

## Between Habit and Imagination: Religious Faith in the Perspective of John Dewey's Theory of Human Conduct

### *Introduction*

The debate about the relation between certainty and religious faith covers a broad spectrum of positions. On the one end of the scale we find someone like Søren Kierkegaard proclaiming that faith in God is best described as “objective uncertainty (...) held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness”<sup>1</sup>. On the other end of the scale, philosophers like Richard Swinburne dedicate thorough investigations to show that, contrary to Kierkegaard's intuition, the subjective certainty typically going along with religious faith proportionally corresponds to the objective evidence provided to support religious propositions.<sup>2</sup>

Though representing two extremely different accounts of religious certainty, these two positions turn out to share at least one crucial presupposition in that both employ ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ as fundamental categories in order to analyze the nature of religious faith. The relation between the subjective mind and the objective state of the world, however, is traditionally assessed by the criteria of truth and falsehood. Thus, as we treat the element of certainty contained in religious faith in terms of subjectivity and objectivity, as a natural consequence, we view the notion of certainty as – somehow – related to or dependent on the notion of truth. In doing so, we enter the field of the debate about the structure of religious language, i.e. the controversy between religious realism and religious anti-realism.

However, in this controversy the positions seem to have become somewhat inflexible. This suggests that it may be more fruitful to reflect on the relation between faith and certainty in context of another setting than the one based on the true/false-dichotomy. With regard to this purpose, Deweyan pragmatism offers a promising perspective. Dewey introduces the concept of “uncertainty” not as a feature of theoretical beliefs, but as “the distinctive characteristic of practical activity”<sup>3</sup>. For Dewey, the proper locus of certainty and uncertainty

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript. The Philosophical Fragments*, ed. By Hong, H.V. and E., Princeton University Press (1992), 203.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Swinburne, Richard: *The Existence of God*, Oxford University Press <sup>2</sup>1991.

<sup>3</sup> Dewey, John (1984e): *The Quest for Certainty*. In: John Dewey: The Later Works. 1925-1953, Bd. 4. Hg. v. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (further on referred to as QC), 5.

is the interface between the individual agent and its environment rather than the inwardness of an isolated subject; certainty and uncertainty emerge from the dynamic flow of events rather than from the static perspective of an individual mind contemplating the world.

In the following I first want to argue briefly that contrary to what some criticism of Dewey does – at least to some restricted degree – prove sensitive to the uncertain aspects in human life. In the second step, I will focus on habit as the key concept of this theory, trying to show that its meaning depends on the dimension of uncertainty as well as on the dimension of certainty. I shall thirdly hold that as Dewey describes habit as the adjustment to the respective social environment, he seems to consider habit and religious faith as belonging to the same class of attitudes. This implies that like any habit, religious faith is seen as a function of uncertainty and certainty likewise. In the last section I shall indicate three implications that follow as we thus read Dewey's theory of religion in the light of his theory of human conduct.

#### *Dewey's Theory of Action: Emphasizing Uncertainty*

In accordance with what we might call the pragmatist common sense, Dewey rejects the idea of irrevocable truths. What our experiences and inquiries end with are judgments that have been proven thoroughly and that allow us to continue our course of action for the present. These judgments are subject to constant revision: As soon as they fail to make us cope with reality, they are labeled “problematic” and taken as a starting point for further inquiry. In order to mark this steady reservation, Dewey prefers to classify them by means of “warranted assertibility” rather than by means of “truth”.<sup>4</sup>

What follows from this with regard to the concept of certainty? In the perspective of critics like Bertrand Russell, the program of warranted assertibility obscures the characteristic difference between certainty and hubris. Following Russell, by abstaining from the notion of truth, Dewey sacrifices the idea of “something dependent upon facts largely outside human control”<sup>5</sup> – and with it the humility which is normally generated by its awareness. In this sense, Russell certifies Dewey as displaying an attitude of “cosmic impiety”<sup>6</sup>.

The reference to “warranted assertibility”, however, also allows for the contrary conclusion. Does not the emphasis on the fact that our judgments remain subject to constant revision express precisely the intuition that the factual course of event is in some sense

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dewey, John (1984d): *Logic. The Theory of Inquiry*. In: John Dewey: The Later Works. 1925-1953, Bd. 12. Hg. v. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (further on referred to as LG), 17ff.

<sup>5</sup> Russell, Bertrand: *The History of Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge 1996, 735.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

stronger than our influence on it? In the light of this reading, the fact that Dewey steps back from a metaphysically strong notion of truth would turn out to reflect an increase rather than a loss of humility.

Dewey's work offers evidence for both of these interpretations.<sup>7</sup> Those who argue along the lines of Russell will point to the manner in which Dewey celebrates the human capacity to anticipate future possibilities. In this sense, they may cite statements like the last passage of Dewey's essay *The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy*, where he proclaims that „[f]aith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation.“<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to that, we find such passages that support the alternative reading, according to which Dewey was well aware of the limits of human control and of the uncertainty arising from these limits. For example, in the second chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey states: “Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable.”<sup>9</sup> And in the final passage of the same book he concludes: “Intelligence will [n]ever dominate the course of events”<sup>10</sup>.

As we are to make up our minds in face of these contrary interpretations, it will be helpful to turn away from the somewhat pathetic statements just cited and to turn our attention to the somewhat more cautious analysis of human experience Dewey offers, e.g., in *Art as Experience*. There he starts from the observation that in order to make sense of our present experience, we necessarily draw back on what we have learnt in the course of past experience. In this sense, “[t]he past is carried into the present so as to expand and deepen the content of the latter.”<sup>11</sup>

However, in so far as the world we live in is marked by historicity, the background constellation of our experiences undergoes constant change. Between the conditions framing our past experiences and the setting of our present activities we face a “gap” to the effect that in order to make use of our earlier experiences to enlighten the present, we have to connect

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<sup>7</sup> Arguments in favor of the respective positions have been presented most prominently in context of the controversy between Sidney Hook (*Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, in: Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association 33 (1959/1960), 5-26) and Raymond Boisvert (*The Nemesis of Necessity. Tragedy's Challenge to Deweyan Pragmatism*, in: Haskins, Casey; Seiple, David I., *Dewey reconfigures. Essays on Deweyan Pragmatism*, Albany, NY, 1999, 151–168.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, John (1983): *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy*. In: John Dewey: The Middle Works. 1899-1924, Bd. 10. Hg. v. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 3-48, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey, John (1984c): *Experience and Nature*. In: John Dewey: The Later Works. 1925-1953, Bd. 1. Hg. v. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (further on referred to as EN), 41.

<sup>10</sup> EN, 326.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey, John (1984b): *Art as Experience*. In: John Dewey: The Later Works. 1925-1953, Bd. 10. Hg. v. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (further on referred to as AE), 30.

the two by virtue of our intelligence: „Because of this gap, all conscious perception involves a risk: it is a venture into the unknown, for as it assimilates the present to the past it also brings about some reconstruction of that past.“<sup>12</sup>

This allows for a more differentiated view of the role of human intelligence in Dewey’s philosophy. On the one hand, intelligence is “the thing most worth winning”<sup>13</sup>: Indeed, it functions as a means to free mankind from its submission to an immutable supernatural reality and to make it gain “active control of the changing course of the world”<sup>14</sup>. Yet at the same time it is just the participation of intelligence that lends every kind of activity a moment of uncertainty and risk, for the specific task of intelligence to relate past, present and future by virtue of imagination is the most error-prone aspect of human experience.

Given that uncertainty thus represents an unavoidable feature of human activity, Dewey distinguishes between two contrary strategies to respond to the tension resulting from this. On the one hand, he finds a group of philosophical conceptions which he summarizes under the label of “*absolutist*” conceptions of normativity. They rest on the presupposition that there are universally applicable moral principles. Hence, they cope with the uncertainty of the singular case of action by the hypothesis of an absolutely certain universal, i.e. by recourse on “[r]eady-made rules available at a moment's notice for settling any kind of moral difficulty and resolving every species of moral doubt”<sup>15</sup>.

In his book *A Quest for Certainty* (as in many other places), Dewey argues for his conviction that strategies of this kind are rooted in a rather regressive “safety first”<sup>16</sup>- attitude of their proponents. They suffer from the fact that they take the human quest for certainty as the starting point for establishing philosophical theories. While the orientation towards a stable order is – as Dewey is well aware – legitimate in the sense that it simply belongs to what it means to be human, on the other hand it does not provide a valid fundament for philosophical argument. Apart from this formal mistake, in Dewey’s view the absolutistic approach to morals fails to develop an adequate account of what it means for a principle to be of general value. Thus, it considers general validity to be the same as validity without regard to space and time, and objectivity to be the same as validity *a priori*. In doing so, it cuts the

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<sup>12</sup> AE, 276.

<sup>13</sup> QC, 163.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibd.*

<sup>15</sup> Dewey, John (1983a): *Human Nature and Conduct. An Introduction to Social Psychology*. In: John Dewey: The Middle Works. 1899-1924, Bd. 14. Hg. v. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (further on referred to as HNC), 164.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. QC, 6.

connection between the general principle and the singular case it is supposed to apply to:  
„Objectivity is saved but at the expense of connection with human affairs.“<sup>17</sup>

In face of these difficulties, Dewey argues for an alternative account of normativity that he himself characterizes as “*naturalist*” or “*experimentalist*” view on morals. According to this position, general validity does not mean static universality, which amounts to a top-down-prescription of principles deducted from a metaphysically sophisticated authority like practical reason or divine will. Instead, general validity of moral norms is seen as the result of a dynamic process of generalization, which renders practical instructions plausible by virtue of a bottom-up-movement. Following Dewey’s naturalist position, moral principles are „empirical generalizations from the ways in which previous judgments of conduct have practically worked out”<sup>18</sup>. In relation to controversial instances of moral deliberation, they do not function as “fixed rules for deciding doubtful cases”, but as “instrumentalities for their investigation, methods by which the net value of past experience is rendered available for present scrutiny of new perplexities.”<sup>19</sup>

This highlights two implications of Dewey’s understanding of what guides our actions: on the one hand, the point of normativity is not that it offers a counterpart to uncertainty inherent to our course of action, but that it contains the open acknowledgement of this uncertainty. Morality starts with the recognition of the fact that “life is a moving affair”.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the propositional aspect of moral norms is shown to be secondary. As norms of action are taken as explications of the implications tacitly underlying our practice, normativity turns out to be primarily a matter of non-propositional habits.

Habit is, for Dewey, “a way or manner of action” as opposed to “a particular act or deed”<sup>21</sup>. On his account of human action, pre-reflective patterns of this kind play a role in every kind of activity whatsoever – no matter whether it includes some close exchange with our physical environment (as in the acquisition of food), or whether it is more or less restricted to an intercourse of ideas (as in logical reasoning). As soon as one specific pattern of action is abstracted from its origin and transferred to analogous situations, its explicit statement is no longer restricted to a description but attains the formal character of a “principle or ‘law’ of action”<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> HNC, 39.

<sup>18</sup> HNC, 165.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> HNC, 164.

<sup>21</sup> LG, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

### *Habit as Constituted by Uncertainty and Certainty*

What has been said shows that at the core of Dewey's account of moral action we find the conviction that there is continuity between what is and what ought to be. This again suggests that Dewey's conception of normativity steps into the trap of a naturalistic fallacy. If principles are taken to be the verbalization of factual habits and customs, they seem to lose their corrective force in relation to attitudes that have emerged from history. This undermines any possibility whatsoever to question or control the power of the factual.

However, as we take a closer look at Dewey's theory of habit the call for an external corrective force appears to be dispensable, since we find a twofold corrective mechanism as part of the inner constitution of habit. Thus, in accordance with Dewey's account of experience as a continuum of interactive events, habit is not considered as a self-sufficient faculty but rather as an aspect of human activity that is related to other aspects of action in a mutually constitutive manner. Two of these aspects shaping habit by virtue of constant exchange are the activities of impulse on the one hand and of intelligence on the other.

Human *impulses* Dewey describes as "native and original activities" as opposed to the "organized activity" of habit<sup>23</sup>. In his view, the interdependence of impulse and habit can be described such that impulse precedes habit in terms of temporary order, since it is there from the very moment of birth on – while at the same time, impulse is secondary to habit in the sense that it can only be employed as the basis for forming new habit as it is embedded into and modified by already existent forms of life.

Following Dewey's diagnosis, in the past moral and psychological considerations got stuck in the alternative between suppression of impulses on the one hand and uncontrolled discharge on the other. To evade this impasse, Dewey suggests the sublimation of human impulse to the effect that it acts as "a factor coordinated intelligently with others in a continuing course of action"<sup>24</sup>. Thus human instinct does not operate any longer as the opposite pole of habit but rather as its "pivot or reorganization"<sup>25</sup>. Human impulse becomes the mediator between conveyed customs on the one hand and changing needs on the other and keeps human dispositions open to modification in accordance with new conditions. It thus prevents habit from turning into self-sufficient routine.

While on one side interaction with impulse detains habit from collapse into stagnation, on the other side *intelligence* grants that habit does not collapse into a process by its own dynamics. Intelligence becomes relevant whenever the certainty inherent to our stable

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<sup>23</sup> HNC, 65.

<sup>24</sup> HNC, 108.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

attitudes is questioned by new circumstances. As so far unknown environmental conditions lead to new instinctive reactions, our acquainted modes of action get “blocked”<sup>26</sup>, i.e., they are rendered problematic. Being in this way interrupted in their course of conduct, agents usually react by critically analyzing the impulse as well as the habit underlying the action in question. Within a “period of delay”<sup>27</sup> of any further open activity, they test various ways of action by means of a mental rehearsal: “Thought runs ahead and foresees outcomes, and thereby avoids having to await the instruction of actual failure and disaster.”<sup>28</sup>

On this account, intelligence no more than impulse appears as a self-sufficient element. Instead, “‘reason’ as a noun signifies the happy cooperation of a multitude of dispositions, such as sympathy, curiosity, exploration, experimentation, frankness, pursuit (...) etc. etc.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, as we take a closer look, intelligence itself turns out to be a cluster of habitual dispositions. For Dewey, our habits ground our intelligence and reason in the sense that they function as a “means of execution”<sup>30</sup>. Accordingly he summarizes the interdependence between pre-reflective habit and reflective deliberation phrasing it as the “habit of knowing”<sup>31</sup>.

Constituted by its interaction with impulse and intelligence, habit has nothing in common with absolute certainty or blind routine. Moreover, all three are aspects of human acting, to be distinguished retrospectively. As such they appear as partners in one and the same project – which is, to lend a new perspective to stagnating action based, as it were, on the division of labor. The uncertainty of crisis turns habit into a reflective awareness of the patterns and motives that used to shape our previous conduct. Habit as illuminated by the light of uncertainty contributes to settling the problematic situation by considering present conditions as well as future forms of action on the basis of the memory of past experience. As habit is “turned inside out”<sup>32</sup> by the forward-pressing energy of impulse as well as by intelligence abstracting from the present moment, it serves to imagine the future in such a way that certainty is reestablished.

### *The Social Condition of Human Action: Habit as adjustment*

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<sup>26</sup> HNC, 127.

<sup>27</sup> HNC, 137.

<sup>28</sup> HNC, 133.

<sup>29</sup> HNC, 136.

<sup>30</sup> HNC, 49.

<sup>31</sup> HNC, 130.

<sup>32</sup> HNC, 127.

What has been said so far has been focused on the individual side of human action. However, it belongs to the core convictions of Dewey's philosophy that the social dimension of life precedes its individual aspects, i.e. that the general customs manifested in an association deeply influence the particular attitudes of its members. In his book *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey states that "socialization of some sort – that is, the reflex modification of wants, beliefs and work because of share in a united action – is inevitable."<sup>33</sup> As we translate this position rooted in social theory into the language of theory of action, it implies that in order to give a complete description of human conduct we necessarily have to refer to its social conditions. For Dewey, there is no need that we shape our conduct in a social manner; instead, any kind of human conduct *is* social by its very nature – even though 'social' in this context is understood in a value-neutral sense.<sup>34</sup> This implies that, whether we like it or not, our practical deliberations are determined by the intersubjective feedback to our mode of acting as we anticipate it in imagination.

Dewey's account of "habits as social functions"<sup>35</sup> has a significant impact on the concept of morality which he summarizes by the phrase that morals are "brought to earth"<sup>36</sup>. The task of morality is not to mediate between the material of human activity and the ideal of moral perfection, but to adjust single events in human practice to the fundamentally social structure of human conduct. This view goes along with the insight that morality is an aspect of the interface between the individual agent and her environment (rather than a characteristic of a moral subject). As Dewey thinks, this points to an analogy between our moral habits on the one hand and our organic conduct on the other. Similar to breathing and digesting, moral attitudes persist throughout our lifetime; like those, they are "functions of the surroundings as truly as of a person"<sup>37</sup>. Like our organic habits, also moral attitudes are forms of adjustment to environment that are essential to our survival:

"Honesty, chastity, malice, peevishness, courage, triviality, industry, irresponsibility are not private possessions of a person. They are working adaptations of personal capacities with enviroing forces. All virtues and vices (...) are interactions of elements contributed by the make-up of an individual with elements supplied by the out-door world."<sup>38</sup>

However, this does not mean that the individual agent is absolved from any moral responsibility. On the contrary, Dewey rejects moral theories that excuse personal failure by

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<sup>33</sup> Dewey, John (1984f): *The Public and Its Problems*. In: John Dewey: The Later Works. 1925-1953, Bd. 2. Hg. v. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 235–372, 279.

<sup>34</sup> HNC, 16: „It is not an ethical ‚ought‘ that conduct *should* be social. It *is* social, whether bad or good.“

<sup>35</sup> HNC, 15.

<sup>36</sup> HNC, 16.

<sup>37</sup> HNC, 15.

<sup>38</sup> HNC, 16.

reference to external circumstances as well as any other sort of one-sided accounts of moral responsibility.<sup>39</sup> By describing individual habits as “working adaptations”, he does indeed ascribe to the agent an active role in the process of settling morally problematic situations. For in Dewey’s terminology, adaption – in the sense of a conscious coping strategy – is explicitly distinguished from accommodation in the sense of a merely passive assimilation to externally determined conditions.<sup>40</sup>

Dewey himself underlines that his conception of habit reconstructs moral action as focusing on future consequences rather than on past causes. In other words, moral accountability has to do with the anticipative (and as such uncertain) dimension of human action rather than with its reconstructive aspect. In accordance with this, Dewey stresses that moral responsibility is embodied in the improvement of general living conditions, aiming to provide future generations with circumstances that allow for ever more individual and common flourishing: “The moral issue concerns the future. It is prospective. (...) The moral problem is that of modifying the factors which now influence future results.”<sup>41</sup>

This again points to the meliorism implied in Dewey’s experimentalist conception of normativity. The issue of morals does not deal with a set of complete and immutable ideals, but with an ensemble of thoroughly justified yet revisable propositions that generate a process of “growth of conduct in meaning”<sup>42</sup>. Morality is not structured by means of the binary scheme of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, but by the gradation between ‘better’ and ‘worse’; its limiting value is not perfection but improvement.

This melioristic trait of experimental normativity is reflected in a further concept Dewey employs in order to discuss the functionality of human habit. Thus, we cannot fully account for habit in terms of *adaptation*; i.e., habits cannot be reduced to the active assimilation of particular sections of our environment. According to a stronger description suggested by Dewey, habits can also be classified as a form of *adjustment* – i.e., they are actively managed processes of assimilation leading to a modification not only of single aspects of the environment but of the whole environment framing the life of an acting individual.<sup>43</sup> Characterizing the status of human habits, Dewey recurs on concepts like “filter” and “medium”<sup>44</sup>: Habits concern our worldview as a whole. Whenever a practical crisis

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. HNC, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Dewey, John (1984a): *A Common Faith*. In: John Dewey: The Later Works. 1925-1953, Bd. 9. Hg. v. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, S. 1–58 (further on referred to as CF), 12.

<sup>41</sup> HNC, 18.

<sup>42</sup> HNC, 194.

<sup>43</sup> HNC, 38: “Habits incorporate the environment. They are adjustments *of* the environment, not merely *to* it.”

<sup>44</sup> HNC, 26.

reveals the uncertain presuppositions underlying our conduct and makes us revise our habits, as a consequence life in its entirety reappears in a new light.

### *Religious Faith as Habit*

The concept of *adjustment* indicates in which way Dewey's theory of action contributes to render his theory of religiosity plausible, for it represents the conceptual pivot between his account of religious faith on the one hand and his discussion of moral habits on the other. In the beginning of his lectures on religion, *A Common Faith*, Dewey classifies religious faith in the first place as a form of adjustment.<sup>45</sup> Religious faith and moral habit thus lead to the same effect: Both convert a phase of "shock, confusion, perturbation, uncertainty"<sup>46</sup> into a phase of an afresh flow of action. They equal each other in that they are as all-embracing as the crisis that leads to their activation, in other words, in that they both concern the overall worldview of the individual agent. The characterization of faith and habit as adjustments locates both on the level of our fundamental attitudes.

To view religious faith belonging to the same class as human habit bears various implications, of which I want to pick out three. The first results from the parallel just mentioned. In Dewey's perspective, religiosity can be related to propositional belief in an indirect way only. What he thinks is characteristic of religious faith is that it grounds the processes of belief formation in all fields of human life. As habit, religiosity has nothing to do with the contents of our beliefs. Other than suggested by the comprehensive systems of religious dogma, religiosity is "medium" and "filter"; it is a formal prefix determining the meaning of our deliberations and actions. "The adjective 'religious' denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs (...). It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal."<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, what Dewey holds in opposition to the mainstream of practical philosophy, namely that habit does not result from will but rather serves as a necessary condition for the very formation of will<sup>48</sup>, is also true regarding the religious view of life. To be religious is not the outcome of an act of will; instead, it causes the effect of a "change of will"<sup>49</sup>.

The second implication concerns one of the specific features distinguishing religious faith from moral habits in general. As demonstrated above, the crucial precondition for maintaining moral attitudes is that we ground all our actions implicitly on the

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. CF, 13.

<sup>46</sup> HNC, 127.

<sup>47</sup> CF, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. HNC, 24f.

<sup>49</sup> CF, 13.

acknowledgement of the social dimension of our conduct. What makes the difference between the religious attitude and the rest of moral attitudes is that it treats the “sense of these encompassing continuities” inherent to the “infinite relationships of man with his fellows and with nature”<sup>50</sup> not as a tacit presupposition, but as an explicit topic. The moral perspective considers the intersubjective effects of every single act in choosing practical motives; it makes us turn to the consequences our particular actions bear on other people. The religious perspective, on the other hand, cultivates the attitude of “natural piety”<sup>51</sup> manifested in a “consciousness of the whole”<sup>52</sup>, or in a “sense of the community, and one’s place in it”<sup>53</sup> respectively. Thus, the moral project to improve the living conditions is situated in a comprehensive horizon of meaning that culminates in the vanishing point of the ultimate unity between the ideal and the actual.

A third implication of classifying religious faith as habit results from the inherent connection between habit, impulse and intelligence. As mentioned above, for Dewey moral principles are judgments that project a habit established and tested in the past to the future. In this course, impulse initiates that we apply the habit in question to new situations, while reason absorbs the risk coming along with such an anticipation by simulating its consequences in a ‘mental rehearsal’. Looking at Dewey’s theory of religion, these considerations help us to make a precise sense of his statement that the concept of God stems from the effort of imagination. “,God”, Dewey says in *A Common Faith*, “ means the ideal ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as having authority over his volition and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagination, take on unity.”<sup>54</sup> Commenting on this characterization of God, Dewey makes clear that “imagination” has to be thoroughly distinguished from “illusion and phantasy”<sup>55</sup>. While the latter are remote from reality, imagination is “made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience”<sup>56</sup> so that its results are continuous with empirical facts. This assertion is backed up in terms of social psychology, when in *Human Nature and Conduct* Dewey points out that “imagination is not a self-generated, self-enclosed, psychical existence”. Rather, it is “the persistent operation of a prior object which has been incorporated in effective habit”<sup>57</sup> ,

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<sup>50</sup> HNC, 226.

<sup>51</sup> CF, 18.

<sup>52</sup> HNC, 226.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> CF, 29.

<sup>55</sup> CF, 38.

<sup>56</sup> CF, 33.

<sup>57</sup> HNC, 40.

whereby this object is applied to the future by virtue of native instincts and proved reasonable by virtue of intelligent abstraction.

### *Conclusion*

The last point makes clear that in light of Dewey's thinking, reference to God can be reconstructed as resting on exactly the same interplay between instinct, intelligence and habit that also enables us to cope with the everyday life. As faith is treated as a form of habit, it turns out to be marked by its relation to uncertainty as well as by its function to grant certainty. While William James in his *Varieties* refers to faith as "retained by habit"<sup>58</sup> in order to characterize the half-hearted attitude of the "ordinary believer" as opposed to the passionate outlook of the "religious 'genius'"<sup>59</sup>, calling religious faith a habit in the sense of Dewey gives way for a fruitful reinterpretation of religious faith.

However, this reinterpretation implies a radical criticism of traditional religious practice. As we describe religious faith as a habit, it is "brought to earth" in the same way as morals are. This of course undermines any attempt to bind religious faith to a set of dogmas considered as utterly certain truths granted for by a supernatural entity. As it is brought to earth in the sense of Dewey's experimentalism, religion cannot any longer be manifested in ceremonies directed towards a transcendent being. Its "only rites and ceremonies" are instead, "the acts in which we express our perception of the ties which bind us to others."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> James, William: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Mineola/New York: Dover 2002, 6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> HNC, 227.