

Self-Trust and the Ethics of Belief

Men seem to be constitutionally believers and unbelievers. There is no bridge that can cross from a mind in one state to a mind in the other. All my opinions, affections, whimsies, are tinged with belief,—incline to that side. All that is generous, elegant, rich, wise, looks that way. But I cannot give reasons to a person of a different persuasion that are adequate to the force of my conviction. Yet when I fail to find the reason, my faith is not less. . . .

Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

Worries about whether or not we can defend our deepest and most cherished beliefs need not arise solely because of our inability to make ourselves understood by those who demand some kind of justification of our views. Although people may find it almost impossible to render an account of their convictions that will satisfy the challenges of others, they may still find that their faith remains unshaken and undisturbed. In the journal entry cited above, for example, written in 1833 during his first excursion to Europe, Ralph Waldo Emerson celebrates his unqualified confidence by noting that the strength of his faith does not depend on his ability to make himself understood by everyone. Like his Danish contemporary Søren Kierkegaard, Emerson is well aware that there are limits to our ability to defend and justify our basic concerns and convictions and that true inwardness demands courage as well as a willingness to take the risk of “becoming subjective.” Acknowledging what often seems to be the unbridgeable chasm that separates believers from nonbelievers, Emerson voices what is clearly a Kierkegaardian

insight concerning the difficulty of making the basis for one's religious beliefs intelligible to others.

It is tempting, of course, to view Emerson's observation about the impossibility of meeting such challenges to one's beliefs as an apologetic ploy that might enable him to ignore or dismiss the claims of others who might demand a stricter standard of intellectual accountability. The suspicion is that his remarks concerning the limits of argument might actually be nothing more than a subtle rationalization intended to forestall any criticism of his own views. For if the believer and unbeliever discover that they cannot understand the force of each other's convictions, reasoned debate would seem to be impossible: one's beliefs would not be vulnerable to the challenges of those who did not share one's views. If Emerson is right, then believers would appear to have no reason to fear that an inability to defend or justify their religious convictions might lead to the erosion or loss of their faith.

Emerson, however, is obviously no apologist and expresses throughout his writings a firsthand knowledge of the vulnerability of religious belief. In fact, what at first appears to be the expression of an optimistic and naive confidence is actually the hard-won result of his own struggle with religious doubt.² From the crisis of 1832, when he begins to express strong doubts about the Lord's Supper, to the end of his life, Emerson wrestles with meaning of faith as he attempts to come to terms with the changes and transformations in his own religious beliefs.

In the world according to Emerson then, the most difficult and formidable challenge to a person's faith is not the demand for some kind of justification that might be acceptable to everyone—worries concerning the fragility of faith do not arise primarily as a reaction to one's failure to justify one's beliefs to others. Rather, the crisis that renders belief vulnerable is the discovery that one's basic beliefs no longer make any sense in the context of one's life viewed as a whole.

For Emerson then the ethics of belief is not primarily a question of whether people are able or willing to justify their beliefs to others, but is rather a matter of cultivating what he calls the virtue of self-trust. The ideal of "Man Thinking," for instance, which he articulates in his well-known address "The American Scholar," provides us with a paradigm of the kind of person for whom inquiry is a matter of subjective reflection, a matter of the heart. This does not mean, of course, that self-trust is an ideal that excludes any reference to intellectual accountability. On the contrary, Emerson's ideal of "Man Thinking" portrayed in "The American Scholar" is akin to Friedrich Nietzsche's "free spirits" whose vocation demands the almost impossible ability to balance self-trust with an austere suspicion of themselves and their beliefs:

Long he must stammer in his speech; often forgo the living for the dead. Worse yet, he must accept—how often! poverty and solitude. For the ease and pleasure of treading the old road, accepting the fashions, the education, the religion of society, he takes the cross of making his own, and, of course, the self-accusation, the faint heart, the frequent uncertainty and loss of time which are the nettles and tangling vines in the way of the self-relying and self-directed. . . .³

Self-trust then does not necessarily entail a blind dogmatism or a stubborn refusal to assess critically one's way of life. Quite the contrary, there is a sense in which the virtue of self-trust is based on an unconditional desire for truthfulness and a willingness to sacrifice security for a life of discovery. In short, self-trust should not be confused with intellectual complacency. It is, rather, a demanding task pursued in solitude: "In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach; and bide his own time,—happy enough if he can satisfy himself alone that his day he has seen something truly."⁴

On the one hand then Emerson recognizes that a meaningful human life requires a certain practical self-confidence. This claim is based on the fact that it is difficult if not impossible to sustain our faith in our life projects unless we are willing to *claim* them as projects for which we are willing to assume responsibility.⁵ By the same token, however, Emerson is suspicious of those who ensure the stability of their beliefs and commitments by espousing a kind of "existential" dogmatism. The problem with such strategies is that they are motivated by a desire to render one's particular worldview invulnerable to any challenge. The result is an inability to entertain or acknowledge new life-possibilities. The kind of practical self-trust that Emerson recommends throughout his writings requires the cultivation of a mean between confidence in one's own commitments and the insights of a moderate skepticism. In short, the ethics of belief is a matter of balancing self-trust and creative flexibility, for it is only by virtue of our practical self-confidence that we can acknowledge without fear strange and unfamiliar ways of thinking about life:

Keep the habit of the observer, and, as fast as you can, break off your association with your personality and identify yourself with the Universe. Be a football to time and chance, the more kicks, the better, so that you inspect the whole game and know its uttermost law. As true is this ethics for trivial as for calamitous days.⁶

As this short passage from Emerson's journal indicates, one of the ways we might articulate the notion of self-trust is to speak of keeping the *habit* of the observer, a habit that requires a willingness to be challenged by the unexpected and unfamiliar: to "be a football" to time and chance. This remark is important to the extent that Emerson characterizes inquiry not in terms of some method or theory of human understanding that might insure knowledge but rather in terms of a certain kind of habit that might enable one to balance practical self-confidence with a willingness to explore new ideas. The assumption underlying this Emersonian insight, an insight I shall explore and defend throughout this essay, is that genuine inquiry depends not on our ability to formulate or defend a theory of knowledge, but on the cultivation of a certain kind of character and style of thinking.

The value of Emerson's remarks on inquiry is the suggestion that the ethics of belief is not primarily an epistemological concern. Like the later Heidegger, who invites us to turn our attention from the traditional philosophical preoccupation with the problem of *knowledge* and reappropriate instead the more original notion of *thinking*, Emerson advocates a more holistic picture of philosophy and insists that *thinking* must involve serious reflection about ordinary life. Rejecting the traditional views of those philosophers and theologians for whom the ethics of belief is primarily a problem of the *justification* of religious *knowledge*, Emerson emphasizes what his contemporary Kierkegaard calls *edification* and insists that spiritual inquiry is primarily a matter of the way we *understand* our life-views and *appropriate* them by claiming them as ours.

In order to appreciate the radical implications of a proposal such as that offered by Emerson or Kierkegaard, we need only remind ourselves of the extent to which both call into question the traditional picture of inquiry dating back to Descartes and Locke. According to this traditional approach, the ethics of belief has generally been cast as an epistemological issue. Thus, the question of whether a person is entitled to hold a religious belief has, until recently, been regarded as a question of whether the position can be justified or defended by the application of some reliable and universally accepted method. As we shall see in the next chapter, the paradigmatic example of this approach can be found in the work of John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* sets the agenda for the development of the ethics of belief by framing the problem of religious belief as an epistemological worry.

It was not long though before this narrow characterization of the ethics of belief set forth in the work of Locke began to elicit critical responses from those who saw his epistemological project as a threat to religious belief. Since the development of this debate among Locke's im-

mediate contemporaries has been explored in detail elsewhere,⁷ I will examine the responses of two later figures who attempt to broaden the terms of the debate. In particular, I am interested in the way thinkers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Henry Newman rethink the problem of the ethics of belief by seriously considering the *personal* component of religious belief often overlooked by Locke and his followers. As we shall see, both thinkers give us good reason to be wary of any approach to the ethics of belief that ignores or systematically discounts the complex ways that personal considerations about the purpose of life figure into the reasons one might have for one's religious beliefs.

After a brief discussion of Coleridge and Newman it will come as no surprise that I intend to defend throughout the remainder of this book the view that the ethics of belief is not primarily an epistemological concern but rather an issue of character and critical self-reflection. In the third chapter we shall see that it is just this insight that informs the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who wants to rethink the ethics of belief in such a way as to avoid the problems raised by traditional formulations of the issue. Much, of course, has been written about Wittgenstein's views on religion and it would be impossible to do justice to all of the controversial issues raised by his work. My focus will be much more narrow and will involve the simple thesis that religious beliefs should not be construed as isolated claims but rather as holistic interpretations about the meaning of life that enable us to make sense of our emotions and desires as well as our attitudes about suffering and death.

Although it might appear to make little difference whether we view a person's religious convictions as involving certain judgments about the meaning of life, there are important consequences in construing religious beliefs in this fashion. For example, it is impossible to assess such life-views in any straightforward way with respect to their "plain truth" because our practical deliberations about life's meaning are, as David Wiggins claims, "cognitively underdetermined."⁸ This notion of "cognitive underdetermination" is important because it suggests that our views about the meaning of life differ in at least one important respect from scientific theories. In short, although our judgments about life's meaning involve an attempt to make sense of certain "existential data" such as love, suffering, and death, we do *not* expect our judgments about the meaning of life to converge in the same way that we expect our scientific theories to converge. In other words, Wiggins's account suggests that it is simply a mistake to suppose that there might be a single interpretation of life that is "true" by virtue of the way the world is. In the end then even though discussion about the question of the meaning of life has become unfashionable in some philosophical and theological circles,⁹ we cannot avoid the conclusion that if religious beliefs involve

judgments about life's meaning, and if such judgments fall short of plain truth, then religious beliefs also fall short of plain truth.

Now although such a conclusion might appear to be a liability, it is, upon closer examination, a liberating and fruitful suggestion. For one thing, once we acknowledge the connection between the ethics of belief and a person's basic questions about the meaning of life, we will be in a better position to grant the extent to which our religious convictions are tied to the way that we understand ourselves in light of our fundamental commitments and projects. Since there are limits to a purely formal discussion of this issue, I will try to elucidate this claim in the fourth chapter by drawing upon literary works, including Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, that might illuminate in a more concrete fashion how the ethics of belief is tied to a person's attempt to come to some self-understanding about the meaning of life. Most importantly, by attending to the way such issues are explored in literature, we shall discover that the criteria for assessing a person's particular interpretation about life's meaning have more in common with the aesthetic criteria we employ to understand characters in a novel than they do with the impersonal epistemological criteria to which many philosophers of religion appeal in their attempt to assess the intelligibility and defensibility of a person's religious beliefs.

Once we grant the importance of more flexible criteria for the assessment of a person's beliefs, we will also be in a better position to understand how the pursuit of practical self-understanding shapes and authorizes a person's religious beliefs. On the one hand, some thinkers, such as Søren Kierkegaard, have suggested that there are important connections between the cultivation of faith and self-examination. Now while this Socratic approach provides a helpful model for understanding the dynamics of the life of faith, we might still wonder whether a person's religious commitments might place certain limits and constraints on the forms this pursuit of self-understanding might take. One might ask, for example, whether it is the case that the pursuit of self-understanding can sometimes put a person's faith at risk. Is it the case that certain forms of self-reflection, such as psychoanalysis, might serve to challenge and even undermine the stability of a person's religious convictions by offering alternative possibilities for making sense of life? And if this is a possibility, could one make the case that it is appropriate to draw practical limits to either the type or scope of self-inquiry in order to avoid placing one's particular religious identity at risk? These are just a few of the issues that a reexamination of the ethics of belief might help us understand.

Another closely related problem is the issue of self-deception: both the case of theists who are self-deceived in their faith as well as atheists,

such as Ivan Karamazov, who might be said to be deceived in their unbelief. Since I will explore this topic in more detail later on, I will just mention two aspects of the problem here. First, any attempt to do justice to the ethics of belief must be willing to consider whether a consideration of self-deception should be a factor in assessing religious belief. Such an inquiry is complex since it is still an open question whether self-deception is *always* epistemically or morally blameworthy. But if it turns out to be the case that self-deception is sometimes blameworthy, it would appear to be an important consideration in assessing a person's religious convictions. Second, it seems clear that the only way to do justice to this type of concern is to move in the direction that I am proposing and to explore what it might mean to assess one's religious beliefs in terms of one's character as a whole.

Of course, once we begin to take these considerations into account, we will also be able to make better sense of what it means for a person to lose faith. Unfortunately, many contemporary philosophers of religion who rightly criticize Locke's foundationalism and evidentialism as well as the ethics of belief they entail still present an overly reductionistic picture of religious belief that distorts the dynamics of the religious life. In particular, thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga and the many others who defend what has come to be known as "reformed epistemology" fail to give sufficient attention to the many ways one's loss of faith might be tied to changes in one's most fundamental concerns and interests. Very often, one's loss of faith should be interpreted not so much in epistemic terms, but rather in terms of the erosion of those basic cares and concerns that constitute one's identity as a believer. The problem is that even when "reformed epistemologists" do attempt to account for the loss of faith, they often succumb to the temptation of accounting for this loss of belief in terms of "sin." Unfortunately, this strategy fails to do justice to the perspective of the person in question who would most likely reject such appeals to the notion of sin in favor of a more naturalistic explanation for this loss of faith. Once again, I shall maintain that any attempt to do justice to the ethics of belief must account for this kind of story.

There are, of course, many ways a person's faith can be put at risk, but one of the perennial challenges to the believer's religious convictions has been the problem of evil. Traditionally, the religious skeptic has posed the question by asking how an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God could permit the existence of natural and moral evil. At first glance, such a challenge would appear to pose a serious threat to the integrity of the believer's convictions. More specifically, the atheist's suggestion is that anyone who acknowledges the seriousness of evil but continues to believe in God is basically irrational. We shall see though

that it is a mistake to construe the concern in these terms. The question of whether belief in God is compatible with the existence of evil is not primarily a question of whether theism is or is not rational or logically coherent. Instead, the problem of evil presents an *ethical* concern and the only way to do justice to this issue is to explore how our responses to evil reflect the shape of our characters as a whole.

In order to show what might be gained from regarding the problem of evil in ethical terms rather than as a problem concerning the rationality of religious belief, I will characterize several possible responses. On the one hand, theists who manage to maintain their faith in the face of evil must be wary of succumbing to the vice of blindness. Part of the problem is that it is all too easy to evade the difficulties posed by the existence of evil by appealing to theodicies and other facile philosophical solutions. But even if one eschews the temptations of such reductionistic theodicies and opts for more modest means of dealing with the problem, such as the Free Will Defense proposed by Alvin Plantinga, one still runs the risk of rationalizing an unacceptable response to the problem.

Of course, it is important to stress that the theist is not the only one susceptible to vice when it comes to the problem of evil. The atheist must also be on guard against succumbing to what can be called the vice of defiance. The classic example of this type of response is Dostoyevski's famous character Ivan Karamazov, for whom the problem of evil raises what appear to be insurmountable worries and difficulties. Unlike the theist who appeals to theodicy at the risk of being blinded to evil, the atheist, such as Ivan Karamazov, runs the danger of appealing to the existence of evil as an excuse for avoiding responsibility for it. But such defiance is no less blameworthy than the blindness of those believers who fail to appreciate the many ways that the acknowledgment of evil and suffering might challenge one's Christian self-understanding and lead to the erosion of a person's religious beliefs.

If the problem of evil is not basically a problem about the rationality of religious belief, it is rather an ethical concern—a concern about the kind of people we want to be and about the best ways to respond to this problem. We shall discover that the best way to avoid the twin vices of blindness and defiance is to cultivate what Simone Weil would call the virtue of attention. What is needed, says Weil, is a respect for reality of the world, a willingness to accept the extent to which our identities and all that we hold to be important can be put at risk by evil and suffering. The proper response to the challenge posed by the existence of evil is the cultivation of a kind of loving attention that would allow us to acknowledge the vulnerability of what is most precious to us. Of course, the price for this kind of realism is high. For once the individual acknowl-

edges the possibility of such vulnerability, there is nothing that might not be lost, including a person's faith.

After considering the fragility of faith in terms of how the existence of evil and suffering can challenge and in some cases undermine a person's religious beliefs, I will take up what has come to be known as the problem of reductionism and religious belief. Unfortunately, the debate surrounding the issue of reductionism has traditionally been motivated by epistemological worries concerning such issues as rationality and relativism. Some thinkers, such as D. Z. Phillips and Peter Winch, are wary of social scientific approaches to the study of religion on the grounds that such attempts misdescribe and distort what the believer actually believes. On the other hand, critics of Phillips and Winch, such as Wayne Proudfoot, maintain that such worries about reductionism usually conceal tacit apologetic concerns and that what is necessary is a more subtle analysis of reductionism amenable to social scientific approaches to the study of religion.

Although there may be some merit in treating reductionism as a worry about rationality and relativism, I will argue in the penultimate chapter of this book that these concerns have no direct bearing on the problem of the ethics of belief. If we want to make sense of why certain people find religious reductionism to be objectionable, it is better to think of such objections as ethical ones, in the broad sense of that term. If, for example, we examine the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who addresses this issue in writings such as "Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*," we will discover that his argument against reductionism in religious studies is primarily a moral one. What Wittgenstein finds objectionable about such "scientific" views is not simply that they distort the data by misconstruing or misdescribing particular religious beliefs, doctrines, and practices; rather, the threat is that such approaches will blind us to the importance of religion for human life and that a failure to see that there is something "deep" in religion can lead to a spiritually impoverished life.

In the final pages of this book I turn to some recent considerations of the problem and suggest that the life of intellectual virtue is a life that manages to maintain the precarious and difficult balance between objectivity and subjectivity. Unlike many rationalistic philosophers of religion who search in vain for some abstract canon of rationality or some methodical way of thinking about our lives that might ensure our confidence in our basic beliefs and commitments, I will argue for a more radical but liberating proposal. Appealing once again to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, I will suggest that our ability to maintain self-trust without succumbing to the temptation of dogmatism depends on a particular

style of thinking that balances subjectivity and objectivity. Since there is no decision procedure that might enable us to avoid the vices of dogmatism or skepticism, we must rely on a kind of practical confidence governed by openness and flexibility, a style of thinking one might call "Emersonian pragmatism."

At first glance, it might seem that this kind of proposal is a blatant concession to intellectual chaos and irrationality. This is not the case. As Richard Rorty has recently suggested, this kind of *ironic* attitude toward one's beliefs is a natural and acceptable part of modern liberal culture.¹⁰ Following Rorty I will conclude that the ethics of belief is not an epistemological issue at all but primarily a matter of our willingness to cultivate the *style* of thinking that characterizes what he calls "the liberal ironist."¹¹

In the end, I would like this reflection on the ethics of belief to help us better understand the limits of argument. My thesis, I believe, is deceptively simple and involves the claim that our failure to reach agreement in our judgments about religion and the meaning of life is not a failure of rationality but is rooted in the limits of what we are willing to acknowledge with respect to commitments and concerns we may not share. Grounds for such disagreements are inevitably self-involving and are tied to the many different ways we understand ourselves in light of our basic commitments. My claim is simply that we can make better sense of what it means to carry on such discussions if we rethink the debate in terms of the model of the ethics of belief that I am proposing here. To say that there is much to be gained from regarding the ethics of belief primarily in terms of intellectual character and critical self-reflection concerning our basic projects and commitments is not to guarantee some formula to help us reach some sort of agreement. On the contrary, it is perhaps the only way to understand why believers and nonbelievers so often fail to agree and why the one thing needed is a renewed commitment to the virtue of tolerance.

Notes

1. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), pp. 15–16.

2. I reject the standard stereotypical reading of Emerson that reduces him to a naively optimistic idealist. It will become clear throughout this book that I want to propose and defend a picture of Emerson as a pragmatist whose optimism is tempered by an acknowledgment that optimism is a difficult achievement. In this respect, my reading of Emerson draws upon the insights of Stephen Whicher's classic study *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of

Pennsylvania Press, 1953). For discussions of the "pragmatic" strain in Emerson's thought, see Frederic Ives Carpenter, *Emerson Handbook* (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1953), esp. pp. 164–78, as well as his essay "William James and Emerson" in *On Emerson*, ed. Edwin Cady and Louis Budd (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988), pp. 43–61. The best discussion of Emerson's pragmatism is Cornel West's "The Emersonian Prehistory of American Pragmatism," in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 9–41.

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, intro. Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 62.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

5. This line of interpretation draws on Stanley Cavell's insightful reading of Emerson. See especially *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), and his recent Carus lectures *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: Emerson's Constitution of Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Cavell's reading and appropriation of Emerson's writings is explored in Russell Goodman's interesting book *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

6. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 81.

7. For an excellent discussion of the impact of Locke's epistemological project on the religious thought of his day, see John W. Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

8. See David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life," in *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 87–137.

9. Recently, however, some philosophers have expressed a renewed interest in this topic. See, for example, Oswald Hanfling, *The Quest for Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); John Kekes, *The Examined Life* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1988); and Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

10. The position I defend in this book is inspired by Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

11. Rorty develops this line of thinking in "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," in *Contingency Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 73–95.