19)

This is no dualism between the mysteries of the universe and that which we can know. Dewey does this without reducing the world to the material, nor to the spiritual. Because of this intimate and vital connection between the attitude Dewey calls religious and our ability to interact with and grow in the world we reach the conclusion that “because the release of these values [are] so important, their identification with the creeds and cults of religion must be dissolved” (20).

The supernatural, as something which is substantively different from nature, is likewise excluded by Dewey. There is no basis on which to posit a different substance, being the supernatural, which affects nature, but that nature cannot affect. The religious experience does not necessitate a divinity, rather “[a]ny activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality” (16). God, if one chooses to keep the word, is not a supernatural divinity but the “*active* relation between ideal and actual,” the unseen processes and connections that go from an ideal, an end to an actuality, achieved by interaction within nature (34). A division of natural from supernatural creates a “double and parallel manifestation of the divine, in which the latter has superior status and authority” which leads to a confusion, an inability not only to understand but to experience (49).

Fundamentalism is undoubtedly a religion on this account; however, it is not religious in the Deweyan sense. While individual religious experiences doubtlessly occur in fundamentalist churches, they are interpreted through the framework of the dogmas of literalism, millennialism, and human corruption. This only exacerbates the problem of action toward an intellectual ideal. Dewey writes that:

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. (31)

Social change is hindered as more people, instead of actualizing human ideals, turn instead toward some form of eschatological waiting. It is when a belief becomes calcified and beyond revision that the pragmatic method is no longer able to function. This is problematic as it is fundamentally how experience works.

The religion of the fundamentalist is one that has a “concentration upon doctrinal conformity” and on a “non-historical understanding of Christianity” (Barr 15). Fundamentalists hold that truth is unchanging and that biblical literalism demonstrates an absolute. Dewey’s religious experience is based primarily in activity and cannot support the kind of absolutism required by a fundamentalist understanding of a God based on eternal unchanging Truths without the *active* relationship between the actual and the ideal. Religious experience for Dewey is one of growth and change, where ideals are formed, changed, moved and inquired into.

Dewey understands that intelligence must be applied to understand the religious experience. Any experience is meaningless until it is formative for action. This implies intelligence because without it no moral value is possible. “Intelligence, as distinct from the older conception of reason, is inherently involved in action” (*A Common Faith* 52). Thus, there is no harsh distinction between intelligent interpretation of religious experience and the authenticity of religious experience. The two are intimately connected. Without intelligence, which is not skepticism or faithlessness, there is no meaningful religious experience. To cut off intelligence for the kind of certainty which comes from literalism and dogmatic assertions of immutable and unchanging Truth is only to cut off the possibility of intelligent action. To do so is not to have a truly religious experience as it lacks the active connection between the ideal and the actual. The interruption of the development of habits results in the inability to cope with the precarious world. Habit is not only an important part of the constitution of the human actions but rather, and more broadly, the constitutive factor of the human individual. It is habituated action and thought that enable any particular individual to exercise individuality, that is, to do anything.

On Dewey’s account, habits are learned behaviors, which form the basis of future action and allow the individual the freedom to grow and interact within an environment. A habit is “that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense [is] acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; ...and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity” (Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* 31). However, Dewey’s conception of habit goes beyond our colloquial understanding of actions repeated. Rather, for Dewey, habits include that “which is projective, dynamic in quality, [and] ready for overt manifestation” (31). Habit is not “to limit its meaning to repetition,” but rather we must understand habit as a dynamic factor of human behavior (32). “The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to *ways* or modes of response, not to particular acts except as, under special conditions these express a way of behaving” (32). Habits aim to a consummation, an end. Habits are formed as we think and act, and find their formation complete in consummation. This end marks a completion, a

functional end-in-view, which can then go out of immediate perception and guide the actions of the organism in the environment.

In this sense, we move beyond the colloquial understanding of habits as bad and begin to understand them as vital and good. Habits which are good (that is, constructive and active) are just as likely as ones that are bad (that is, destructive and passive). Dewey holds that it is through an understanding of habits that we can begin to understand human behavior. Habits begin to function in an organism “especially in requiring the cooperation of organism and environment” (15). Thus, Dewey has no trouble comparing habits to physiological functions, like breathing or digesting. Of course, habits are acquired while physiological functions are involuntary. The comparison remains valid as habits are done “by means of organic structures or acquired dispositions” (15). The fingers of the skilled violinist move according to habit. It is the practice of scales which brings the finger down on the fingerboard without hesitation. Although fractions of a millimeter determine if the note will sound true, the practiced musician produces the pitch. This is the delicate balance of habit that informs human action. More important for our lives as human beings, however, are habits of the mind. For Dewey there is no harsh dichotomy between the environment and the individual; therefore, habits inform movement as well as thought. The beginning crossword solver cannot compete with the expert, not due to any particular inherently lesser intellect, but rather because there are habits built by the continual playing of the game that she does not yet possess.

Habits are important as constitutive of the self. Dewey holds that “[a]ll habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they *are* will” (21). Desires, propensities and will power have to do with habits. This is more than evident in observations of a child learning temperance and maturity as she interacts with the environment. Habits of mind change and develop. The choices of an adult and the child are different due to the continual formation and reconstruction of habit. Habits are not only the guide of the will, but “are conditions of intellectual efficiency,” which “are blinders that confine the eyes of mind to the road ahead;” furthermore, “[o]utside the scope of habits, thought works gropingly, fumbling in a confused uncertainty” (121). Habits constitute the will, by guiding choices, and they constitute the intellect, by narrowing the blur of experience.

Old habits inform new inquiries, new actions. Old habits are both lost and made into new habits. To return to the example of the violinist, scales are beneficial and formed habitually. Eventually, however, these habits are used to perform musical works. If habits are flexible, they can be used to inform more, novel occurrences, thoughts, actions and beliefs. These provide the actor, the habit user or habit former, with novel and potentially meaningful inquiries and actions. It is rigidity that constitutes bad habits. If a habit cannot be an instrument of novel and intelligent activity, it is a bad habit. Dewey holds that what “makes a habit bad is enslavement to old ruts” (48). Without intelligent action in the context of flexible habit, a habit that guides attention and focus without rigidly determining results, there is no goodness, nothing morally excellent at work. To make a blind rigid habit out of something typically “good is a negation of the principle of moral goodness. It identifies morality with what was sometime[s] rational” (48). When the rigidity of bad habit is absent, growth can occur. If the habit is too rigid and unthinking, any new formation of habit is perverted toward old unthinking ends.

If habits are the guiding and constitutive element of experience, the more fruitful analysis of fundamentalism is as a bad habit. It is unfruitful to rely wholly on *A Common Faith* to provide an analysis. As we have seen, while fundamentalism is undeniably a set of beliefs that constitute a religion, it is not religious insofar as it cannot deal adequately with the needs of understanding the active connection between the actual and the ideal, the foundation of religious experience. Furthermore, due to literalism and dogmatism, it cannot allow for intelligent recreation and modification with a changing and precarious world. Understanding fundamentalism as a series of habits will show that it is a full worldview and network of interacting habits that have real social consequences. Particularly, fundamentalism will prove to be a bad habit as its rigidity excludes intelligent activity and its dependence on a supernatural eschatology makes social action difficult or impossible.

When we treat fundamentalism as a philosophy and look into the methods it uses to come about its beliefs, we can see more clearly how it functions as a habit. Fundamentalists make habits of particular kinds of inquiry. Therefore, by only using certain tools, such as biblical literalism, there is a fixation of habit in methods of inquiry. Leaving hypotheses and fundamental assumptions beyond question forms a ridged habit of missing the opportunity to inquire. It functions as a block to knowledge both in the secular and sacred realms. As “[h]abit means that an individual undergoes a modification through an experience, which modification forms a predisposition to easier and more effective actions in the like direction in the future,” continually moving over inquiry results in a future habit to pass over the possibility of inquiry. Experience of this limited kind thus constricts itself (*Democracy and Education* 349). Fundamentalism’s inflexibility co-opts further inquiry and investigations into a routine and predictable end, resulting in monotonous consequences of thought and limitations of possible actions. This can be seen when “[t]he sinfulness of man, the corruption of his heart, his self-love and love of power, when referred to as causes” and become the “chief obstacle to the generation and growth,” resulting in hindered social development (*A Common Faith* 51).

The effect of bad inquiry, which might at first seem limited to the individual, becomes a social problem as it is beliefs that result in the actions that an individual takes. As we have seen, Dewey holds that if humanity gives up a significant amount of power for change and development to an imagined supernatural power, it surrenders the possibility of growth and change (31-32). The belief that creation, human nature, or morality is unchangeable by humans but destined to one day be changed by the hand of God, results in an absence of work and development. This is not due to an essential inability to work and develop, but rather a belief that it is impossible to produce real goods in the world. The danger here is that even in secular matters, seemingly far away from religion, the same rigid and unchangeable habits will be in operation.<sup>11</sup> Dewey has no problem in admitting that “[w]e do not know the relation of causes to results in social matters, and consequently lack means of control.” However, it is a mistake to “resort to supernatural control” (51). This distinction of supernatural and natural is an artificial dualism, one that results in a denial of the possibility that “intelligence may and will develop in respect to social relations;” moreover, Dewey holds that “the needed understanding will not develop unless we strive for it” (51). The danger of habituating bad inquiry is that it creates overall bad habits that prevent possible and necessary social growth. The answer to social problems cannot be the old dogmatic dualisms of fundamentalism but rather must acknowledge that ideals are created, inquired into, and achieved by humans in a natural

world. Moving beyond habits created by inadequate thought enables us to avoid the absolutism and oppression of the *status quo*.

## NOTES

1. I am following Niels C. Nielsen, Jr. in defining fundamentalism. Nielsen, citing Thomas Meyer, holds that there are four primary characteristics of fundamentalism. These are a stance:

- a. against every theological, cultural and political liberalism;
- b. against the historical and critical view of Christian faith documents (Scriptures, etc.; against the infallibility of the pope, the infallibility of the bible is affirmed);
- c. against the theory of evolution as compared with a literal understanding of the biblical creation stories; and,
- d. against every syncretism as seen in all interreligious dialogue, in ecumenics, and (secularly) in the League of Nations and the United Nations (2).

However, Neilson goes on to add another character left out of Meyer's study. Following Nancy Ammerman, he adds that another characteristic of fundamentalism is that they "construct a world in which God is in control," where "[l]ife is no longer a puzzle" (10).

2. Without the possibilities of inquiry into new and novel solutions for ever changing social, political and economic problems, there is no possible manner to effectually deal with an ever-precarious world. Dewey writes:

Reinforced by the prestige of traditional religion, and backed by the emotional force of beliefs in the supernatural, it stifles the growth of that social intelligence by means of which direction of social change could be taken out of the region of accident, as accident has been defined. Accident in the broad sense and the idea of the supernatural are twins. Interest in the supernatural therefore reinforces other vested interests to prolong the social reign of accident (Dewey, *A Common Faith* 52).

This reign of accident is evident in professed faith in *laissez-faire* economic theories, in allowing non-democratic controls on culture, or in any relinquishment of even the possibility of control over social goods. Furthermore, it is from these habits, developed as we have explicated, that further mistakes are reinforced into more stanch habits of action and inquiry. Fundamentalism digs deep ruts in the road, which are only dug deeper when passing wheels fall into the same grooves.

Furthermore, Barr observes that "[t]he acute religiosity of the fundamentalist does not alter the fact that in another sense he almost fully accepts the secular and economic structure of that world"(99). This is again the result of habits of avoiding inquiry and avoiding real social control. A further tendency can be observed that due to the abbreviated experience of the fundamentalist, they must in the end submit to an authority of the *status quo*, even in matters that are seemingly secular.

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