MORAL FAITH*

The topic of the present essay is an idea that seems to me both important and unjustly neglected, an idea that once had much more currency in the intellectual community than it has today, namely, the idea that morality has a need, or something approaching a need, for some sort of faith. The most influential exponent of the idea of moral faith is Immanuel Kant. The idea figures, of course, in Kant's development of moral grounds for belief in the existence of God. In this paper, I shall have some things to say about religious developments of moral faith, but I shall have much more to say about more narrowly moral objects of faith. The emphasis will fall here on those aspects of the idea of moral faith which I think likely to command the widest agreement, though I do not expect even them to be uncontroversial.

Various points about what the word 'faith' means, in this context, will emerge gradually in the course of this exploration. It may be useful at the outset, however, to say in a very provisional way that faith is, or involves, believing something that a rational person might be seriously tempted to doubt, or even not to believe. Talk about faith is normally concerned with problems that arise from rational possibilities of doubting or disbelieving something that seems important to believe. Indeed, the type of faith I have in view here involves the believer's awareness of such possibilities. It includes doubt, and a certain sensitivity to opposing reasons, as well as a certain resistance to them. In this way, the virtue of faith involves holding to a mean between vices of credulity and incredulity.

I. FAITH IN MORALITY

So *are* there things which it is morally important to believe, but which there is a rational possibility of doubting or not believing? We might put this by saying that my next task is to identify some articles of moral faith; but that way of putting it sounds like a proposal to draw up a moral "creed," and that would suggest far too much precision of doctrinal formulation. At this point, we encounter one of the factors that can make issues of faith uncomfortable for philosophers. As a philosopher, I have no desire to escape accountability for the accuracy and the logical implications of anything I say. At the same

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time, I do not believe that any form of words is itself a suitable object of faith. To take a verbal formulation as an object of faith seems to me to be a sort of idolatry, though doubtless it is a form of idolatry that is common enough in religious communities. Faith ought to be a stance in relation to something larger. Moral faith is a stance in relation to goodness and duty, and in relation to possibilities of human action, thought, and feeling and their larger context in human life and in the universe. We can hardly talk about such a stance without articulating its content verbally; but the adequacy of any verbal formulation, as an articulation of the stance, can always be questioned.

The first and most obvious object of moral faith is morality itself, or one's own morality, the morality to which one adheres. What I mean by speaking of morality as an object of faith can perhaps best be indicated by evoking an experience that many people have had at some point in their education. It might happen in a course in moral philosophy in which the question 'Why be moral?' is asked, and is answered with a variety of philosophical performances that the student finds fairly impressive but not entirely satisfying. Or the course might focus on questions about the meaning of moral terms, and the student may become puzzled as to what it is that we can be doing when we say that it would be wrong to do this or that. Perhaps the student actually accepts philosophical answers to these questions, but remains uncomfortable about the extent to which the answers still seem debatable. Other doubts might be stirred in an anthropology course that leaves a student wondering whether moral opinions about such issues as the rightness or wrongness of headhunting are not simply relative to different cultural systems and their expectations. An encounter with Marxist thought, or with some related form of the "hermeneutics of suspicion," might lead the student to doubt whether any moral belief can be anything nobler than an intellectual tool or weapon for the service of the self-interest of the believer or of some group to which the believer belongs. These are among the ways in which a rational person might be seriously tempted to doubt the validity of morality in general, or of the morality that she herself nonetheless professes.

I do not mean to suggest at all that faith must be unreasoned, much less that it must be irrational. Reasons can doubtless be given for philosophical answers to all of these questions. Perhaps one could even rationally justify a morally comforting answer to all of them. I hope so. But would the reasoning prove the case "beyond a reasonable doubt," as you should demand of the prosecutor if you are a juror in a criminal trial? That I would not expect. It is rare

indeed to reach such a standard of proof on fundamental philosophical issues. The questions I have raised about the validity of morality are all serious questions that are unlikely to be permanently cleared off the philosophical agenda.

One reason for this is that in responding to such fundamental philosophical issues it is often impossible to avoid a kind of circularity. If we are asked, for instance, to justify the belief that there is "something to" ethics, that it is not a massive socially induced delusion, we shall not be able to answer without some essential reliance on the very inclinations to ethical belief that are being called in question.[1] Of course, it does not follow that we should not rely on those inclinations; indeed, I think we should. But a certain level of rational discomfort with the situation seems to me appropriate.

And as regards our own particular morality, the one we adhere to ourselves, we can hardly be conscious, in a sensitive and nondefensive way, of what is going on around us in our pluralistic cultural situation without knowing that there are intelligent, generally reasonable, and in many ways admirable people who disagree with us on smaller and larger issues about ethics. Our ethical beliefs must be held together with the knowledge that there is a sense in which "we could be wrong."[2] Not that there is a sense in which cruelty, for example, could really be a virtue, despite appearances; but that many ways of looking at these matters are available to reasonable people, and others could be right against us.

How then is it possible to have moral convictions? For surely it is essential to a moral life to hold some strong beliefs about good and evil, right and wrong. Given the exposure of moral beliefs to possibilities of rational doubt, it appears that moral convictions will have to be faith, in the sense that I have thus far loosely defined. This is one way in which morality has a need for faith.

II. FAITH IN MORAL ENDS

Thus far I have spoken of morality itself, or its validity, as an object of faith. Perhaps many people will not have experienced more than merely theoretical doubts on that very general and in some ways abstract subject. I turn now to some other, more concrete topics of moral importance on which I think virtually all of us have, or have

[1] The type of circularity I have in mind is that discussed in William P. Alston's excellent paper, "Epistemic Circularity," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XLVII, 1 (September 1986): 1–30. I am more inclined than I think Alston is, however, to emphasize how much is conceded to the skeptic at this point.

[2] The possibility expressed here is an epistemic one; and it is a possibility from one's own point of view, an invitation to doubts of one's own, though it may be grounded partly in one's awareness of other people's views.

had, or will have doubts that are more personally troubling, perhaps even soul-wrenching. They have to do with the value and the attainability of what we might call "moral ends."

It is in this area principally that Kant saw morality as having a need for faith. He argued that moral commitment must set itself a certain end for whose attainment it aspires or hopes; that this end is only to a very limited extent within our power; that therefore the possibility of the result for which the moral agent must hope depends on there being what I would call a *moral order in the universe*; and that such an order cannot reasonably be supposed to exist except through the action of a God, in whom we are therefore rationally obliged to believe, if we seriously aim at the end that morality sets as the comprehensive goal of our striving.[3] It is no part of my present project to develop or evaluate Kant's argument as such, and I shall not try to determine here how strongly such considerations as these may support belief in the existence of God, though that is a question that interests me very much. Issues about a moral order in the universe certainly lurk in the background of some of the doubts we may have about moral ends, but they may not always emerge.

One place to begin thinking about faith in moral ends is with the question whether human life is worth living—or rather with particular instances of that general question—for example, whether your life is worth living. It is certainly *humanly* important to believe that one's own life is worth living. I shall not try to argue that it is *morally* important, or important for morality, though I suspect that it generally is. But at least it is morally important, in typical cases, to believe that other people's lives are worth living. If your friends are going through hard times, they may or may not be tempted to despair. Either way it is likely to be important to them to have your support as a person who believes in them and in the value of their lives. Harsh circumstances may try your faith that their life is worth living, which makes it seem natural to speak of "faith" in this context. Having that faith might be essential to being a good friend, and not having it might be letting the other person down in a particularly hurtful way. Thus, having faith that another person's life is worth living might be important to moral virtue, since being a good friend is a part of moral virtue.

What does it take to have faith that a friend's life, or one's own, is worth living? It is closely connected with caring about the person's good, the friend's or one's own. There is more than one way to care

[3] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, L.W. Beck, trans. (New York: Liberal Arts, 1956), ch. 2 of the "Dialectic"; *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, T.M. Greene and H.H. Hudson, trans. (New York: Harper, 1960), the first edition preface.

about a person's good. There is a way that is merely pity, in the sense in which pity is rightly despised. It is caring only that the person should be spared the suffering of pain. It is natural, of course, to want to avoid pain; but a view that sees nothing to value in a person's life except the avoidance of pain offers no support for meaningful living.

Caring more constructively about a person's good involves taking that person's life as a project that one prizes. If it is your good, it is primarily your project, and it is yours to determine the shape of the project; but if I care about your good, I add myself as a sponsor of the project. And this I can hardly do without believing that your life is worth living. To have faith that a person's life is worth living will sometimes be manifested in clinging stubbornly to that person's life as a project to which one is committed, refusing to give up hope for her. It will involve a certain resistance to reasons for doubting the value of that person's life.

Few judgments are more dangerous morally than the judgment that another person's life is not worth living, or not worth living any more. Such judgments can tempt us literally to murder. I grant there are cases, for instance of irreversibly comatose persons, in which it is morally necessary to make such a judgment. But I think it is almost always the part of moral wisdom to cling as stubbornly as one can to the belief that the other person's life is worth living, at least as long as the other person wants to go on living it, and often even when the other person is tempted to despair.

I have been discussing cases of friendship, but I do not mean to suggest that those are the only cases in which it is morally important to believe that other people's lives are worth living. It is also important to believe that distant lives, such as those which are lost to famine in Somalia or to genocide in Bosnia, are worth living, or would be if they could be preserved. We may be more tempted not to value lives that are very different from our own, but surely some moral defect would be involved in not believing that those distant lives are worth living.

Other instances of a need for faith in moral ends may be sought in connection with the question whether the *moral* life is worth living. This is actually a family of questions, one of which is whether a morally good life is better *for* the person who lives it than an immoral or amoral or morally misguided life. Philosophical opinion is divided on the question whether it is *morally* important to believe that the moral life is better *for oneself*, some philosophers holding that moral commitment should be entirely independent of questions of self-

interest, while others think it would be deeply immoral not believe that doing a bad action would bad for oneself.

Be that as it may, it is hard to deny the moral importance of believing that the moral life will be good, or is apt to be good, *for other people.* For it is part of moral virtue to care both about the other person's good and about the other person's virtue. Morality requires that we encourage each other to live morally. But how could we do that in good conscience if we thought living morally would be bad for the other person? Are we to encourage others to act morally so that we, or the less scrupulous, may take advantage of them, or so that we may all lose out together? Those are not morally attractive propositions; but if, on the other hand, we cease to encourage each other to act morally, we have abandoned morality as a social enterprise. So it seems that, if we do not believe that living morally is at least normally good for a person, there will be a conflict in the very soul of our morality that threatens to tear it apart. But while few doubt that it is advantageous to have the rudiments of honesty and neighborliness, it is notoriously easier to doubt that some of the finer fruits of morality are good *for* their possessors.

Another question about the value of the moral life is whether it is better for the *world,* or at least not bad for the *world,* and not too irrelevant to be worth living. As H. Richard Niebuhr[4] put it, those "who are loyal to justice" trust "that devotion to justice will not result in futility" (*ibid.*, p. 59). This trust or faith or belief is severely tested, by both the failures and the unforeseen consequences of moral efforts. Yet it does seem important for morality to believe that living morally is good for the world, or if not, then to believe that the moral life is of such intrinsic value that it is worth living for its own sake, whatever does or does not result from it. For how else can we care about morality as morality itself requires?

In these questions, I have assumed that we *can* at least live moral lives. But that, too, can be doubted. Who emerges unscathed from a morally rigorous examination of conscience? And where conscience discovers no fault, a hermeneutics of suspicion may suggest that our deepest motives, hidden from our own eyes, are too self-seeking to give any moral satisfaction. Indeed, we all have real moral faults, and doubtless we all shall continue to have real moral faults; but it is crucial for morality that we believe that moral effort can be successful enough to be worth making. For one cannot live morally without

[4] *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith,* Richard R. Niebuhr, ed. (New Haven: Yale, 1989).

intending to do so, and one cannot exactly intend to do what one believes is totally impossible. Religious traditions have tried to deal with this problem with doctrines of grace. Moral philosophers, with the notable exception of Kant,[5] have paid less attention to the problem; but it seems that morality does have need for faith that a moral life is possible enough for us to be worth trying.

I shall mention one more item of faith in a moral end. We might call it faith in *the common good.* More precisely, it is a matter of believing that the good of different persons is not so irreconcilably competitive as to make it incoherent to have the good of *all* persons as an end. It is of course necessary to have enough moral realism to see that the interests of some people must sometimes be balanced against the interests of others. Without that, one could hardly have anything we would recognize as a sense of justice. But if we can manage to view the problems of fairness and conflicting interests within the framework of a conception of human good that is predominantly cooperative, or if we can at least avoid viewing the good of different persons as irreconcilably conflicting goals, then we may still be able to take a stance that is fundamentally *for* everyone and *against* no one. And such a stance is what morality requires if it is to be more than a parochial or tribal loyalty.

What we must resist most strongly here is an ultracompetitive view of the pursuit of human good as a sort of zero-sum game, in which every good that anyone enjoys must be taken away from someone else. With such a view it would be impossible to include the good of *all* persons among one's ends. We are perhaps unlikely to see the pursuit of human good as a zero-sum game among individuals; but I suspect we are all-too-prone to see it as something close to a zero-sum game among nations or groups, and in that we are closer than we like to imagine to genocide and kindred crimes against humanity.

Much of the temptation to doubt or abandon our beliefs in moral ends arises from the fact that these beliefs are concerned not only with ideals, but with the relation of ideals to actuality, the possibility of finding sufficient value in the lives of such finite, needy, suffering, ignorant, motivationally complex, and even guilty creatures as we are. It is sometimes hard to believe that actuality is as supportive of moral ideals as these beliefs imply that it is. This is an aspect of the problem of evil that confronts all moral persons, nontheists as well as theists. Encounters with evil can shake our faith in moral ends, very

[5] *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone,* bks 1 and 2.

much as they can shake faith in the existence, power, and goodness of God. Perhaps there is some good, purely philosophical answer to all the doubts about moral ends. But even if there is one, it is unlikely to *silence* the doubts, just as no theodicy is likely to *dispose* of the theological forms of the problem of evil. In both cases, a need for faith remains.

This is of course the point at which Kant connected morality with religious belief. It may indeed be easier to retain one's faith in moral ends, at least in some cases, if one believes in some sort of moral order in the world—a life after death and a God or a Karma that guarantees the sure reward of virtue, or at least an order that assures the virtuous life of being likely to contribute to a greater good, perhaps through "intelligence as a force in social action," to borrow a phrase from John Dewey's[6] version of moral faith. Moreover, the impulse to integrate one's moral faith with the rest of one's view of reality is healthy. Perhaps an attempt at such integration is rationally or morally demanded of us. And the attempt is obviously apt to involve a special interest in views that support belief in the possibility of moral ends. There may be here a reason, strong or weak, for thinking we have a moral need to believe in some cosmic order, as an ultimate object of moral faith. For the present, however, I am content to have argued just that we have a moral need to believe in more particular possibilities of moral ends, as proximate objects of moral faith.

Two objections to this argument may be considered here. One of them might appeal to things that Dewey says in developing the version of moral faith to which I have referred. He argues that in trying "to prove that ideals are real not just as ideals but as antecedently existing actualities," philosophers and theologians "have failed to see that in converting moral realities into matters of intellectual assent they have evinced lack of *moral* faith" (*ibid.*, p. 21). He is concerned that believing the ideal is already actual, apart from our efforts, can lead to moral laziness. His argument might suggest that the object of moral faith should be simply the ideal, and not the relation of the actual to it. But this is not borne out by the full development of Dewey's own position. He already departs, more perhaps than he realizes, from a narrow conception of moral faith as faith in the ideal alone, when he says that "all endeavor for the better is moved by faith in what is possible, not by adherence to the actual" (*ibid.*, p. 23).

That endeavor for the better is moved by faith in what is possible is a nice formulation, one that I think Kant, for example, would

[6] *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale, 1934), p. 79.

approve. Faith in a moral end is generally faith in a *possibility* of good. But we must ask what is meant by 'possible' in this context. Surely, faith in the possibility of the ends of morality, the possibility of moral good, is not just belief that moral good is imaginable, or that it is logically possible or consistent. It is faith in a stronger possibility, an actual attainability, of moral good. And, as Kant saw clearly, faith in a strong possibility of this sort involves some sort of faith in what is actual. It involves faith, or at least a living hope, that actual causal circumstances are not so adverse, all things considered, as to preclude realization of the moral ends.

Another possible objection to my argument about faith in moral ends is that the beliefs I demand are more high-flown than morality needs. It may be suggested that our beliefs about actuality will provide sufficient support for morality as long as we believe that we are doing pretty well within the moral system, that honesty is the best policy, that laws will be enforced against us, that immoral behavior will elicit attitudes and responses that we shall not like from other people, and so forth. My main answer to this objection is that such low-flown beliefs may sustain minimal moral compliance, but will not sustain moral *virtue.* My concern is with moral faith as a part of moral virtue. The attitudes of mind that morality demands are surely not limited to those involved in minimal moral compliance. Morality could hardly exist, indeed, if all or most people had no more than the attitudes of minimal moral compliance. There must be many people who have more virtue than that, for the morality of the merely compliant is largely responsive to the more deeply rooted morality of others. True virtue requires resources that will sustain it when society is supporting evil rather than good, and when there is considerable reason to doubt that honesty is the best *policy* from a self-interested point of view. Thus virtue requires more moral faith than mere compliance may.

III. THE COGNITIVE ASPECT OF MORAL FAITH

It is time to attend to a misgiving that some philosophers are likely to have about everything I have said thus far. Is it really correct to speak of *believing* in these contexts, or is something less cognitive demanded in moral faith? For example, does one really *believe* that a person's life is worth living? I have argued that this "belief" is closely connected with *caring* about that person's good, clinging stubbornly to the person's life as a project, and the like. Should faith that a person's life is worth living just be *identified* with such caring?

The issue thus raised could be viewed as a general one about cognitivism and noncognitivism regarding ethics and values, but I

want to narrow the focus as much as possible for the present. I shall not propose here any comprehensive theory about the meaning of ethical terms or the relation of value judgments to truth, and I shall leave aside many debated issues in order to concentrate on some of the concrete features of moral faith that incline me to speak of "belief" here. One reason for this narrow or concrete focus is that metaethics, the relevant branch of ethical theory, is a field in which philosophical experience suggests that no comprehensive or very complex theory is likely to attain a very high degree of certainty. Moral faith is therefore a stance we shall have to take, if we are reasonable, in the face of the recognition that any metaethical theory we may hold *could* rather easily be mistaken. So it would be nice to have an understanding of the stance that does not presuppose very much metaethics, though doubtless anything we say about moral faith may have implications for more general theories in the field.

I think both will and feeling are involved in moral faith (as will be discussed in sections IV and V). But I do not think that moral faith is *merely* will and feeling, or that believing another person's life is worth living is *merely* caring about that life. Moral faith is not sheer exercise of will power, or expression of emotion, or both together. Any characterization of it as merely self-assertion, self-expression, or self-consciousness does violence to an intention central to moral faith, an intention of respecting something more commanding, and at least in some cases more external to the self, than mere personal preference and feeling.

This is the most important reason for speaking of moral faith as a sort of "belief," and it is connected with the possibility of error. It is characteristic of the sort of faith I am discussing to acknowledge a sort of possibility that one could be mistaken in it—typically, a possibility that one could be mistaken and never know it. To deny that possibility, particularly where another person's life is concerned, would be to adopt a stance altogether too egocentric. I may believe that another person's life is still worth living, though she no longer believes it, in her terminal illness. But I must recognize that I could be tragically mistaken, mistaken in a way characteristic of false *beliefs*. That is, I must recognize that in some sense it *could* be that her life is not worth going on with. Faith confronts a temptation to doubt precisely because such possibilities of error must be recognized, and in a way respected.

To this argument it may be objected that emotions too can be mistaken, or inappropriately related to reality, as when one is angry at

someone who has done nothing wrong or harmful or offensive.[7] The possibility of inappropriate anger, however, may be best understood on the assumption that the angry person is implicitly committed to a belief that the target of anger has done something objectionable. It is far from clear that we can understand how an *emotion* of faith in the value of life can be inappropriately related to reality if we cannot understand how faith can be, or involve, a false *belief* that life is worth living. In any event, the possibility of an objectively appropriate or inappropriate relation to reality is precisely the aspect of moral belief most subject to metaethical doubts, and also the aspect that seems to me most important to the nonegocentric character of moral faith. So long as we must acknowledge this possibility in our faith, it is hard for me to see what would be gained by eliminating belief from our conception of faith.

Connected with the possibility of error is the giving of reasons for and against beliefs. We do give and entertain reasons for and against items of moral faith, and moral beliefs in general. And the structure of giving and entertaining reasons for them is at least very similar to the structure of reasoning about other sorts of belief. In thinking about items of moral faith, one uses logic, one aims at consistency and at coherence with one's beliefs on other subjects, and one is responsive to one's sense of "plausibility," as we sometimes put it. All of that is grounds for classifying moral faith as a sort of belief.

Particular interest attaches to the question of the responsiveness or unresponsiveness of moral faith to the evidence of *experience*. Faith in morality itself, or in the validity of one's own morality, is not, I think, strongly empirical. This is not to insist that no empirical evidence could be relevant to it at all, but the validity of a morality is not apt to be tightly enough tied to particular experiences for any question of a direct empirical proof or refutation to arise. That is not the case, however, with what I have called faith in moral ends. Our faith in the value of particular human lives, in the value and the possibility of a moral life, and in the possibility of a common good, can be put under strain by particular experiences. Indeed, adverse experience is precisely what gives rise, as I have argued, to a problem of evil for moral faith.

There is thus a considerable empirical element in faith in moral ends. But I do not believe that science, or social science, could devise a definitive empirical test of the truth of faith in any moral end. One reason for this is a certain vagueness or indefiniteness of

[7] I am indebted to Michael Otsuka for calling my attention to objections of this sort.

content. A form of words, as I have argued, is not an appropriate object of moral faith; and a faith in some sense the same can persist through considerable revision of its verbal formulation. Because objects of faith are not precise formulations, but have vaguer contours that permit reformulation in the face of adverse experience, we cannot identify experiences that are unequivocally predicted or excluded by such items of faith as that so-and-so's life is worth living. Hence faith is not normally subject to definitive proof or refutation by any specifiable finite set of experiences. And from the perspective of moral faith, this is as it should be, for moral faith is *supposed* to be resistant to adverse evidence.

Empiricists may take offense at this feature of faith. A familiar attack on some forms of theistic faith comes to mind here. Antony Flew[8] asked: "Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say 'God does not love us' or even 'God does not exist'" (*ibid.*, p. 99). He charged that, if theistic formulations are continually revised to avoid definitive refutation by experience, then theism will suffer "death by a thousand qualifications" (*ibid.*, p. 107). I think logical positivists often greatly underestimated the amount of empirical content in religious beliefs; but Flew shows some real insight into the nature of faith. Faith as such is indeed resistant to adverse experience, and is apt to revise itself before simply accepting refutation. Flew is right that faith is in danger of evacuating itself of content if its resistance to refutation is undiscriminating or absolutely unconditional. Nonetheless, I believe that resistance to adverse experience, and to refutation in general, is an appropriate feature of faith; and I shall argue this with specific reference to moral faith.

It is interesting to note a passage in which Kant[9] seems to agree, declaring that "in knowing [*Wissen*] one still listens to counter-reasons, but not in believing [*Glauben*, that is, in moral faith], because this turns not on objective grounds but on the moral interest of the subject" (*ibid.*, p. 502). Kant's comment about "moral interest" directs us to an important consideration here. Our interest in items of faith is importantly different from our interest in scientific

[8] "Theology and Falsification," in Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

[9] *Logik*, Gottlob Benjamin Jäsche, ed., in Kant, *Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik*, Wilhelm Weischedel, ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968). With one exception, I follow the English translation by Robert Hartman and Wolfgang Schwarz, in Kant, *Logic* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), p. 80. I am indebted to Houston Smit for calling this passage to my attention. Kant goes further than I would in declaring that faith does not even *listen* to counter-reasons.

hypotheses. One of the reasons why we want scientific hypotheses to be precisely formulated is that we welcome their conclusive falsification (at least if they are not too central to our conception of things). Conclusive falsification of a hypothesis is *progress* in science. But falsification of an item of faith is *not* progress—at least not from the perspective within which it is an item of faith. To think that falsification of the belief in morality itself, or of the belief that a moral life is worth living, might be pure progress is already to hold an amoral view, a morally bad view. The falsification might be progress toward knowing the truth, but that sort of progress is not, and ought not to be, the only thing that concerns us here. A loss of moral faith would be the loss of something precious.

To this it may obviously be objected that, if the moral faith is false, then the loss of it would be the loss of something not so precious after all. This objection is not as good as it looks at first. One weakness in it is that when we consider what we would lose in giving up a belief as falsified, we have to consider the value the belief has if it is true as well as if it is false. For if we were sure that whenever we are seriously tempted to abandon a belief as falsified, it really is false, then all sincere resistance to such temptation would already have collapsed. But when we resist refutation of an item of moral faith, we may, and should, be thinking of the danger of being misled into giving it up while it is true. From a moral point of view, that would be a worse mistake to make than the mistake of clinging to moral faith while it is false. Even if an item of moral faith is false, moreover, we are not likely in abandoning it to attain anything corresponding to the moral value of believing it if it is true. Either way, there is of course the value of believing the truth; but there is an additional moral value in moral faith, or made possible by moral faith, if it is true, which would not be replicated in acceptance of a morally emptier truth. In view of this important asymmetry, I think it would be foolish to say that there is the same kind of value in refutation as in confirmation of moral faith, whereas it is quite reasonable to say that there is the same kind of value in falsification as in verification of a scientific hypothesis.

It is worth noting that the balance of potential payoffs is much more equal when it is a question of revising moral faith instead of abandoning it. For if revision of moral faith leads to truth, or to a closer approximation to truth, it will presumably not be a morally empty truth, but a view that is morally more adequate. If a revision of moral faith is correct, the revised faith will presumably have *more* moral value than the unrevised had. Thus we can hope that revision

of moral faith will be progress from a moral point of view. This is a further reason for thinking it is good for moral faith to combine a variable, revisable form with a vaguer but more enduring core, so that self-critical growth and development may be combined with constancy of commitment.

Items of faith are not hypotheses to be tested by experience, though we may well want their *formulations* to be tested by experience. Items of faith may in fact be tested by experience, but we are not trying to refute them. We are trying to live by them. In science, we commonly have reason to frame hypotheses in such a way that they are liable to conclusive refutation by experience. But if we have reason to have faith in something, we have reason to conceive of the object of faith in such a way that our faith can change and develop without being abandoned as it is tested by experience. This does not mean that moral faith is wholly unempirical, let alone noncognitive, but that it involves a different way of accommodating thought to experience, a way that is reasonable in some cases, given the diversity of human interests at stake in morality and in science.

Maybe this suggests too stark a contrast between morality and science. Perhaps in science, too, a variable, revisable form, consisting of hypotheses up for refutation, is to be distinguished from a core that is more resistant to change, and that is an appropriate object of commitment or (dare we say it?) faith. Notoriously, the reliability of induction, and more broadly of empirical scientific methods, has been doubted by reasonable persons; and it may not be possible to set the doubts to rest in a completely satisfying way. Yet a refutation of the reliability of induction would not be scientific *progress* in the same way that a refutation of the meteorite explanation of the extinction of dinosaurs might be. Indeed, it is hard to see how we could make progress in empirical science at all if we abandoned induction. So perhaps there is a place, or even a need, for *faith* in the highest-level beliefs of science. That is a suggestion[10] that is not at all unwelcome to me; but I shall not pursue it here, as I wish to keep my focus on *moral* faith.

IV. THE VOLITIONAL ASPECT OF MORAL FAITH

Probably all belief involves the will. Part of believing a proposition is in general being disposed to act on the assumption that it is true. That is also part of *faith*, but faith involves the will more deeply than that. To have faith is always to be *for* that in which one has faith. It is perfectly consistent to say you *believe* that Bill Clinton will win but you

[10] Which I owe to Marc Lange.

are still planning to vote for George Bush; but a genuine Bush supporter could hardly have *faith* that Clinton will win. *Moral* faith involves being *for* something in a special way. Like religious faith, it involves *commitment.*

There is doubtless moral and religious belief that does not amount to faith and does not involve commitment. That can occur, perhaps most easily in a relatively homogeneous society, if one simply accepts what one has been taught of ethics and religion in much the same way that one accepts what one has been taught about the past, but without caring much about it or making much effort to live by it. Here the ethical and religious beliefs seem more like something that has happened to the person than like a stance he has taken. That does not relieve him of responsibility for them; but it does mean that he is not *committed* to them, and we would certainly not speak of them as *faith.* We also would not think such beliefs a credit to the person, even if we agreed with them.

Another way in which one could hold an ethical or religious belief without commitment is *tentatively.* And this is sometimes appropriate. To hold as merely probable a theological opinion about the virgin birth of Jesus, or a moral opinion about whether a fetus has rights, may show commendable humility and restraint. One is not exactly committed to such a belief, and it is not an instance of faith. One who holds all her moral beliefs in this way, however, is not a moral person. '*Probably* it is wrong to torture innocent children' and '*Probably* the moral law is binding on us' are hardly recognizable as expressions of a moral stance. Neither is '*Probably* we are entitled to treat a Hitler as wrong or evil, and not just as someone who has a different point of view'. And while a thoroughly moral person might indeed say, 'Probably Uncle Al's life is still worth living', it would not be an expression of faith.

Søren Kierkegaard was a pioneer in exploring the aspect of faith that we touch here. It has long been recognized that there is something incongruous in holding an article of faith as merely probable. Classical accounts of Christian faith expressed this by speaking of a *certainty* of faith, or of a "sure confidence," or a "feeling of full assurance," as John Calvin[11] puts it. Kierkegaard is as emphatic as Calvin that an opinion held as merely probable cannot constitute faith, but he does not speak of faith in terms of feelings of assurance. On the contrary, the faith that interests him is

[11] *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* III, ii, 15, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), Volume I, p. 560f.

one that coexists with an acute awareness of the "risk" that it is wrong. "If I wish to preserve myself in faith," says Kierkegaard,[12] using a memorable image, "I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith" (*ibid.*, p. 182). This is a type of faith that will typically coexist with doubt.

We may not agree with everything Kierkegaard says about the desirability of uncertainty. In the next section of this essay, I shall have something to say about the importance of something like confidence for the moral life. And I would say much the same about the religious life. For most people in the modern world, however, a confidence amounting to subjective certainty seems neither possible nor desirable. Whatever our ethical or religious commitment, and whatever our confidence in it, it must be held together with the knowledge that there is a sense in which "we could be wrong," as I have already noted. On this issue about the nature of faith—moral as well as religious faith—Kierkegaard seems likelier than Calvin to speak to our condition.

How then can we be *committed* to an ethical or religious outlook and way of life? Kierkegaard sees commitment in terms of decisiveness, and while in some ways his view is probably too voluntaristic, I think his emphasis on decisiveness is more importantly right than wrong. The attitude of the will, broadly understood, is crucial to commitment. The possibility that one is wrong may be recognized, but at certain points it must be disregarded in one's decisions and actions and way of life, and one's "bets" must not be "hedged." This is the heart of Kierkegaard's account of faith.

While tentativeness seems quite appropriate in some ethical and theological opinions, a moral life, like a religious life, requires a core of commitment, and in relation to that core we are not prepared to accept attitudes toward probability and doubt that seem perfectly appropriate, or even praiseworthy, in relation to most other topics. It is not morally acceptable to "hedge one's bet" on morality. Factoring into one's financial decisions whatever chance of error one sees in one's forecasts of economic trends is prudent, and usually commendable. But if I factor into my practical deliberations a "10% chance that morality is a delusion," or a "25% chance that my efforts to lead a moral life are just a waste of energy and opportunity," or a

[12] *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Swenson and Lowrie, trans. (Princeton: University Press, 1941).

"30-50% chance that my children will be better off if they subordinate morality to self-interest," then I have stepped outside the moral life.[13]

"A wise man. . .proportions his belief to the evidence," claimed David Hume.[14] A moral person, however, will have a degree of commitment to some central ethical beliefs which is more than proportionate to the strength of the evidence or arguments supporting them. In that sense, morality requires a faith that goes beyond what we can establish by reasoning. It does not follow that the beliefs to which a moral person is committed cannot all be favored by reason, in preference to alternatives. It is just that reason's support for them is not likely to be as solid as morality's.

Closely related to the central role of commitment in faith is the phenomenon of *struggles* of faith, or striving for faith. That we strive for faith is connected with an important point that I think American pragmatist philosophers got right, that our cognitive project is one of developing a system of beliefs that can be integrated not only with experience but also with the living of a moral life, and more broadly a good life. The striving often takes the form of *clinging* to faith. This phenomenon is familiar to most religious believers, and I think it has a place in moral as well as religious faith. A moral person has reason to cling to moral faith, with some tenacity, when it is tried by doubts.

In such clinging there is a desire to hold a particular belief, which is certainly not just a desire to believe whatever is true. It is easy for us to have a bad conscience about this, for we tend to think that both the reliability and the honesty of a belief are apt to be corrupted if one is influenced, in holding it, by the desire to hold it. It is often claimed also that one cannot be aware of being influenced by such a desire without that awareness undermining the belief that is recognized as influenced by it; but I think this undermining need not occur, and often does not, in cases of clinging to faith. Why is that? And must the belief be seen as corrupted by the desire?

Well, why would belief be undermined or corrupted by such awareness? If impartial desire to believe whatever is true is likelier to lead to true belief than the desire to cling to one's present belief, then the influence of the latter sort of desire may well corrupt the

[13] Here I am adapting and abbreviating an argument I have developed in another context in my *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford, 1987), p. 44.

[14] *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), sect. X, pt. I, p. 73.

reliability of one's belief-formation process. And if one sees the reliability of one's thinking as reduced in this way, that may undermine one's confidence and one's sincerity in believing. But *is* the impartial desire more likely to lead to truth than the desire that strives for faith? It will be, where one has fairly reliable truth-finding faculties that are independent of one's desires (or independent of all but the impartial desire to believe whatever is true).

In ethics, however, it does not seem that we have truth-finding faculties independent of our desires. Whatever may be the nature of ethical truth, it is not plausible to suppose that those whose hearts are in the wrong place are as likely to find it as those whose hearts are in the right place. If I hold moral convictions, I shall not suppose that my ability to grasp their truth is independent of the way in which their content moves my feelings and my will; and to be moved in the relevant way is in part to want to hold the convictions; it is not independent of volitional commitment to them. To suppose that our thinking in such matters would be more reliable if we did not care which conclusion we come to, so long as it is the correct one, is to propose an implausibly cold-hearted conception of what would constitute reliable thinking in ethics.

The matter is more complex than that, however, and I shall surely not be able to exhaust its complexity here. For not every desire to hold a particular ethical belief seems to be an appropriate motive. Suppose, for instance, that one wants to believe that a certain course of action is right because one stands to profit from it financially. Clinging to the belief from that motive, though humanly understandable, does not seem admirable, and we would not want to dignify it with the title of "moral faith." And the desire to profit financially from a course of action does seem unlikely to contribute to the reliability of any moral judgment concerning the action. Such a motive for an ethical belief seems as suspect epistemologically, and morally, as a financially motivated desire to believe that tobacco smoke does not cause cancer, or to believe that our current energy policies are not leading to catastrophic global warming.

In other cases, we may face more delicate questions about the appropriateness of desire as a motive for belief. Suppose I hold an opinion one way or the other about the rightness or wrongness of a law permitting women, unconditionally, to have an abortion on demand. Believing my position right seems to give me a reason to want to continue to hold it. Moreover, assuming this desire is grounded in feelings about relevant matters, such as fetuses and women's lives, there is no reason in this case to suppose that my

judgment would be more reliable if I were not moved to want to retain my belief. So is it appropriate for me to *cling* to my belief on this issue in the face of any misgivings that may arise? That seems very doubtful, and its doubtfulness is connected with the distinction I made earlier between revising and abandoning moral faith. A humane and reasonable moral faith will include the belief that we all could be more enlightened ethically than we are, and will therefore demand an openness, as unprejudiced as we can manage, to certain revisions of our ethical opinions.

But which revisions are those? Are some of our moral judgments items of moral faith, to which we should cling, whereas others are mere moral opinions, to which we should try not to be attached? Or ought we to be as open as possible to revision of any of our beliefs about particular ethical issues? Must we try to give an unprejudiced hearing to the golden-tongued prophet of a movement that seeks to persuade us that we have been wrong in condemning slavery or genocide, for example? Surely not; there are some moral judgments that it would be a betrayal of morality, or of humanity, to think seriously about abandoning. I have no formula for determining which moral issues we ought to regard as issues of faith and which as mere matters of opinion, or for determining how strong and unyielding a degree of commitment is appropriate on a given issue of moral faith. But if it seems to us that giving up a particular moral conviction would amount to an abandonment of other human beings, or of a significant part of the moral meaning of our own lives, those are certainly reasons for regarding the matter as an issue of faith.

The line between moral faith and moral opinion may fall in different places for different people with different histories. For many students, utilitarianism may be an opinion that can be adopted and abandoned with little struggle. For John Stuart Mill it was something more—a commitment which he shared with other people and which structured his life's projects, a faith that he strove to reshape rather than abandon in the light of objections and his own experience.

A question that is regularly and rightly addressed to me in view of these claims is whether moral faith is still a virtue when it is faith in the wrong cause. I believe it can be, though not if the cause is too indefensible. The possibility of virtues being manifested in the service of the wrong cause is crucial for the morality of conflict. Conflict is dehumanized when we lose the sense that our enemies can be admirable in opposing us, even though we think them wrong. It is a sort of self-righteousness to think that nothing matters by comparison with being on the right side. Epic poets and professional politi-

cians have known that respecting one's enemies is commonly of at least comparable importance. Recognizing and admiring in one's antagonist such virtues as courage, loyalty, and faith is a major ingredient of that respect.

Like courage, like loyalty, faith is a dangerous virtue. We may rightly refuse to call them virtues at all where they are part of a pattern of moral depravity. But if we refuse them the title of virtue wherever they are implicated in understandable moral error and contribute to guilt or disaster, we deny appropriate recognition to the frail and fragmentary character of our grasp of moral and other truth.

V. THE EMOTIONAL ASPECT OF MORAL FAITH

There remains an important aspect of faith about which I shall say only a little here. A voluntary decision to commit yourself to a proposition does not, by itself, amount to faith. Even the decision plus a bunch of good reasons for your decision still is not sufficient for a sincere belief, let alone a conviction.

Faith as I conceive of it moves in a space bounded on the one side by subjective certainty (which Calvin ascribed to faith, but I do not) and on the other side by the subjectively incredible. Within that space it is often hard to tell, subjectively, how far one's faith is supported by one's sense of what is more plausible, and how far by will power. But both, I think, are normally involved.

It is also not easy to specify what more is required beyond will power. One is tempted to say that what you believe must *seem true* to you, or at least must not *seem false.* Seeming true or seeming false in this context is largely a matter of *feeling,* and as a first approximation we might try to identify the requisite feeling as at least a minimal degree of *confidence* in the view that you hold.[15]

This is not adequate as it stands, however. If you are depressed, you may doubt that your life is worth living. It may not *feel* worth living; it may *seem* to you that it is not worth living. In such a case, we can hardly say that you have *confidence* that your life is worth living. Yet in precisely this sort of case it is very likely both possible and right for you to cling to *faith* that your life is worth living.

[15] For interesting discussion of the importance of confidence in an ethical outlook and life, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1985), pp. 170–71. Williams sees it, however, as "basically a social phenomenon," one which exists in individuals, but only in a much less adequate form if it is not shared by their society as a whole. My focus on faith under trial leads me to be more interested in aspects of belief that can exist in individuals without being shared by a whole society.

Is it sheer will power if you do cling to it? Surely not. Will power cannot give you a belief in a hypothesis that is not "live" for you, as William James[16] put it. Probably no amount of will power could give you the belief that '2+2=5', or even that you will never die. Nor, I imagine, could sheer will power give you the belief that the number of bald eagles that laid eggs in 1993 was even rather than odd. If you succeed, against emotional appearances, in clinging to the faith that your life is worth living, the clinging must feel different from trying to believe one of those patently false or humanly undecidable propositions. Perhaps you feel some level of trust in some reasons for clinging to faith, or perhaps giving up faith "feels wrong" to you.

But 'confidence' is hardly the right word here.[17] It suggests a state of feeling that is much less troubled than faith has often to endure. In some ways, I prefer the word 'courage', provided I can make clear that I do not mean courage as a mainly voluntary virtue. I mean courage in a sense in which it is felt more than chosen, the sense in which it might be a direct product of being "encouraged." In Greek, it would be *tharsos* rather than *andreia*; in German, it would be *Mut* rather than *Tapferkeit*.[18] The courage of which I would speak is not sheer will power or voluntary determination, but an inner force which carries one forward, and is *felt* as sustaining determination. We may hope that such emotions are responsive to reality. If not, our chances of living a life both good and grounded in reality are small.

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[16] *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897), pp. 2–3.

[17] Here I would like to unsay something I said in my *The Virtue of Faith*: "Peace, joy, gratitude, and the freedom to love are supposed to flow from a confidently held conviction that God is good" (p. 46). This is not only too simple; it is a "Pollyana" sentiment.

[18] Cf. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale, 1952), pp. 5–6, a text that inspired the theme of this paragraph.