Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory

GOODNESS AND TRADITION

Irene Liu

"Irene Liu offers an exciting, ambitious, and comprehensive exploration of secular moral phenomenology. Leveraging insights from multiple traditions, and re-grounding metaethical questions in a wider humanistic context, this book has something powerful to say to comparativists, value theorists, and philosophers of religion alike."

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Goodness and Tradition

This book investigates the importance of spirituality in moral life. The author claims that modern secular morality suffers from a lack of spirituality and argues that a solution to this problem can be found in tradition.

Over several centuries, a process of secularization has loosened both the hold and the appeal of religion in the West. Morality did not dissipate, as many feared it would. This book is motivated by the idea that, nevertheless, something important was lost along the way. Arguing that a lack of spirituality has weakened secular moral life, the author seeks to identify an alternative source of spirituality that is not divine or supernatural. To this end, she considers three perspectives that offer potential sources of secular spirituality: Aristotelian humanism, which emphasizes nature; existentialist humanism, which emphasizes freedom and choice; and Confucian humanism, which emphasizes rituals. The author ultimately defends the view that traditions are intrinsically good as creations that elevate human nature through their customs, practices, and institutions. Further, she argues that the initiation into tradition is necessary to bring a person into the "space of reasons," which encompasses both moral and non-moral values. In consequence, traditions are appropriate objects of existential gratitude, which some theists hold to be the foundation of religious experience. Thus, it is possible to infuse secular moral life with spirituality by reawakening a love for the traditions in which it is already embedded.

Goodness and Tradition will appeal to scholars and graduate students in ethics, metaethics, and moral psychology who are interested in questions of moral motivation and experience. It will also appeal to those who are interested in the role of religion in moral life, as well as philosophers who are interested in comparative approaches to Western and Chinese thought.

Irene Liu is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York. She has published articles on topics in ethical naturalism, pluralism, moral psychology, history of Greek and Roman philosophy, and Confucian thought. Her most recent articles appeared in *Philosophy*, *European Journal of Philosophy,* and *Journal of Value Inquiry*.

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For my parents, Tieh-Fo and Ching-Li Liu, who taught me to love tradition.

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Every genuine artist must be looked upon as one who is guarding something that is acknowledged to be sacred, which it is his wish to propagate with earnestness and care. But every century, in its own way, tends toward what is secular, striving to make what is sacred, common, what is difficult, easy, what is serious, amusing; and nothing could be said against this, were it not for the fact that earnestness and humor are thereby utterly destroyed.[1]

1 Goethe, *Letters to Zelter*, March 18, 1811, tr. A. D. Coleridge (George Bell and Sons, 1892), 81.

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Introduction

1.

Since the early modern period, a process of secularization has gradually loosened both the hold and the appeal of religion in the West. Many feared along the way that the loss of divine authority would lead to moral collapse; some would say that the danger remains even today. But most people today would disagree.[1] What has taken the place of theism in the lives of many is secular humanism, a non-religious framework for understanding our place in the world that knits together scientific knowledge and a sense of value, meaning, and purpose. Humanist morality, which is broadly encapsulated by the slogan "good without God," upholds the dignity and value of human life, and it is the backdrop of many of the significant moral developments of modern times. Indeed, some would say that moral progress has increased as religion weakened and secularism gained ground: there are now fewer wars, less violence and cruelty, more rights for minority groups, and less inequality than at any time in human history.[2] And so it is that, in the minds of many, morality has not only survived the loss of religious authority, but grown stronger.

This book was motivated by the idea that, nevertheless, something important was lost along the way. Theists experience moral life with a profound sense of meaning because they see it as a way of being closer to God. Cast in the light of cosmic purpose, their morality is animated with sacred significance, their striving for goodness touched with grace. The same cannot be said for secular morality, which seems to lack what William James calls the "note of infinitude," Iris Murdoch refers to as "mysticism," and I would describe as "spirituality," or a "life-orientation" toward a transcendent good that elicits reverence and awe.[3] Secularist morality works insofar as people are able to treat each other with respect, meet moral obligations, and cultivate virtues without God. But the experiential quality of morality is another matter. I venture to say that most secularists are not moved by a sense of reverence or awe in their moral life, and while

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many may derive a sense of meaning from moral actions, they would not describe this meaning as sacred. In short, secular morality seems to lack a significant dimension of experience that exists in religious morality, and this, it seems to me, is a genuine loss.

Of course, many secularists would disagree that any fundamental value has been lost. Many who reject religion do not see spirituality itself as valuable and are thus unlikely to see the de-spiritualization of moral life as impoverishing. At the very least, many would say that spirituality is irrelevant to moral goodness. After all, there are plenty of corrupt theists, and atheists can be just as good as saints. Indeed, those who are most serious about morality may positively welcome the de-spiritualization of moral life. This is because spirituality takes effort and attention that could otherwise be directed to the difficult, but mundane work of improving the world and helping others.

But there are signs of trouble. For one thing, it can now seem that "being good [is] no longer a good thing" and that "moral people [are] almost always bores."[4] Maximal morality has come to be viewed by many as "saccharine" and "disgusting," and it is said that "[s]aints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent."[5] In this context, one must be careful not to be too good, as goodness itself is something that needs to be moderated along with other values – success, meaning, love, authenticity, and so on – to produce a satisfying, well-balanced life. The results of this attitude shift are predictable. When being good is no longer a good thing, being bad is no longer bad – or, at least, not that bad. And so some conclude that it is best to aspire to the neither-too-moral-nor-too-immoral middle ground of "decency."[6] While such attitudes evince a concern for morality, they are hardly inspiring, and it is natural to worry about where they will eventually lead.

Then again, secularists who still believe that being good "ought to be difficult and breath-taking" may end up worse.[7] Over the last few centuries, we have seen certain stripes of activists devote themselves to secular moral ideals with a fervor and devotion that might rightly be described as quasi-religious. The most extreme versions have been positively horrific: Stalinism and Maoism, both secular revolutionary movements, took the lives of tens of millions of people. But even milder cases can be disruptive, corrupting, and counterproductive. Many have likened a "cancel culture" devoted to extirpating harmful attitudes and views – as well as, oftentimes, the people who hold them – to a new religion.[8] These examples are signs of a spiritual malaise that threatens to impact our ability to conduct moral life. It may not lead to moral collapse, but it could still be dangerous.

The goal of this book is to defend a sort of spirituality in moral life that does not depend on the divine or supernatural. Unlike staunchly secular authors, I think that humanist morality is seriously impoverished without

a sense of spirituality. Moral motivation, I argue, runs dry, and moral life is coarsened, narrowed, and flattened, unless it flows from the sort of love that is inspired by objects of spiritual devotion. At the same time, unlike authors who approach this matter from a religious perspective, I do not seek a return to religion or a supernatural re-enchantment of the world. I assume that supernaturalism, however refined, is not a possible view for the secularist. And I take it that whatever spirituality there is to uncover must come from within a squarely humanistic perspective. The challenge, then, is to identify something suitably naturalistic that can take the place of God as the object of spiritual devotion in secular moral life.

2.

Of course, there is no single humanistic perspective on moral life. Secular humanism is not a theory so much as a "climate of opinion" that accommodates a wide variety of views, and the origins of humanist thought have been traced to myriad, divergent sources – ancient and modern, Western and non-Western.[9] With this in mind, I consider three humanistic perspectives on moral life as potential resolutions to the spirituality problem – Aristotelian, Existentialist, and Confucian. While I do not think that any of the views can be adopted wholesale, they are worth serious consideration due to their appeal among both philosophers and non-philosophers today. Notably, the inclusion of a non-Western view demonstrates the benefits of a comparative approach to our problem, for it is very difficult to contemplate a replacement for God from within a perspective that has been so thoroughly shaped by theistic thinking. As a system of thought that is widely considered humanistic from the beginning, Confucianism offers a fresh perspective on the problem.

My discussion of the two Western views revolves around a pair of contraries – nature and freedom. Defended by Aristotelianism and existentialism, respectively, both of these concepts appear at first blush to be strong candidates to ground a secular, spiritualized morality. Not only do they each anchor a moral perspective that arguably contains something transcendent, but they resonate deeply with popular views today: Aristotle's teleological conception of nature provides a basis for seeing the pursuit of natural goodness and human goodness, in particular, as a kind of spiritual project, whereas the existentialist view of human freedom locates a sort of spiritual experience in the individual creation of moral values. I argue that neither of these views resolves the spirituality problem, but because they are contraries of a sort, they bring to light the challenge that faces the secularist. To put it coarsely, the deficiencies of Aristotelianism show the need to go beyond nature, while the deficiencies of existentialism show the need for something

with the normative force of nature. Each view gets an aspect that is essential to a spiritualized morality, but the two views cannot be stably combined.

It is, however, worth noting that, while their differences are profound, Aristotelian and existentialist humanisms both represent responses to the prospect of morality in a godless world. As such, they are both developed under pressure, however implicit, to fill a God-shaped void. The problem of responding to such a void is that nothing worldly can fill it – neither the perfection of human nature, nor the creative potential of human freedom is up to the task of replacing an all-perfect Creator. The only way for a secularist to avoid this problem is to give up on the idea that a replacement for God in moral life will be God-like. Like much advice, this is easier said than done.

But a template can be found in Confucianism. A thinker of the Axial Age, Confucius is often compared to the likes of Socrates and Aristotle, though the assimilation can be misleading. Widely considered as one of the world's oldest humanisms, his perspective is arguably complete without any reference to supernatural or divine beings. In this way, it is unlike most of its ancient and modern Western counterparts, which either assume the existence of the divine or are embarrassed by its absence. Against a backdrop that is neither godly nor godless, Confucians see human goodness in terms of participation in society and mastery of a culture that exceeds anything found in human nature. The moral exemplar is neither a perfect specimen of natural goodness nor a godlike decider of value, but well-mannered, knowledgeable, and refined. Despite being thoroughly mundane, Confucian humanism does not devolve into a dreary conventionalism. Instead, it brings into view what has been described as the "sacredness of the secular."[10] For Confucians, culture is not an accretion of mere habits, but the way that humans access or "broaden" the ultimate reality known as *dao*.[11]

I believe that none of these three views provides a complete response to the spirituality problem, but there is something to be learned from each of them. At the very least, it is worth understanding why some of the most obvious and attractive possibilities for secular spirituality fall short. While it incorporates elements of all three, the position I ultimately defend is heavily influenced by Confucian thought. More specifically, I expand upon the Confucian idea that there are spiritual possibilities inherent in human culture, however imperfect, parochial, arbitrary, and contingent it may be. In so doing, my goal is not to interpret or revive Confucianism *per se*, but rather to translate some of its insights into terms that are acceptable to Western secularists. In essence, I will attempt to defend a resolution to the spirituality problem that bridges two ways of thought.

3.

My bridge will be the concept of tradition, and my primary claim is that tradition can take the place of God in secular moral life. More precisely, I argue that the spirituality problem can be resolved through traditionalism, or the love of and devotion to one's own tradition.

By "tradition," I mean a comprehensive way of life that is passed down from generation to generation. Examples include Western, American, British, Native American, and Chinese traditions. My view is pluralistic in that I do not mean to single out any particular tradition as a source of spirituality in moral life. Indeed, I think that every tradition can play this role, though the traditions that are likely most relevant to readers of this book come from the West. These are the societies that are most at risk of experiencing the spirituality problem. Not unrelatedly, they also happen to be the ones where tradition is most likely to be neglected.

To this point, tradition does not garner very much attention in academic philosophy today. Two prominent thinkers that take up the topic are Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Oakeshott, but there are few more than that.[12] At the time of this writing, the concept of tradition has no introductions, no entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and no "guides to the subject" in mainstream presses. This lacuna can be attributed to multiple causes. First, there are moral and political reasons to shun tradition. Many associate tradition with unpopular views about women, sexual minorities, and the family. More generally, tradition is associated with conservatism, which is viewed by many, particularly in the academy, as retrograde and parochial. Perhaps worst of all, the concept of tradition has been claimed by thinkers of the radical right, whose connections to fascism make them unacceptable to most. Beyond moral and political considerations, there are cultural biases that set people against tradition. Modern Western societies tend to place great emphasis on what can be scientifically proven and rationally argued, and they are generally resistant to obedience or subordination to what cannot be vindicated through reason. However, tradition is based in history, shaped by contingency, and full of arbitrary distinctions, and traditionalism requires a certain degree of submission to what cannot be fully rationalized. Although it is not a supernatural phenomenon, many people see tradition as no more rational than religion. Needless to say, this does not exactly endear tradition to most philosophers. Finally, there are practical obstacles to embracing tradition. Forces of globalization, economic and technological, have weakened the influence of tradition. As people all over the globe become more connected and culture more homogeneous, it is getting harder and harder to maintain an authentic connection to traditional ways of living. Some traditions have simply died out, and many more are on the way. For all

of these reasons, defenders of tradition will appear hopelessly misguided, deluded, or worse. So, it is no wonder that tradition is mostly neglected in the academic literature.

But facts on the ground are somewhat different. Despite the negativity surrounding tradition, many people continue to derive a sense of spiritual fulfillment from their participation in tradition. Some of these individuals identify with particular countries or nations, others with particular tribes or civilizations, and still others with particular historical or cultural communities. These individuals, whom I consider to be various forms of traditionalists, love and are devoted to their respective traditions. They look to their traditions as a source of shared meaning that transcends their individual lives. They revere the wisdom of their predecessors, and they stand in awe of the achievements, both moral and non-moral, of those who came before. They see moral life in terms of values, beliefs, and ideals that are grounded in tradition, brought to life by historical figures in historical events, and realized in culturally specific institutions, practices, and customs. And they experience the commitment to honor the sacrifices of past generations and to care for the viability of future generations as sacred. It is, of course, true that traditionalism, just like religiosity, can take dark turns, and one of my tasks will be to distinguish good from bad forms of traditionalism. Nevertheless, it seems to me that, in its fullest and best instances, traditionalism is a sort of spiritual devotion that enhances moral life.

In proposing traditionalism as a resolution to the spirituality problem, I thus take myself to be bringing to view an experience that is already known to many people. A significant part of this work will involve shedding light on the nature of tradition, which, despite being utterly familiar, is not very well understood. I argue that tradition is the source of one's humanity, or that in virtue of which a person is a participant in a moral community, capable of having ends and purposes, pursuing meaning, and cultivating character. On my view, we come into humanity by living in some particular way that is realized through, but not reducible to, culturally and historically informed customs, practices, institutions, beliefs, values, arts, landscapes, artifacts, and so on. I argue that, as the source of one's humanity, tradition is intrinsically good. It is also a proper object of existential gratitude, or a kind of transpersonal gratitude for one's very existence that has been described as the "ground zero of religious experience."[13] This accounts for the spiritual attachment that people have to tradition. Finally, I explain how it is that people who come to love their traditions appreciate an expanded sense of moral life and experience a deeper and richer commitment to moral values.

Insofar as it does not depend on a belief in supernatural entities, traditionalism is not, on its own, a religion. But it is a spiritual orientation

that enhances moral life. Since there is no person on earth who is not part of some tradition or other, the spiritualized morality of traditionalism is equally available to everyone, both religious and non-religious. If this is correct, a resolution to the spirituality problem already exists in plain sight. We just need to see it for what it is.

4.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 introduces the spirituality problem and argues, against various critics, that it is something that secular humanists must take seriously. Part 2 considers three humanist responses to the spirituality problem based in Aristotelian, Existentialist, and Confucian philosophies, respectively. Part 3 advances traditionalism, or the love of and devotion to tradition, as a solution to the spirituality problem and defends the view against serious criticisms. Readers who are only interested in my positive view can skip from Part 1 to Part 3 without missing anything essential.

Secular humanists argue for the possibility of "goodness without God" by appealing to values such as justice and human dignity. While many would agree that this is possible, *Chapter 1* seeks to raise questions about the experiential quality of a purely secular morality. Drawing on thinkers such as William James and Iris Murdoch, I argue that religious morality is enhanced and deepened by the theist's love for a transcendent good. This sort of love, a spiritual love, inspires moral transformation by turning attention away from the self and promoting full engagement with external reality. The spirituality problem is that, without a comparable object of love, secularist morality is qualitatively worse than it could be. While some humanists claim to love humanity, I argue that humanity, understood as the human race, is not an appropriate object of spiritual love. I conclude that, to resolve the spirituality problem, the secularist needs to identify a non-supernatural, but transcendent good that can take the place of God in moral life.

The majority of humanists, unmoved by what has called the "religious temperament," will recoil from the suggestion that spirituality belongs in moral life. *Chapter 2* considers and answers two main objections to the entire project. Some philosophers will deny that spirituality is necessary because reason is sufficient to motivate morality. I argue that this response fails to appreciate the immense psychological obstacles to moral life. While not impossible, it is highly difficult to overcome these obstacles without the ennobling influence of spiritual love. Others will say that the call for spirituality encourages an unhealthy obsession with morality. There are, in particular, two distinct sorts of obsession to be worried about – a life-denying do-gooderism and a dangerous fanaticism. I argue that the first

obsession is not the result of spirituality and that the second results from misdirected spiritual impulses. In so doing, I also explain how each is, in its own way, actually an expression of the spirituality problem.

Chapter 3 considers Aristotelian humanism as a potential secular resolution to the spirituality problem. This view grounds morality in human flourishing, which represents the fulfillment of natural human capacities. Martha Nussbaum has argued that, insofar as it surpasses ordinary humanity, flourishing embodies a sort of "human transcendence." Thus, a secular spirituality might be found through devotion to human flourishing. I argue that human flourishing cannot sustain spiritual love because it is a sort of perfection that is, unlike God, defined by limits. This good is embodied in healthy and virtuous individuals, and it can elicit admiration and delight. But it cannot elicit spiritual love because it lacks the "note of infinitude and mystery." I argue, in addition, that true human transcendence, as exemplified by sports heroes and saints, is unnatural and unaccounted for by Aristotelian logic. I conclude that the transcendent good of secular spirituality must go beyond the merely natural.

Existentialism, which is described by some as the "religion of existence," ostensibly fills the gap left by Aristotelianism by positing a radical human freedom as the source of human transcendence. *Chapter 4* considers how an existentialist morality that is based on human freedom might resolve the spirituality problem. According to Sartre, human beings establish morality for themselves by creating values and, in so doing, transcend their situations. Drawing on critics such as Iris Murdoch and Charles Taylor, I argue that this view fails to support a satisfactory resolution to the spirituality problem. Unconstrained by a sense of external necessity, the free agent's moral choices are shallow, indulgent, and trivial, and a life grounded on existentialist freedom is ultimately unsustainable for a human being. The discussion shows that any resolution to the spirituality problem must put a person in touch with an objective reality or necessity larger than herself that commands obedience.

Chapter 5 is devoted to Confucian humanism, which finds both freedom and necessity in the comprehensive, open-ended, normative reality known as *dao* or the Way. According to Herbert Fingarette, Confucius's insight is that the traditional customs (*li*) that regulate daily life are, in fact, "sacred rites" that represent "roadmaps" of the Way. Confucian morality centers on the mastery of these customs, which effect the "magical" transformation of the human animal into a moral being. Thus, those who master *li* are not only moral exemplars, but also harmoniously integrated into the ultimate reality of *dao*. While this view does account for a spiritualized morality, there are two main obstacles to adopting it. First, it is uncritically reliant on human conventions. Second, the metaphysical status of *dao* is uncertain and, from the perspective of a secularist, suspect.

Nevertheless, the Confucian perspective moves our query forward by illuminating the spiritual potential inherent in human culture.

Chapter 6 begins the work of advancing tradition as a solution to the spirituality problem. The primary goal of this chapter is to establish that tradition is or possesses a sort of intrinsic goodness. I begin by defining tradition as a way of life that is passed down from generation to generation. Drawing on a well-known view of habituation, I then explain that tradition imposes shape on the raw material of human nature through its customs, practices, institutions, and so forth. In the process, tradition elevates the human animal into a bearer of humanity, which is that in virtue of which a person is a participant in a moral community, capable of having ends and purposes, pursuing meaning, and cultivating character. Thus, I argue, tradition possesses a variety of intrinsic goodness known to artists as "truth to materials." Just as a "truthful" artifact honors, exalts, and beautifies its raw material, a "truthful" shaping of human nature honors, exalts, and beautifies the human being. I call the latter goodness *humaneness* and argue that every tradition is humane.

In *Chapter 7*, I argue that traditionalism, or the love of and devotion to tradition, can resolve the spirituality problem. I begin by considering the examples of three sorts of people – Native Americans, Confucians, and American patriots – who love their traditions. Such traditionalists revere the ways of their predecessors, and they view tradition as sacred. Insofar as they treat their traditions as objects of spiritual devotion, their experience supports the idea that tradition is a viable resolution to the spirituality problem. Drawing on the findings of the previous chapter, I then argue that tradition is indeed worthy of spiritual devotion because it is the proper object of existential gratitude. In addition, I explain how traditionalism infuses moral life with a sense of depth, height, and significance, and I argue that the love of tradition shields people from some of the moral dangers that face secularists.

The final two chapters consider objections to my proposed resolution to the spirituality problem. *Chapter 8* is dedicated to the morality of traditionalism, which is widely viewed with suspicion today. This concern is broken down into four objections: (1) traditionalism is inherently partial, (2) traditionalism perpetuates immoral practices, (3) traditionalism depends on bad faith, and (4) traditionalism is a form of idolatry. While I concede that bad forms of traditionalism can fall to any of these objections, I argue that good forms of traditionalism do not. In so doing, I enrich our understanding of traditionalism. More specifically, I argue that traditionalism requires recognition of and respect for people outside of one's tradition, critical scrutiny and continual revision, open-mindedness, a healthy amount of self-awareness, and a pluralistic acceptance of other ways of living.

Even if they are not opposed to traditionalism, many will be skeptical of my proposal because the process of secularization is also associated with the weakening of tradition. Globalization, magnified by technology, has led to the destruction of local traditions, and many people have lost their connection to traditional ways. *Chapter 9* considers two cosmopolitan objections to the practical viability of my view: (1) it is no longer possible to live authentically as a traditionalist, and (2) most people today are indifferent to tradition. I argue that the first objection is based on faulty assumptions about what it means to live within a tradition. Not only does our participation in globalized networks not undermine the existence of tradition, but it is not possible to live beyond tradition. It is true that living a traditional life may be more complicated today. But whether we like it or not, we are all part of some tradition, and cosmopolitans are no exception. Against the second objection, I argue that it is possible to recover an emotional connection to tradition through traditional education, or the study of culture through classic texts, history, myth, narratives, arts, and so forth. The chapter concludes with a defense of the humanities as a modern form of traditional education.

Notes

1 See Pew Research Center, January, 2024, "Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe," 87. According to this poll, 73% of U.S. adults – including 65% of "religiously affiliated" adults – think that morality is possible without believing in God.
2 See Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Viking, 2011) and *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Penguin, 2018).
3 William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," *International Journal of Ethics* 1, no. 3 (1891): 352; Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 2001), 72. This definition of spirituality is loosely based on one provided by David McPherson in *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 151.
4 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, tr. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Secker and Warburg, 1953–60), 183. Cited by Samantha Vice, "On the Tedium of the Good," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8, no. 4 (2005): 459.
5 Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): 423, 425; George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review* (January 1949).
6 Todd May, *A Decent Life: Morality for the Rest of Us* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).
7 Musil, *Man Without Qualities*, 183.
8 See, for example, John McWhorter, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (Penguin, 2021).
9 The phrase "climate of opinion" is taken from W. H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" (1939).
10 Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Waveland Press, 1972).
11 Confucius, *Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Hackett, 2003), 15.29.

12 See James Alexander, "A Systematic Theory of Tradition," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 10, no. 1 (2016): 1–28 and "Three Rival Views of Tradition: Arendt, Oakeshott and Macintyre," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6, no. 1 (2012): 20–43 for wide ranging discussions of different senses of tradition that have appeared in thinkers of the 20th century.
13 David Stendl-Rast, "Gratitude as Thankfulness and as Gratefulness," in *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (Oxford University Press, 2004), 287–8.

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Part 1

The Spirituality Problem

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1 Goodness Without God

1.

It has been over a century since Nietzsche pronounced the death of God. While religion retains a greater hold than many realize, the claim is no longer shocking to many people in the Western world. For those individuals, religion has been replaced by some, mostly inchoate form of *secular humanism*. Secular humanism – which I will subsequently refer to simply as "humanism" – is a general ethical orientation or attitude toward life that knits together scientific knowledge, a sense of values, and an interest in meaning and purpose. This perspective is principally defined by its rejection of religion, which is based on a scientifically grounded "skepticism about anything 'transcendent'" or "beyond the physical, organic, human world," and its affirmation of matters of this-worldly importance.[1] It places great value on the "dignity and value of human life," and enshrines the idea that "life, flourishing, driving back the frontiers of death and suffering are of supreme value."[2] This description is admittedly not very precise, as the position is not terribly well-defined. Unlike the dominant religions, humanism is not a specific creed or practice. It is not anchored in foundational texts or teachings, and it is not – or, not yet – strongly associated with institutions or organizations.[3] There are no authorities for humanism; adherents may not even know that they have adopted its outlook. Rather than a clearly defined position, humanism might be aptly described, like Freudianism, as "a whole climate of opinion under [which] we conduct our different lives."[4] Given its relative recency, we have arguably yet to appreciate the full consequences of this shift: "it is easy," it has been said, "to *say* there is no God. It is not so easy to believe it and to draw the consequences."[5]

One of the potentially most significant consequences of this development concerns its impact on moral life. The association between religion and morality is well-established and, in many quarters, still taken as unbreakable. It is thus not unreasonable to question whether the death of

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God means the end of morality.[6] This question is typically framed as a concern about objectivity or authority. What confidence can we have in the truth of our moral judgments and values if they are not anchored in a divine source? God is traditionally conceived as the absolute standard of goodness, the source and judge of moral law. Without Him, there can be no right or wrong, good or bad, permissible or impermissible beyond personal preference. Most contemporary philosophers would reject this line of thinking. Philosophers have defended the objectivity of morality on other grounds, or, at least, explained why the lack of objectivity is not threatening.[7] In this way, they have contributed to the project of making a humanist morality, or a secularist morality, plausible. While the objectivity of morality is a worthwhile topic of discussion, it is not my interest here.

Instead, my worry concerns something more experiential – namely, the spiritual dimension of moral life. Spirituality, which might be roughly described as a "life-orientation" shaped by a relationship to a transcendent good, looms large in religious morality. A person's moral development is viewed as part of fulfilling a relationship to God, and moral life is an aspect of religious life. For theists, moral experience is infused with a sense of elevation and connection to a transcendent good. Morality is set in the context of cosmic meaning and purpose, and goodness is thought to be a way to be in touch with the divine. Religious morality shows how spirituality can infuse moral life with fullness and depth. The worry, then, is that, without some kind of spirituality, humanist morality is flat and uninspired, impoverished, and hollow in comparison to its religious counterpart. Call this the *spirituality problem*.

The spirituality problem has received considerably less attention from mainstream philosophers than the objectivity problem. It has recently been discussed by openly theist philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Roger Scruton, and David McPherson.[8] Nevertheless, worries about spirituality in humanist morality have mostly been ignored. This is because most analytic philosophers lack what Thomas Nagel calls the "religious temperament."[9] Not only are they not religious, but they do not feel moved by a desire for cosmic integration or transcendence. Unsurprisingly, they will not see the spiritual dimension of moral life as something that needs to be accounted for. Indeed, since spirituality is traditionally associated with God, the very asking of the question would seem to make assumptions that secularists would at least avoid, if not reject outright. Not all contemporary philosophers are atheist, but the tenor of contemporary philosophy is. In this climate, a concern for spirituality will strike many as odd or out of place.

But I think philosophers would be remiss to neglect this issue without at least considering both why spirituality may be ethically significant and how humanists might accommodate it. To begin, there is solid

philosophical precedent for recognizing a spiritual dimension in moral life. Plato's vision of the Good, which is said to exist "beyond being," is as much a spiritual experience as an intellectual one; Aristotle's ethics culminates in an ideal of godlikeness. Kant identifies "the starry heavens above" and "the moral law within" as the two things that fill him with ever-increasing wonder and awe. Such claims have a spiritual tone insofar as they gesture toward something beyond life – certainly beyond anything as ordinary as recognizing one's duty or the virtuous course of action. While these thinkers are widely viewed as the foundational figures for virtue ethics and deontological thought, contemporary virtue ethicists and deontologists rarely, if ever, consider their more spiritual elements. It is tempting to think of these details as rhetorical flourishes that carry little philosophical weight. But it is equally possible that the removal of spirituality has deformed or altered the original thinking and the morality it advocated.

More generally, it is a mistake to neglect spiritual issues because humans seem to have an "ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond life."[10] The near-universal presence of religion among human societies suggests that we seek to devote ourselves to something sacred that can give our lives meaning. Though naturally interpreted through the lens of religion, the claim is not itself a religious one. Both theists and non-theists can have these desires and experiences, and whatever it is that is "beyond life" or sacred need not be divine. If the desire for beyondness indeed exists among humans, it is something worth taking seriously, for it is naturally suited to moral life, in which a person is called to respond to a reality that exists beyond herself. Thus, Iris Murdoch, herself an atheist, writes of the importance of "mysticism," which I take to be another way to indicate spirituality[11]:

> Morality has always been connected with religion and religion with mysticism. The disappearance of the middle term leaves morality in a situation which is certainly more difficult but essentially the same. The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially un-formulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected by experience.[12]

Murdoch thinks that the idea of a transcendent good or God belongs to morality. Accordingly, she suggests that "moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all [the] characteristics" of God.[13]

Obviously, for a humanist, the retention cannot be total. But it would be a mistake to relinquish the ground of spirituality entirely to religion. Humanists need to take the spirituality problem seriously because the loss

of transcendence impoverishes morality, and humanists have ways to fill the void – at least, this is what I will argue.

2.

Let me begin by flagging an obstacle that will arise more than once: recognizing the spirituality problem requires an attunement to spiritual matters. However, most secularists are unmoved by spiritual matters and, thus, unlikely to see any problem that could arise from a lack of spirituality. This does not mean that there is no problem, but it does mean that it will be difficult to convince the non-spiritual secularist to think otherwise. I will deploy different strategies to address this obstacle over this chapter and the next. Here, I begin by juxtaposing the richness of a morality infused with spirituality against the relative poverty of a morality without it. To this end, I will draw on the comparison between religious and secular morality offered by William James, the great student of human experience, in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." In introducing this discussion, it is important to note that, unlike James, my goal is not to advocate for the superiority of religious morality. My ultimate aim is to argue that secular morality can be – or, in some cases, might already be – as spiritually rich as its religious counterpart. But to motivate that argument, we first need to confront the problem facing secularists. James's discussion is a suitable starting point for that task.

James describes the contrast between religious and secular morality in terms of the "strenuous" and the "easy-going" moods. As he puts it,

> Our attitude towards concrete evils is entirely different in a world where we believe there are none but finite demanders, from what it is in one where we joyously face tragedy for an infinite demander's sake. Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life's evils is set free in those who have religious faith.[14]

An energetic mood toward moral challenges comes naturally to theists because they recognize the existence of an infinite demander. By comparison, those without faith, or secularists, are relatively lackadaisical. They are more likely to adopt an "easy-going" or "don't care" mood and to "play fast and loose" with moral ideals.[15] Unlike some doomsayers, James thinks that morality will survive in a secular world. But he warns it will suffer from a lack of sufficient motivation to pursue the good and combat the bad, and he thinks its commitment to goodness will be less robust and less joyous. I take it that this is one way to describe the spirituality problem.

Before unpacking James's thought, it is necessary to acknowledge that the sort of energy that he attributes to the theist carries clear moral dangers. All sorts of atrocities have been committed in the name of faith, and the moral fervor of religious conviction can be blinding. The Crusades come to mind as a classic historical example of religious fanaticism, though modern examples are not difficult to find. In light of these incidents, one might naturally recoil at the thought of theists joyously facing tragedy or steeling themselves to confront the world's evils. The "easy-going" mood – perhaps less pejoratively described as "moderate" – may seem better; it could certainly be less dangerous. However, this potential danger is not a reason to deny that religious morality has something to teach us. Not only is fanaticism not necessary to theism, but it is arguably a defective form of faith: consider, for instance, how violence committed in the name of religion is often condemned as not just wrong, but theologically mistaken. Fanaticism, which is importantly not limited to the religious, shows that religion can be abused and degraded.[16] But there is nothing special in that, as people can find a way to ruin just about everything. To appreciate what James is saying here, all we need is the possibility that religion and, more specifically, religious spirituality can enhance moral life, even if motivation can tip over into fanaticism. The point is not that theists are especially good, but that the secularist attitude toward morality is potentially lacking.

Now one might think that James's infinite demander represents an omniscient, omnipotent judge, one that is capable of punishing the bad and rewarding the good. In that case, it might seem that the problem of secular morality consists in the lack of divine surveillance: people who do not believe they are being monitored may be less likely to care about good behavior. As it turns out, this is a commonly cited reason for why atheists, who consistently rank as the least trusted group of people in society, are distrusted.[17] However, I venture to say that, were this the only problem for godless morality, secularists would have little to worry about. Irrespective of whether a divine surveillant actually exists, good behavior motivated by fear of detection or hope for reward reflects nothing more than a childish form of self-interest. This attitude probably has certain social benefits. But it does not comport with what one typically thinks of as spirituality, and more importantly, it is not morally admirable.

But there is another way to read James that does implicate what I take to be spirituality. David McPherson has defined spirituality as a sort of "practical life-orientation that is shaped by what is taken to be a self-transcending source of meaning, which involves strong normative demands, including demands of the sacred or the reverence-worthy."[18] The infinite demander, or God, is the prototypical "self-transcending source of meaning" and, as such, an eminently suitable object of spiritual devotion.

He is a supremely perfect being that exists on another plane of value, objectively higher, nobler, and better than all other things. His goodness, infinite, inexhaustible, and mysterious, is the ultimate cause and standard of everything good in the world. Thus, a person who is practically oriented towards God sees her actions and decisions in the light of a sacred source of normative demands. Moral life is set in the context of cosmic good and infused with a sense of depth that rings with the "note of infinitude and mystery."[19] Motivated by reverence rather than fear, the theist aspires to a goodness against which all worldly goods pale in comparison. Augustine describes the experience:

> So great is the beauty of justice, so great the joy of the eternal light, that is, of the unchangeable truth and wisdom, that even if we could abide in it only one day, for the sake of that short time we would rightly and justly despise countless years of this life, full of pleasures and an abundance of transitory goods. How truly and passionately was it said that "One day in your courts is better than a thousand!"[20]

The problem, James suggests, is that this sort of heightening experience is not possible for the secularist.

In other words, the principal worry is not that secularists are necessarily immoral. Of course, an "easy-going" or "don't care" attitude may lead to immorality. However, that is not James's concern as he thinks a secular world would still contain an "ethical symphony."[21] The demands of finite demanders might be more mundane and less impressive than those of an infinite demander, but they can still be pressing, and they are certainly plentiful. A secularist could do just as much good in the world by responding to the needs of finite demanders as a theist who is called to action by allegiance to the infinite demander.

Instead, the principal worry seems to concern the experiential quality of secular moral life. James describes the difference between religious and secular morality as the "contrast between the ethics of infinite and mysterious obligations from on high, and those of prudence and the satisfaction of merely finite need."[22] This comparison, which hinges on the difference between the infinite and mysterious versus the finite and mundane, concerns the breadth, depth, and richness of moral life. Without spiritual experience, the secularist can still actively participate in moral life. He can recognize and abide by what virtue or duty demands, vow to do better when he falls short, and make progress toward being good. Nevertheless, James suggests, his sense of morality is foreshortened and flattened compared to that of his religious counterpart: the "ethical symphony" in the merely human world is "played in the compass of a couple of poor octaves, and the infinite scale of values fails to open up."[23] Secular morality

is removed from the context of cosmic meaning and closed to the infinite gradations of goodness that exist between the mundane and the divine. Lacking the "infinitely penetrating, shattering, tragically challenging note of appeal," moral ideals will seem smaller and less compelling. It will be harder to be motivated to moral action. And limited to "prudence and the satisfaction of merely finite need," moral demands will be easier to fulfill only because they are less demanding and more constrained. The worry is that once there is no longer anything sacred or mysterious about goodness, moral life will grow coarser, narrower, shallower, and less appealing.

Of course, there is one way in which a certain constriction of moral vision will naturally occur for the secularist. Moral considerations that pertain to one's relationship to God, such as piety and respect for divine authority, will fall outside of the "octaves" of the secular symphony. This will be seen as a real loss in the eyes of theists, though most secularists would not rue the disappearance of these virtues.[24] However, it should be concerning to secularists if the foreshortening and flattening of moral experience impacted the "octaves" of moral life common to themselves and theists. For instance, we should be concerned if people became less attentive to detail and less sensitive to nuance in moral life, and we should be concerned if people became less keen on moral excellence and more complacent with moral mediocrity. We should be concerned if, despite avoiding great evils, people became less willing to go above and beyond the bare minimum requirements of duty and virtue. Finally, I think we should be concerned if generally decent people became less hopeful about the possibility of moral progress.

How might we assess this worry? Ostensibly, James is making an empirical claim that could, theoretically, be confirmed by observation. To this point, social scientific research, however limited, does seem to lend some support to the existence of the spirituality problem. Although theists and atheists do not, on balance, behave very differently, they do appear to differ in how they conceive of their relationship to morality. Theists tend to see their lives in more moral terms than atheists and to feel more moral emotions such as guilt, embarrassment, disgust, pride, and gratitude.[25] Perhaps more suggestively, studies indicate that secularists have a "more constrained view of morality" than believers in at least two ways.[26] First, while both groups are equally attuned to "individual" moral values that relate to the protection of vulnerable people, secularists are considerably less likely to endorse "binding" moral values that relate to group cohesion and community. Examples of individual values include caring for and protecting others, promoting liberty and fairness, and rejecting oppression. Binding values include a concern for honor, pride, loyalty, authority, and the sacred. While the binding values may be less pressing, they contribute to the rich texture of moral life, and a

society that neglected them would certainly fare worse with respect to relationships and communities. Second, multiple studies have found that secularists are considerably more consequentialist in their thinking about morality than theists.[27] Although some moral decisions are best treated with consequentialist reasoning, there is a significant swath of moral life that is more complicated and resistant to quantitative comparison. It is also possible to argue that consequentialism fails to account for the way that certain principles and values exist beyond calculation.[28] Insofar as they are more reliant on a consequentialist approach to morality, secularists risk losing sight of some nuance and some appreciation for the limits of human action.

The social scientific findings are worth noting because they seem to lend some *prima facie* credibility to James's worry, but their value for our purposes is limited. For one thing, the differences observed between secular and religious morality may not have to do with spirituality, but with other factors that cause a person to become secular or religious.[29] More importantly, it is not clear to me that any properly empirical research could be definitive on this issue. The issues of depth and breadth concern fine-grained nuances of moral perception and subjective experience that are not easily observed, and that no one should expect to show up in a social scientific study. Finally, these studies are designed to capture the difference between religious and non-religious people, whereas our ultimate concern is with the difference between the spiritual and the non-spiritual. Of course, this last point applies to James as well. Nevertheless, the aim of this section will have been met if my discussion of both the scientific findings and James suggests that secularists face a potential problem in moral life.

3.

To get a better hold of the problem, we need a more precise understanding of how spirituality contributes to moral life. In "On 'God' and 'Good'," Iris Murdoch illuminates the morally transformative effects of spirituality in terms of love. She focuses specifically on the love of God, which she defines as "a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention."[30] Seeking to reach non-theists, she also equates the concept of God to the "idea of perfection," "absolute good," and, ultimately, "the Good." These supposed equivalencies trade on features that are traditionally attributed to God. While they are worth noting, they also add a level of complication that is unnecessary to contend with here. The goal of this section is not to extend the concept of God, but only to clarify the problem that faces secular morality. Accordingly, I will keep things simple by sticking to the case of theism. My goal will be to explain

how the theist's love of God, which I take to be central to her spirituality, shapes moral life.

To appreciate this point, we first need to acknowledge the moral frailty of human beings. Moral life requires us to take seriously the good of those beyond ourselves, and the truth is that this is extremely difficult for us to do. Religions tend to be keenly attuned to this deficiency: the human condition has been described by theists as "fallen" or "out of joint," marred by "darkened intellect, disturbed passions, and disordered will."[31] But one need not be a theist to acknowledge the perennial problem of human badness. We are constitutionally more aware of our own needs and desires than anyone else's; our personal interests present with an insistence and intensity that can easily blot out the demands of everything else. It is very difficult to appreciate the full reality of others, whose needs and desires may conflict with our own. It can be equally difficult to follow through on our commitments, particularly when they require personal sacrifice. Thus, human goodness is "almost impossibly difficult."[32] The result is the familiar state of moral life, where, despite small areas of achievement, failure is expected, conflict ubiquitous, and unhappiness common.

However, says Murdoch, the religious believer is "in the fortunate position of being able to focus his thought upon something which is a source of energy."[33] This special object of attention is, of course, God. The believer's attention – which Murdoch identifies as a form of love – does not originate in bodily needs or selfish desires, but rather stems from a natural capacity to be moved by an objective reality that exists independently of our own interests.[34] This capacity is as much cognitive as it is affective, and it is awakened in our response to ordinary goodness, such as virtuous people or great art. However, it is most powerfully inspired by God, whose goodness is transcendent, "incorruptible and indestructible," and is deserving of reverence and awe.[35] Thus, the love of God counteracts the selfish tendencies that are perennial obstacles to moral life. This love, the highest love, is free of the instincts to possess and control that so often accompany our attachments, such as love of friends and love of romantic partners. It diminishes the self-importance of the "fat relentless ego" and orients the theist toward something entirely beyond.[36]

The love of God does not just deflect attention away from the self. Perhaps more importantly, it propels the theist into deeper engagement with reality. Murdoch describes this love as fundamentally "impersonal."[37] Because it is not mired in selfish impulses, it drives the theist to see things as they really are. It opens her eyes to the infinite scale of value, both moral and non-moral, that separates the bad from the good, the good from the excellent, and the excellent from the perfect.[38] Having had her eyes opened to this reality, the theist cannot be easily satisfied with the mediocre. She will be more likely to resist simple principles, ideologies, and fantasies that

can cloud one's appreciation of reality. She will become more attentive to complexity, detail, and nuance and better able to see other people and situations. Moreover, just as perfection is not limited to moral perfection, the greatness of God is not merely moral. In loving God, the theist opens herself to an infinite reality that both incorporates morality and exceeds it. As a result, she comes to appreciate the unity between varieties of goodness in the world – beauty in art and nature, virtue in people and institutions, truth in the sciences and literature, and so on. Thus, not only is the theist released from the incessant pressures of the self, but her capacity for moral life is enlarged and deepened through her love of God.

None of this is to say that the love of God is sufficient to induce moral transformation. Love is morally complex, and perhaps no love is immune to defilement. After all, religious fanatics often claim to be acting out of love for God (though one often wonders whether it is really God that they love most strongly). Moreover, this love is not necessarily very strong or deep. Due to human frailty, this love might be easily overpowered by a love of lower things, which appear more appealing due to human ignorance and gain strength due to human weakness.[39]

However, the theist who loves God is potentially in a better position than the person who does not because her love is amenable to cultivation. Here, it is important to remember that spirituality is a practical orientation. Not only is a person called upon to act in certain ways, but her actions can deepen her experience. Theists have a rich repertoire of spiritual practices by which they are able to grow and strengthen their love of God – prayer, worship, meditation, study, fasting, and so on.[40] These practices work to deepen their appreciation for His greatness by focusing attention, both mentally and physically, on divine perfection. Since God is the source of everything good, spirituality can also be strengthened through cultivating appreciation for the blessings of everyday life. Although these sorts of spiritual practices and activities are not necessarily moral in character, they prepare the ground for moral transformation.

Thus, insofar as it centers on love of a transcendent good, spirituality facilitates the sort of personal transformation that is essential for moral life: "spiritual life in the fullest sense connects up then with the ethical life, and spiritual transformation always involves ethical transformation."[41] This does not mean that personal transformation is impossible without spirituality. However, it is exceedingly difficult due to the powerful forces of selfish solipsism. In the face of this challenge, the theist shows how the love of God can function like grace, "a supernatural assistance to human endeavour which overcomes empirical limitations of personality."[42] Therefore, the spirituality problem is that morality is more impoverished – coarser, narrower, shallower, and less appealing – to the degree to which is unsupported by spiritual love. Insofar as

secularists fail to recognize the existence of something worth loving in this way, they are at risk of moral impoverishment.

4.

Broadly speaking, there are two main ways that secularists might respond to the spirituality problem. Some will say that spirituality is not necessary for moral life, whereas others will say that a sort of spirituality is already part of secular morality. I will reserve discussion of the first response, which strikes me as more likely among philosophers, for the next chapter. To finish this chapter, I want to consider the second, which I think might be more common among practicing humanists. These individuals are not necessarily professional philosophers, but people who commit themselves to the positive ethical project of secular humanism. Members of organizations such as the American Humanist Association and Humanists International, they do not just endorse and defend secular premises as many philosophers do, but actively seek to live out a humanist agenda of "good without God." I would say that atheists or agnostics who subscribe to Unitarian Universalism, a religion that is based on a spiritual commitment to shared moral values rather than theological truths, also fit into this category. While these individuals are not necessarily concerned with the philosophical underpinnings of their worldview, their experiences are an important touchstone for our discussion.

To this point, it is relevant that these people often use the language of love and passion to describe their commitment to humanism. Here, for instance, is Bette Chambers, the former president of the American Humanists Association:

> Humanism is the light of my life and the fire in my soul. It is the deep felt conviction, in every fiber of my being, that human love is a power far transcending the relentless, onward rush of our largely deterministic cosmos. All human life must seek a reason for existence within the bounds of an uncaring physical world, and it is love coupled with empathy, democracy, and a commitment to selfless service which undergirds the faith of a humanist.[43]

In a similar vein, it has been claimed that "secular life, at its keenest, undertakes a passionate engagement with what it is to be human," and that "[h]umanists can take pride in our passionate belief in a morality based on unfettered inquiry, on compassionate questioning" about "how to promote human dignity more effectively."[44] While it is impossible to fully compare personal experiences, such statements suggest that a humanist's love for human life might take the place of the theist's love for

God: "[w]e are in some way *moved* by human powers…just as the theist is moved by the love of God."[45] And the language of transcendence suggests that, at least for some, this love is spiritual in nature. That is to say, their passion is experienced as a response to something deserving reverence and awe. As one minister puts it, the core of Unitarian faith is "[r]everence and respect for human nature" and the belief that life itself is "holy."[46]

It can be difficult to say what, exactly, the object of humanist passion is. As a reasonable suggestion, I propose that it is directed toward humanity, understood empirically as the human species or, what I take to be in this instance equivalent, all human beings.[47] It is safe to say that humanity, so conceived, is not a supernatural good, a transcendent perfection, or anything divine. Nevertheless, J. S. Mill, who argues for the "religion of humanity," proposes that it is deserving of something like spiritual devotion:

> [I]f individual life is short, the life of the human species is not short – its indefinite duration is practically equivalent to endlessness; and being combined with indefinite capability of improvement, it offers to the imagination and sympathies a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration.[48]

Through inter-generational existence and continued improvement, the human species can approximate the eternity and perfection of God. In Mill's eyes, this makes humanity worthy of spiritual love. If this is true, secularists have an answer to theistic spirituality that does not violate their metaphysical assumptions.

Indeed, it is not difficult to see how a spirituality based on love for humanity might enhance moral life. As an object of love, humanity can counteract selfish desire and inspire us to moral excellence. Passionate engagement with the question of what it means to be human produces a deeper understanding of others, promotes empathy, and reinforces connectivity. It focuses attention on the preciousness of human life and common bonds between us. Community service and advocacy for the vulnerable, needy, and oppressed might be considered sorts of spiritual practices. Indeed, one might even say that, morally speaking, humanist spirituality is an improvement over its religious counterpart because it is better able to acknowledge the widespread and horrific injustice, abuse, and suffering that exists in this world. Oriented toward a divine reality, religious spirituality distances a person from the practical concerns that are the substance of moral life, absorbing energy and resources that could be better used attending to the reality of the here and now.[49] By contrast, humanist spirituality entrenches a person more deeply in the world by cultivating an attunement to the ordinary reality of individual human beings.

For these reasons, one might reasonably deny that secularists face a spirituality problem. Thus, Mill claims that a religion of humanity, which rejects all supernatural premises, can deliver the same moral benefits of the best religions:

> The essence of religion is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as of the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire. This condition is fulfilled by the Religion of Humanity in as eminent a degree, and in as high a sense, as by the supernatural religions even in their best manifestations, and far more so than in any of their others.[50]

Secular morality at its best is infused by the love of the human species and spiritual attachment to promoting human dignity. Many secularists fall short of this ideal, just as many theists fall short in their faith. Nevertheless, we might conclude that secular morality can be just as rich and deep as religious morality. Insofar as my ultimate aim is to show that the spirituality problem can be resolved in a secularist way, I welcome this final conclusion.

But I do not think that the humanists' professions of "faith" alone dissipate our concerns. For one thing, I worry about taking their claims at face value because the language of passion can be facile and one's sense of spirituality vague. It can be difficult to say, for instance, whether a profession of love for the human species really is an expression of spiritual devotion or just an enthusiastic declaration of moral commitment. To be clear, the worry is not that the humanists' statements are insincere or feigned, but rather that their meaning and status are indeterminate. The spiritual life of the theist might be fundamentally mysterious, but it is grounded on robust theological foundations and supported by deep-rooted spiritual practices. The foundations of humanist spirituality, on the other hand, are poorly understood. After all, many people claim to be "spiritual but not religious" without being able to explain what that really means.[51] Without a better understanding of its basis, it is not possible to ascertain whether the spirituality problem is actually resolved by their love of humanity or just appears that way.

More pointedly, there are questions about how spiritually fulfilling the love of humanity really is. Alongside the heady declarations of humanist passion, we should keep in mind reports, such as the following, about what can happen when one makes "the good of others, and especially of mankind on a larger scale, the object of existence":

> It occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in

> institutions and options which you are looking forward to could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.[52]

These are the words of none other than Mill. It is unclear how this recollection of an early mental breakdown squares with his advocacy of the religion of humanity, but we know that he recovered only once he had abandoned human welfare as "the object of existence" and expanded his interests to poetry, music, and art. It is hard to imagine the same thing happening to a committed theist.

Regardless of how particular humanists might recount their experiences, the more important point is that Mill's breakdown is completely intelligible. Humanity has certain charms, and particular individuals deserve admiration. Nevertheless, among all the species that exist, it is also true that none are as harmful and destructive as humans. Even good people can be selfish, inconsiderate, careless, thoughtless, and cruel; groups can be even worse.[53] And it is not at all certain that future humanity will be any better.[54] If love depends on lovable qualities, the human species is hardly an impeccable object. But beyond the negative qualities of humanity, there is also not enough positive to elicit spiritual love. In defending the religion of humanity, the best that Mill can do is to say that the human species "offers to the imagination and sympathies a large enough object to satisfy any reasonable demand for grandeur of aspiration."[55] Unfortunately, this assessment only serves to highlight the deficiencies of his religion. For spiritual love is not a response to reasonably impressive qualities, but to something marvelous, awesome, and astonishing. The empirical reality of human beings is that they are "all too finite" – too small, too imperfect, too familiar, and too prosaic to support spiritual love.

I want to conclude this section with a note about the appeal of this humanist view. Even if it is not humanly possible to love the human species or all human beings, many would say that we should make it our aim. The love of all humans is reminiscent of *agape*, which Christians define as the love of God for humans and of humans for God and one's neighbor.[56] Christians think of *agape* as a moral ideal that enjoins a universal love of all fellow humans, and they recognize it as an extraordinarily difficult achievement. But it is also true that Christian spirituality can play a part in the striving, for God is not only the ultimate object of spiritual devotion, but also the perfect model of *agape*. In loving God, a person is inspired

to become more godlike, and in becoming more godlike, she comes closer to realizing universal love. Thus, the love of all humans is the fruit of Christian spirituality, as well as its impetus. This strikes me as importantly different from the way that humanists envision their love. In their most passionate declarations, they suggest that it is possible to bypass love of God to a direct love of all humans, a prospect that may be even more difficult than it sounds. Moral life challenges us to overcome self-love to love others, sometimes perfect strangers, and to care for them despite evident flaws and shortcomings. To do so is to love human beings, who are "all too finite," more than they deserve.[57] What Christianity shows is that, while the end of moral life might be universal love of all humans, the means might require a devotion to something better than humans.[58] It is hard to see how to have that without the invocation of some kind of transcendent good.

5.

I have now argued that secular morality faces a spirituality problem and that resolving this problem requires identifying an object of love that can take the place of God in moral life. The shortcomings of the "religion of humanity" suggest that humanity, understood as the human species, is too imperfect and mundane to fill this role. What does this mean for the prospects of resolving the spirituality problem?

James thinks that the need for spirituality is so strong that humans should posit a God, even if there were no metaphysical grounds to do so.[59] I venture to say that most secularists lack his strongly pragmatist leanings and will find this recommendation unconvincing. The spirituality problem may be worrisome, but it does not provide grounds to posit an entity that they believe does not exist. If there is no source of spirituality to be found in secular moral life, that is the reality that must be faced. It would mean that secular morality is more impoverished than religious morality, and though not without moral bearings, a secular society might be worse. But, especially for the secularist, there is no guarantee that the truth will be convenient, pleasing, or beneficial. Some problems simply have no solution. Adopting a religious framework just for the sake of resolving the spirituality problem will not do.

Murdoch offers an approach that ostensibly does not require pragmatic theism. Here, we can return to her elision of the concept of God with the idea of perfection and absolute good. Her defense of "a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention" is couched in terms of what "God was," and she claims that her view is premised on the assumption that, in fact, "there is no God."[60] Thus, she endorses a variety of neo-Platonism based on the reality of a transcendent

Good that has the same properties of God. The metaphysical status of this entity, which is said to be fundamentally mysterious, is left in doubt.[61] But Murdoch seems to conceive it to be supersensible or supernatural, as some invisible perfection that exists, like Plato's Form of the Good, beyond being. She offers metaphors – like the sun – and analogies – like beauty and art – to help make sense of this Good. But whatever it is, it is not squarely of this world. For this reason, some have suggested that the difference between Murdoch's view and theism is mostly semantic.[62] At the very least, her view may rightly be cast into the category of what has been called "refined religion."[63] I suspect that Murdoch, who claimed to not believe in God, would not be particularly concerned about the differences. She is ultimately less interested in bolstering secularism, if at all, than she is about the folly of a particular conception of moral psychology. While these worries overlap (the offensive conception of moral psychology is encouraged by secularism), the concerns differ. The upshot is that she does not seem to be very bothered about the tension between secularism and spirituality. However, by appealing to a supernatural entity, her view essentially gives up on a central premise of secular humanism. For this reason, although Murdoch has been instrumental in the formation of my understanding of the problem, I will not further pursue her view as an option for humanist thinkers.

Thus, James and Murdoch, both attuned to the spirituality problem, end up advocating for a re-enchantment of moral life through cultivating a relationship to a supernatural good. I do not deny these views out of hand. In particular, Murdoch's approach, which gains a foothold in our appreciation of truth and beauty, could be appealing to a certain sort of thinker. However, most secularists will find these positions untenable. This is not because the average secularist has strongly held, carefully considered metaphysical commitments. Instead, I simply think that, for most secularists, the weight of commonsense goes against the embrace of supernatural entities. Whether it is God or the Good, those who fail to recognize anything "beyond the physical, organic, human world" are not going to be moved by the possibilities suggested by James and Murdoch. Those are the individuals I hope to reach.

To resolve the spirituality problem, I suggest that we need to identify some sort of transcendent good that can take the place of God in moral life. Of course, given that secularists have "skepticism about anything 'transcendent'" or "beyond the physical, organic, human world," this task might seem impossible.[64] But while the idea of a transcendent good is most obviously associated with supernatural entities, the concept of the transcendent is not synonymous with the concept of the supernatural, and there is nothing that says that a transcendent good must exist outside of the laws of nature. In its most modest sense, the transcendent is

simply something that exceeds or goes beyond ordinary humanity or human experience.[65] Exceptional athletes and musical performances, great works of art, acts of heroism, and wonders of nature can be properly described as transcendent in this sense. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that these marvels contain a "note of infinitude and mystery."[66] They defy explanation and complete comprehension, and they are endlessly fascinating – not because they are supernatural, but because they go beyond normal expectations and imaginings. Thus, as long as we stay within the bounds of the natural world, the very idea of a transcendent good that can take the place of God in moral life need not offend secularist sensibilities.

Admittedly, compared to God, a good that only exceeds ordinary humanity may seem quite deflationary. One might wonder whether anything so mundane could be worthy of spiritual love, and some may reject the idea of a purely secular spirituality out of hand. Theists, I am sure, will be particularly unimpressed with any purported God-substitute. And with regard to such worries, it is perhaps worth making the obvious point that a secularist spirituality will necessarily differ from a religious one. Whatever secularists find to take the place of God in moral life will not be substantively equivalent. Nothing that a secularist can countenance will seem as impressive as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." Still, a good that "merely" exceeds ordinary human experiences might be far more marvelous and moving than one might think.

To resolve the spirituality problem, the secularist need only to identify something that can elicit a love that is powerful enough to inspire sustained moral transformation. This is the sort of love that can counteract the forces of selfish solipsism and enhance one's engagement with moral reality by opening one's eyes to nuance, expanding one's vision, and deepening one's commitment to goodness. The object of this love must be better than ordinary humanity, but it cannot be supernatural. It must elicit reverence and awe without defying the laws of nature. Insofar as it is an inspiration to morality, whatever this is must be genuinely good. But there is no reason to think, à la James or Murdoch, that the only worthy candidates for this position are God or the Good. Indeed, secularists have more options than one might think. These options will be explored in Parts 2 and 3.

But before turning to those discussions, I need to return to an important objection that was briefly raised earlier. Unlike the humanists I considered in this chapter, a substantial number of secularists, particularly philosophers, are likely to deny that spirituality is necessary for a rich and fulfilling moral life. Some might even say that it is dangerous. These responses are tantamount to rejecting the spirituality problem altogether.

The next chapter considers and responds to these objections. While this discussion is most directly aimed at convincing skeptics, my hope is that non-skeptics will find that it develops the spirituality problem in surprising and illuminating ways. As we shall see, the spirituality problem is far more entrenched and subtle than it may seem.

Notes

1 Philip Kitcher, *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism* (Yale University Press, 2014), 6.
2 Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy" in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness,* ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 13, 23. See also Stephen Law, *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 89 and Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament: Essays 2002-2008* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 10–11.
3 As I note in Section 4, humanist organizations exist, but they are relatively young and have considerably less authority than traditional religions.
4 W. H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" (1939).
5 Iris Murdoch, "Existentialists and Mystics," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (Penguin, 1999), 226.
6 This is the concern famously voiced by Ivan in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov.*
7 See, for example, Kitcher, *Life After Faith*, Chapter 2 and Greg Epstein, *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2010). Other thinkers who defend the objectivity of morality without God include William Sinnott-Armstrong, Peter Railton, and Erik Weilenberg.
8 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press, 2018); Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World* (Princeton University Press, 2016); David McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). Other recent books that discuss spirituality in light of the weakening of religion include Daniel J. Mahoney's *The Idol of Our Age*, Joseph Bottum's *An Anxious Age,* and Chantal Delsol's *Icarus Fallen.*
9 Nagel, *Secular Philosophy*, Chapter 1.
10 Taylor, "Iris Murdoch," 25. See also Scruton, *Soul of the World*, 1–2 and McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning*, 59–66.
11 See Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts" in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 2001), 77 for her atheism.
12 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'" in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 2001), 72.
13 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 54, 57.
14 William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," *International Journal of Ethics* 1, no. 3 (1891): 353.
15 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 351. James additionally thinks this attitude is because the secularist sees his moral ideals as "mere preferences." Since most secularists would disagree with this attribution, I will not consider this as an explanation for the problem he identifies here.
16 I consider a secular variety of fanaticism in Chapter 2, Section 4.

17 Will Gervais, Azim Shariff, and Ara Norenzayan, "Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust is central to anti-atheist prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, no. 6 (2011): 1189–1206.
18 David McPherson, "*Homo Religiosus*," in *Spirituality and the Good Life*, ed. McPherson (Cambridge, 2017), 64–65.
19 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 352.
20 Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Hackett, 1993), 3.24; citing Psalm 84:10.
21 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 352.
22 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 352.
23 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 352.
24 For instance, Rosalind Hursthouse dismisses the virtue of piety as not rational. *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 232–3.
25 Wilhelm Hofmann, Daniel Wisneski, Mark Brandt, and Linda Skitka, "Morality in Everyday Life," *Science* 345, no. 6202 (2014): 1340–43.
26 Tomas Ståhl, "The Amoral Atheist? A Cross-National Examination of Cultural, Motivational, and Cognitive Antecedents of Disbelief, and their Implications for Morality," *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 2 (2021).
27 Jared Piazza, "'If You Love Me Keep My Commandments': Religiosity Increases Preference for Rule-Based Moral Arguments," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 22, no. 4 (2012): 285–302; Jared Piazza and Paulo Sousa, "Religiosity, Political Orientation, and Consequentialist Moral Thinking," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 5, no. 3 (2014): 334–342.
28 See, for instance, Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19 for the general point about consequentialism, and McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning*, Chapter 3 for how consequentialism fails to account for sacred values.
29 This is the assumption of Ståhl in "The Amoral Atheist?" who identifies certain features having to do with role models and circumstances that make a person more likely to become religious.
30 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 54.
31 McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning*, 155; Candace Vogler, "Turning to Aquinas on Virtue" in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, ed. Nancy Snow (Oxford, 2018), 225.
32 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 49.
33 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 54.
34 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 53.
35 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 58–59.
36 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 51.
37 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 73.
38 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 60.
39 Augustine, *On Free Choice*, 3.18.
40 McPherson, "*Homo Religiosus*," 64; Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 53–54.
41 McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning*, 151.
42 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 54.
43 "Definition of Humanism," *American Humanist Association*, accessed June 15, 2025, https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/definition-of-humanism/
44 Kitcher, *Life After Faith*, 157; Epstein, *Good Without God*, 37.
45 Taylor, "Iris Murdoch," 13–14. While not himself an example of the humanists that I am summarizing here, Taylor understands their perspective well.

46 "First Principle: The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person," Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed June 15, 2025, https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/1st
47 In Chapter 6, I will be introducing a concept of humanity that differs from the one being invoked here.
48 John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (Greenwood Press, 1969), 106.
49 Kitcher, *Life After Faith*, 69–70.
50 Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 109.
51 Some of the most common explanations for secular spirituality include "being connected to something larger than myself," "being open-minded," and "being connected to my true self," but it is not obvious how such experiences can support the sort of moral transformation that we seek. See Pew Research Center, January 2024, "Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe," 65.
52 J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, Chapter 5.
53 Reinhold Niebhur, as quoted in Martin Luther King, Jr's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."
54 James thinks future humans fare no better eliciting in love: "We do not love these men of the future keenly enough; and we love them perhaps the less the more we hear of their evolutionized perfection, their high average longevity and education, their freedom from war and crime, their relative immunity from pain and zymotic disease, and all their other negative superiorities." "The Moral Philosopher," 352.
55 Mill, *Three Essays*, 106.
56 It is no accident that humanist thinkers end up here, since most forms of modern humanism are products of the West, and Western conceptions of morality are very much influenced by Christianity.
57 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 352.
58 See Robert Adams, "Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 81, no. 7 (1984): 399–401. Relatedly, Taylor suggests that the denial of the transcendent undermines our commitment to preserving and supporting flourishing in "Iris Murdoch" (24).
59 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 352–3.
60 Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," 54, 74.
61 Murdoch, "'God' and 'Good'," 68 ff.
62 Fiona Ellis, "Murdoch and Levinas on God and Good," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 1, no. 2 (2009): 63–87.
63 Kitcher, *Life After Faith*, Chapter 3.
64 Kitcher, *Life After Faith*, 6.
65 See McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning*, 154; Martha Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64, no. 2 (2002): 445–52.
66 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 352.

2 Against Spirituality

1.

In arguing for the integration of spirituality into moral life, I realize that I swim against strong currents. Western society is becoming increasingly secular – and not just in practice, but in temperament. People are less moved by the desire for spiritual wholeness, more comfortable with a baldly naturalistic universe, more skeptical of mystery, less prepared to experience wonder and awe. This matters because temperament is, in the words of James, the "potentest of all our premises," and what makes it especially tricky is that it is never mentioned as such.[1] Without ever having to be declared, temperament shows up in bedrock intuitions and intellectual styles, the sorts of questions asked and possibilities considered and, perhaps more importantly, the sorts of questions and possibilities never even imagined. It is thus immensely difficult to persuade across temperamental lines, particularly in ethics, where personal experience is itself a test, though not the only test, of truth. So, I recognize that, on a personal level, many will resist the very idea that secular morality has a spirituality problem or that spirituality is needed for moral life. Unfortunately, those are the very people whom I am trying to reach.

The good news is that, as long as arguments can be mustered against my view, there is a chance to persuade. In particular, I anticipate two sorts of arguments. First, some will deny that spirituality is necessary for morality. After all, non-spiritual types – atheistic, materialist, scientistic individuals who seem to have no hankering for transcendence – can be just as good as spiritual people, if not better. Second, some will object that the spiritualization of moral life is positively bad. More specifically, it promotes moral extremism, which is itself harmful and should not be encouraged. Both of these responses imply that we should not seek to infuse spirituality into moral life and, thus, strike at the very foundations of my project. Responding to these objections is the goal of this chapter.

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I will argue that the first objection fails to fully appreciate the immense psychological obstacles to human morality and that the second depends on unduly narrow or misguided conceptions of morality and the place it has in a human life. I hope, of course, that these replies will bring some skeptics over to my side. However critical it may be, temperament is not dispositive, and the business of persuasion has a potency of its own. But at the very least, my replies should deepen our understanding of the nature of the spirituality problem, the obstacles to addressing it, and the prospects for a potential resolution.

2.

The first objection concerns the need for spirituality in moral life. One might say that, in arguing that a spirituality problem exists, I have simultaneously overestimated the difficulty of morality and underestimated our moral capacity. On my view, spirituality is needed to counteract an innate and deeply seated drive to selfish solipsism that threatens moral life. However, some might find this view overly pessimistic. Although selfish solipsism is an obstacle to moral progress, it is not so insuperable as to require the extraordinary tonic of spirituality. In his defense of secular humanism, Philip Kitcher attributes an overly pessimistic view of human "depravity" to literature and religious myths of original sin.[2] But, the objection goes, there is no empirical evidence for this view, and until evidence can be provided to support it, we should refrain from unwarranted pessimism about our capacities for moral progress. After all, a great deal of moral progress has been made over the history of humankind: one can point to greater rights for women and gay people, a reduction in homicides, and a decline in wars as reasons for optimism.[3] On this view, what is needed for moral life is not spirituality, but a serious commitment to reflect on one's moral condition and to take steps toward improvement.

"Pessimistic" is a rather impressionistic term, but if it means that I see human nature as a perennial threat to moral life, I will accept it. To this point, the first thing to say is that it is unclear that empirical evidence speaks against pessimism. Kitcher suggests that legitimate evidence must come through scientific experiments, but this assumes an unnecessarily narrow conception of what counts as empirical evidence. The "truth" of literature and myth depends on their fidelity to common experience; they would not be as compelling as they are unless they captured something that most people intuitively recognize. This evidence is not scientific, but that does not mean it is not empirically based. Moreover, the notion of moral progress is questionable. While progress has been considerable on some metrics, it is unclear that the progress is permanent or the trends irreversible. Rights can be eroded, violence can always return. And unlike

most of human history, technology has made it such that the erosion of rights is much more insidious and the effects of wars much more existential than ever.

More importantly, while progress may have been made on systemic oppression and mortal threats to existence, virtue on the small scale, measured in ordinary, daily interactions between people, has not necessarily progressed. Beyond freedom from mortal threat and oppression, moral life also requires kindness, honesty, loyalty, and all the other virtues that make life with others possible. Private morality, far more subtle and nuanced, is very difficult to address through law, policy, or technology. In the cultivation of virtues, every generation starts anew and encounters the same obstacles to success. Humans will always need to combat the forces of moral gravity, such as selfishness, ignorance, and weakness. So, there is no reason to believe that people are kinder, more honest, or more loyal today than they were before. On the contrary, daily life provides ample evidence that selfishness is normal, indifference easy, and dishonesty commonplace.

It is important to note that my pessimism about human morality is not based on the idea that people are moral monsters. "Depravity" connotes something unusually sinister and sadistic – killers, rapists, and torturers. But it is not the existence of these individuals, who are exceptionally rare, that is most troubling. Garden-variety badness or moral mediocrity provides more than enough reason for pessimism. Hannah Arendt's famous account of Adolf Eichmann exposed something far more disturbing than sadism. If his testimony is taken as accurate, Eichmann was not motivated by hatred or venom toward Jews. He was, on multiple expert accounts, psychologically "normal."[4] He had good relationships with friends and family, and he seemed to have had positive qualities as well – a tenderness toward Jews that he admired, a conscientious work ethic, a strong sense of principle and duty. All that was needed for him to facilitate genocide was a strong desire to advance his own career and a certain level of thoughtlessness.[5] And he was not alone. With some exceptions, the entire population of Germany – comprising ordinary, normal, decent citizens – proved themselves tolerant of and complicit in one of the most evil schemes in human history. It is precisely the very ordinariness of these individuals that presents the "greatest moral…challenge of the whole case."[6] Arendt called this challenge "the banality of evil."

Most ordinary people are, like Eichmann, a mixture of both good and bad traits. We have what Christian Miller has called "mixed characters."[7] We can be empathetic, caring, and helpful, but also uncaring and callous. We are sometimes honest and scrupulous, and sometimes dishonest and unscrupulous. And, as numerous studies have shown, which traits are acted upon is often due to morally irrelevant features of our environment, such as ambient temperature or the smell of baked goods.[8] This might not

seem very pernicious or threatening on the face of it, but the mixed character is not itself morally neutral. There is a reason that ancient Greek philosophers defined virtue as a stable disposition to certain actions, feelings, and thoughts. A virtuous person must consistently and knowingly perform well over time and across circumstances. This achievement requires the integration of good emotional habits and a practical intelligence that is responsive to moral salience, and it is not something that occurs automatically. It takes considerable work over a lifetime to realize virtuous character, which is why most ancient philosophers thought this achievement incredibly rare. Against the ancient ideal, the mixed character may not be positively vicious, but it is morally dangerous. We might get lucky, and circumstances may make it such that we are not morally challenged in any serious way. However, the absence of atrocity would be neither evidence of our goodness nor cause for reassurance. The mixed character means that, in the wrong circumstances, we are capable of great evil.[9] This, it seems to me, is a reason for pessimism about human morality.

Now, a critic can acknowledge that pessimism is appropriate while also denying the need for spirituality. The existence of natural empathy and a discomfort with lying, say, means that we have a foundation to build upon. More importantly, we know better. Very few people endorse dishonesty, cheating, or indifference to the needs of others, and almost everyone desires to be good – at least in the abstract. Thus, the secularist may appeal to our capacity "to appreciate the claims of fellow beings, to reflect, to arrive at reasonable conclusions, and, in light of those conclusions, to overcome prior indifference."[10] On a personal level, we can strive to broaden our moral imagination and to see things from the perspective of others. On a collective level, we can organize society in ways to promote good behavior – for instance, by instituting policies that call for personal accountability or that induce reflection. There are, then, straightforward, non-spiritual methods to overcome obstacles to morality.

Although the benefit of such measures cannot be denied, they are insufficient. To improve, a person must have the ability to accurately assess and monitor her moral progress. However, we should be deeply skeptical about our capacity for this sort of self-knowledge. Thousands of years ago, Socrates revealed that many people who thought they were wise – or good – turned out not to be. Contemporary psychological research suggests that little has changed. Researchers have found that there is a "strong tendency for people to believe that they have a 'true self', and to believe that this true self is inherently morally good."[11] The majority of us predict that we would act better – help a person in need, distribute resources fairly – than others.[12] And we rate ourselves as more virtuous – "more charitable, cooperative, considerate, fair, kind, loyal, and sincere" and "less belligerent, deceitful, gullible, lazy, impolite, mean, and unethical" – than average,

an assessment that cannot possibly be true for everyone who thinks it.[13] Unfortunately, these assessments are not supported by actual behavior, for we consistently underperform predictions of our own behavior. That is to say, we do not behave as generously, honestly, compassionately as we think we would. On this point, it is worth noting that we tend to be better predictors of the moral quality of other people's actions than we are about our own.[14] So, we are not generally unable to assess and predict moral behavior. It is just that we have great difficulty assessing ourselves. In other words, there is a gap between how good we think we are and how good we actually are.

Further, and to make matters worse, researchers have identified multiple self-deceptive strategies that we use for maintaining belief in our personal goodness in the face of moral failure. For instance, we are strongly motivated to engage in "cleansing" behaviors, which involve doing good deeds to make up for the bad. Another useful technique is "moral credentialing," which involves appealing to good deeds done in the past to preserve our sense of moral identity.[15] To be effective, these strategies cannot be intentional. That is to say, we cannot consciously realize that we are using them to serve our own purposes, and that makes them especially dangerous. Combined with our general ignorance of our moral condition, these strategies present serious obstacles to moral progress. If we are already good, there is little need to work at getting better. Moral progress requires that a person acknowledge that he is not yet good, but that admission may be as rare as virtue.

Murdoch, who accuses secular philosophers of being overly optimistic about human goodness, draws on modern psychology to assert what she describes as a secular version of original sin. By "modern psychology," she means Freud. And while many Freudian theories have been superseded in contemporary psychology, his basic insight about the human subject cannot be ignored. We are, in many ways, opaque to ourselves. We are moved by unconscious drives and instincts that are older and, in many cases, stronger than any motivation that can be consciously endorsed. This is not to deny that we have capacities for rational thought and reflection, and insofar as we have those capacities, moral progress is always possible. However, our rational capacities are themselves subject to unconscious shaping.[16] And since unconscious drives are enduring parts of the psychological makeup of the human animal, we must always be vigilant about the possibility of regression.[17] Unlike the religious account of original sin, this condition is completely naturalistic. But it describes what I take to be the same phenomenon – namely, the natural "ignorance and difficulty" that stand in the way of living a moral life.

This is not to say that we should ignore Socrates's call for the examined life. Even if we are not as transparent to ourselves as we might think, there

is no replacement for critical self-scrutiny and moral effort. Nevertheless, what we know about the psychological obstacles to morality should temper confidence that we can achieve our moral aims without some sort of additional help. According to Murdoch, the primary challenge facing moral philosophers is to discover "techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish."[18] In particular, she recommends directing our attention to a transcendent good that elicits "love in the highest part of the soul."[19] In a similar vein, Miller concludes that, "We need the tug of our emotions. The head alone will not motivate us enough to keep working at becoming a better person."[20] The efficacy of spirituality depends on its emotional appeal. There are multiple sorts of emotional appeal, but the appeal of a transcendent good is greatest.

It would be unreasonable to dismiss the possibility of morality without spirituality out of hand. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to think that spirituality, which reorients us away from the self and toward a higher good, may be a crucial supplement to our rational efforts at moral progress. The spirituality problem is not about the logical possibility of secular morality, but about its psychological feasibility. Human nature means that it will always be challenging to be good, and love is one of the most powerful countervailing forces known to us. Insofar as humanist morality lacks a sense of spirituality, it misses a rich source of meaning and transformative power, and the extraordinarily difficult task of being good is even harder. It seems to me that this is enough reason to seriously entertain the project of infusing spirituality into moral life.

3.

The second objection to my project has to do with its consequences. While everyone agrees that morality has an important place in a human life, many have thought that it is possible to care about it too much.[21] Insofar as the infusion of spirituality into moral life is supposed to deepen one's engagement with goodness, it may seem that I am promoting moral extremism, or an excessive or obsessive zeal for morality.

This worry is captured in Susan Wolf's famous critique of the moral saint. The moral saint is defined as "a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be" and whose life is "dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole."[22] He is a person who is passionately – some have even said "religiously" – devoted to morality.[23] While Wolf admits that the moral saint is a "remarkably noble and admirable figure," she thinks that no one should aspire to be like him.[24] Since he is singularly focused on morality, the saint would have no time and no room to pursue activities such as cooking, gardening,

and music, the sorts of activities that make a life worth living for a "healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character."[25] And since morality requires compassion and kindness, he would be unable to cultivate character traits, such as humor, edginess, or coolness, that are found in lively, interesting people. He would be overly nice and have no personality, and have nothing distinctive of "an identifiable, personal self."[26] Wolf's portrait of the saint is aimed at showing that there is something "disgusting" about too much goodness.[27] Anyone who is so good is likely to have compromised on other aspects of his personality. If this is the upshot of infusing spirituality into moral life, we should not want it.

Although I agree that there is a problem with the moral saint, whether or not it is the result of spiritual devotion is another question. To answer it, it will be helpful to get more concrete about the life of moral sainthood. Wolf's sketch of moral saints, conjectural as it is, seems to be fully developed in the real-life portraits of Larissa MacFarquhar's *Strangers Drowning*, where they are referred to as "do-gooders."[28] Do-gooders are extremely moral people who make what many would consider unthinkable sacrifices to help others. Their allegiance to the most stringent demands of morality means, for instance, that family relations and personal attachments are given no special weight compared to strangers. So, one couple risked their lives and the lives of their children to found a leper colony in the jungles of India, and a woman who had always dreamed of being a mother found herself unable to justify getting pregnant until she reasoned that any child of hers would be raised to give most of its earnings to charity. The do-gooders' commitment to morality also means that they must refrain from pursuing any pleasures and interests, such as indulging in a glass of wine or guitar playing, that are not directly related to helping others. Several of MacFarquhar's do-gooders lived, at the turn of the 21st century, on less than $1200 a year, eating out of dumpsters and denying themselves creature comforts in order to give as much as possible to charity. Even the personal fulfillment of charity work has to be denied if more good would come from charitable giving. While there is indeed something noble and admirable about these individuals, there is also something deeply disturbing.

However, I do not think that what is disturbing about these individuals – whom, for reasons that will soon be apparent, I will continue calling "do-gooders" rather than "saints" – has to do with spiritual devotion. Some of MacFarquhar's subjects are religious. Most are not, and indeed, several came to adopt their moral extremism through reading secular philosophers.[29] Whatever their spiritual commitments, their stringent commitment to helping others is not itself evidence of a life-orientation toward a transcendent good. It does not flow out of a love of that which elicits

reverence and awe, so much it issues from a crushing feeling of obligation and an overriding motivation to maximize moral value.

This becomes even clearer when we consider what real saints are like. In his response to Wolf, Robert Adams describes real saints as "people who submit themselves, in faith, to God, not only loving Him but also letting His love possess them, so that it works through them and shines through them to other people."[30] Real saints are very, very good, but not because they are fixated on morality. They live their lives in devotion to a transcendent good that is not only higher and greater than anything in the world, but that is also the source of all good things. Thus, saints need not be narrowly fixated on moral goodness to the exclusion of all other interests. The love of God can take form in nearly everything – music, art, carpentry, masonry, philosophy, mathematics, and, of course, morality. So, morality is enhanced by its relationship to other goods, rather than weakened by it. Moreover, because their relationship to God is deeply personal, saints will not view morality as an impersonal endeavor that requires total self-sacrifice. In fact, Adams says, "saints have typically been intensely and frankly interested in their own condition, their own perfection, and their own happiness."[31] Their goodness is part of a life that is rich and full of meaning. Their selflessness grows out of a sense of abundance and generosity rather than self-denial. They are not fixated on what they can do to save the world. Instead, through their love of God, saints let themselves be moved by "goodness overflowing from a boundless source."[32] So, the saint could be described as extremely good, but he is not a moral extremist.

Although it is intensely felt, the do-gooder's commitment to morality is decidedly unspiritual. Rather than submit to a transcendent good, the do-gooder takes matters into her own hands, exercising every bit of agency she can to improve the world. Her work for others is born from a sense of the limitless demands of suffering in the world rather than a sense of abundance. And there is a smallness to her actions. A common theme in MacFarquhar's portraits is an obsession with money. Every single penny not dedicated to charity becomes a cause for regret, consternation, and guilt. One pair of do-gooders argued over a deficit of $0.38 in their weekly allowance; the frivolous purchase of a candied apple sent another pair into a crisis of conscience. When a person commits to living on $1200 a year, it is difficult not to think about money all the time. And, of course, time is also something that can be maximized. That is why one do-gooder arranged his bedroom so that he only needed one motion to get out of bed and turn on his computer. Altogether, do-gooder morality is the sort of project best pursued with the help of a spreadsheet. Through these tireless efforts, do-gooders do manage to do far more good in the world than the average person. But they lack the sense of generosity and abundance that comes from spirituality. Ironically, despite their obsessive avoidance of

waste, one feels that the noble and admirable intentions of these individuals have been wasted.

Thus, I conclude that the problem with do-gooders does not have to do with spirituality. Indeed, I would suggest the opposite. The do-gooder sense of morality is not exactly wrong, but it is unnecessarily constricted. Morality does require impartial consideration for the good of others, and self-sacrifice is often part of the story. But there is a larger story that includes relationships, loves, beauty, wonder, and so forth, goods that not only do not dilute morality, but may actually enhance it. Without the horizon of the larger story, the do-gooder's engagement with morality is thinner, smaller, and less moving than it should be. Thus, rather than undermining my project, the figure of the do-gooder shows why it might be important to infuse spirituality into moral life.

4.

The do-gooder is not the only form of moral extremist. Moral extremism can also take the form of fanaticism, such as seen in the ancient Hebrews' persecution of impure peoples or the Catholics and Protestants who massacred each other in the French Wars of Religion.[33] The moral fanatic is both much more closely associated with religion and far more pernicious than the do-gooder. Unlike the do-gooder, he does seem to have a spiritual investment in his pursuit of morality. His moral commitments are deeply personal and infused with a sense of height and depth. His pursuit of goodness is not conceived as a small-minded matter of quantitative accumulation, but rather as purity and fidelity to a lofty ideal. He is not worried about efficiency but what he perceives to be the ultimate truth. And, as history shows, he can be extremely violent and dangerous in a way that the do-gooder is not. The figure of the moral fanatic suggests that the extremist who actually succeeds in bringing spirituality into moral life should be more feared than the one who fails.

Examples are not difficult to find. Since the Enlightenment, there has been no shortage of secular fanatics whose passion for reform has turned into something close to religious zeal. For instance, Toqueville attributes the violence of the French Revolution, which was founded on secular principles of human dignity and equality, to the fact that it "became a new sort of religion" that was able to "cover the earth with its soldiers, its apostles, and its martyrs."[34] And scholars have argued that atheistic political movements of the 20th century such as Stalinism and Maoism were, in fact, political religions complete with their own sacral rites and theologies.[35] As they devolved into horrific campaigns of terror, these ostensibly secular movements took the lives of millions of people in the name of dignity, equality, and liberation. Such examples have been described as cases

of "secular monotheism."[36] Thus, it could be argued that the infusion of religiosity into moral life has been a disaster. For many, the promise of secular morality lies, precisely, in the abandonment of irrational religious zeal. In light of these examples, perhaps the last thing we should do is to bring spirituality into moral life.

As with the do-gooder, it is impossible to deny that the moral fanatic presents a problem. It is also difficult to deny that he pursues morality or moral ideals with something like spiritual devotion. Still, one can ask whether this necessarily means that the spiritualization of moral life is a problem. The example of individuals such as Saint Francis, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Fred Rogers, Muhammad Ali, and Socrates – some saints, others not, but all individuals whose commitment to serving others shone with a sort of holiness – suggests not. But if not, we should want to know where the moral fanatic, who seems to be similarly passionate in his devotion to moral ends, goes astray.

Isaiah Berlin, who witnessed the destructive moral movements of the 20th century, has an idea about what goes wrong with secular fanatics. He explains:

> The possibility of a final solution – even if we forget the terrible sense that these words acquired in Hitler's day – turns out to be an illusion, and a very dangerous one. For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for ever – what could be too high a price to pay for that? To make such an omelette, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken – that was the faith of Lenin, of Trotsky, of Mao, for all I know of Pol Pot.[37]

Berlin sees in these fanatics a fervent devotion to moral perfection. Moral perfection is conceived as the perfect life for human beings, the "final solution" for life founded "on a correct understanding of the rules that governed the universe."[38] The fanatic believes that he grasps this vision and seeks, with good intentions, to bring it to life for all people. And since he sees it as the single, salvific truth, he thinks there is no sacrifice too great to realize it. Thus, we might see the primary driver of secular fanaticism as total devotion to moral perfection, or the worship of morality itself.

As I take it, the point is not that morality is not tremendously significant. Embodied in certain values, principles, and ideals, morality is the aspect of life that has to do with our treatment of others. It is considered by most people to have primacy in a human life or, if not primacy, at least a special kind of priority.[39] However, unlike a transcendent good such as God, it is not an appropriate object of reverence or spiritual devotion.

Morality is not higher or better than human life, but squarely part of human life itself. It is the subject of discussion, interpretation, critical scrutiny, and revision. There will always be questions about what it entails and how to realize it. And there is also no *a priori* guarantee that all goods, especially all moral goods, will fit together perfectly, that they will remain the same, or that they will be the same everywhere. Morality is a project that humans collectively engage in response to the challenges of living together. It is something we work on, not something we worship.

When treated as itself an object of spiritual devotion, morality can become extremely dangerous. Moral values, principles, and ideals are useful abstractions: they can be articulated and grasped by a human mind, their implications spelled out, and their edges neatly defined in service of making sense of shared life. But real life does not perfectly conform to abstractions. In the jagged fit between idea and reality, the moral fanatic elevates the clean lines of thought over the messiness of life, and what is supposed to be a subject of reflection open to the input of common experience is treated as absolute and authoritative. All of life is flattened to the totalizing standard of ideas. Because no person or institution can live up to an idea, the fanatic will inevitably find the rest of humanity lacking. So, he will always find reason for judgment, censure, recriminations, or worse – and not just for actions, but also for motives, intentions, and attitudes. The judgment may be internal and need not result in external corrections or punishments, but it can. And when it does, it is potentially devastating because the standard is pure and people are not. So, masses of people and institutions can get swept up in the frenzy of moral mania, as happened during the French Revolution, Stalinism, and Maoism.

Here, a comparison with the saint is once again illuminating. The object of the saint's spiritual devotion is not morality, but God, a transcendent being that exceeds everything human in goodness, power, and wisdom. Insofar as God is infinite, no human can claim to fully grasp Him and His ways. The multitudes contained within Him can comprise even what seem to be incompatible, contradictory, absurd possibilities as comprehended by humans. Thus, while the saint aspires to be as godlike as possible, he cannot have any illusions about attaining perfection. While he might be aware of the ways in which others fall short, he cannot claim to be their ultimate judge. And he cannot be dogmatic about what it means to be devoted to God. The saint's spiritual devotion is of necessity characterized by humility and surrender. Accordingly, his goodness does not have the judgmental conviction, or hubris, of the moral fanatic. This is, of course, not to deny that theism can lead to fanaticism or, even, that it is strongly linked to fanaticism. However, the saint, who is a spiritual figure, is not a fanatic.

Thus, I suggest that the problem with the moral fanatic is not spirituality *per se*, but rather the object of his spiritual devotion. Moral fanaticism

elevates morality to a place it should not occupy in human life. Although it is extremely important to human beings, morality itself is not an appropriate object of reverence and spiritual devotion. Insofar as we seek to infuse spirituality into moral life, we need to look some greater good, a good that not only encompasses morality but exceeds it.

5.

The objections I considered over the last two sections, objections that I have heard pressed by interlocutors against my views, were predicated on perceived similarities between moral extremism and spiritualized morality. While these are very different phenomena, the conflation of the two is understandable given the current context. Odd as it may sound, many people today are uncomfortable with the prospect of being too good. This discomfort, which is rather vague and mostly implicit, is not really an objection, but it does pose a general obstacle to addressing the spirituality problem. Let me conclude with some brief remarks on this obstacle and how to see our way around it.

First, it will help to be more explicit about what the discomfort is. Robert Musil has his protagonist describe the state of affairs in *The Man Without Qualities*:

> [I]n situations that bring them into conflict with their environment people always deploy all their resources, whereas whenever they are only doing what is proper they naturally enough behave no differently from the way they do when paying their taxes - from which it can be concluded that all Evil is enacted with more or less imagination and passion, where the Good is characterised by an unmistakable pitifulness and poverty of emotion. Ulrich recalled that his sister had expressed this moral dilemma in a very uninhibited way by asking whether what it came to was that being good was no longer a good thing. It ought to be difficult and breath-taking, she had asserted, marvelling at the fact that moral people were almost always bores.[40]

We find ourselves in a world in which goodness no longer shines. It is seen as dry and boring, a matter of being nice and doing duties. The figure of the "good person" is a stock character, one that lacks personalizing or distinguishing features. Morally flawed people, even evil ones, are more interesting to our tastes. In this world, a deep concern for goodness looks small-minded and technocratic or obsessive and humorless. And though few would follow Ulrich's sister in saying that being good is no longer a good thing, many have grown wary of being too good.

It is important to note that those who think this way are not evil or unscrupulous. If they do not wish to be too good, they also do not wish to be too bad. Instead, the general thought is that we ought to aim for "decency," the sane middle ground between moral sainthood and moral mediocrity.[41] The decent life is one that balances concerns for morality and personal perfection, rather than one that is as morally good as can be. An example of a decent person is the delightfully spontaneous person who sometimes breaks promises or the loving parent who shields her child from just punishment.[42] Decent people do care about morality, and some even devote themselves to noble causes, such as helping the homeless or ending wars. But they also have a healthy appreciation of the value of other goods. In conflicts between different goods, they ensure that morality does not always "win."[43] And their lives are believed to be richer and more meaningful as a result.

As sensible as it may sound, we should be wary of this view. It seems to me that this is exactly what James feared would happen in the merely human world. It is not a world of rampant evil or pure immorality. People still care to be decent and to fulfill their basic duties. Justice, kindness, and honesty are not dead. However, it is a world in which the scope of moral life is narrowed and the interest in moral goodness dampened. The person who sets her sights on decency is especially susceptible to the psychological dangers that I discussed above.[44] For a person who aims to be merely decent has less incentive to overcome self-deception about her own goodness than one who consciously aims to be as good as possible. Given the tendencies of the human psyche, it is not difficult to see how a concern for moral decency might slide into moral mediocrity and, eventually, the "don't care" mood.

But the biggest problem is that the narrowing and coarsening of moral life will likely go unnoticed. For from within the secular perspective, it is very difficult to see how the ceiling has been lowered – the symphony foreshortened – on the possibilities of human goodness. This is perfectly exemplified, for instance, in Wolf's failure to appreciate the figure of the saint. She views the saint as an exemplar of a saccharine niceness, of "innocence and undiscriminating love," because she cannot see how his behavior emanates from his love of God.[45] His goodness is flattened, dulled, dimmed because it is viewed through a lens that does not accommodate its transcendent source. Unmoored from this source, the saint's passion for goodness can only appear as a bizarre or foolish moralism, an example of well-meaning, but empty do-gooderism. The oversight is remarkable – and not despite, but especially, because it is unintentional. It is a testament to the smallness and dullness of the secular conception of goodness without the horizon provided by a transcendent good. Wolf's oversight points to the more general problem of a world in which it is believed that saints

"should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent."[46] While we are still impressed by acts of heroism, we are no longer moved by the quiet wonder of truly good people. Saints start to look like moral extremists, and everything breath-taking and difficult about goodness fails to be registered. To my mind, such lapses and misunderstandings are the most poignant expressions of the spirituality problem.

To resolve this problem, we will need to loosen our gaze with a view to glimpsing some good beyond morality itself, one that can elicit a kind of spiritual love that is both personally and morally transformative. In Part 2, I consider Aristotelian, Existentialist, and Confucian humanisms, three approaches to secular morality that expand our vision of moral goodness in potentially spiritual directions. I do not think that any of these views adequately resolves our problem. But they are well worth considering, for not only do they seek to locate moral life in broader contexts of meaning and purpose, but they draw on ideas that modern people find appealing and approachable. More specifically, my discussions of these views explore (human) nature, freedom, and ritual as potential foundations for a spiritualized morality. Through these discussions, I aim to extract insights on the nature of a transcendent good that can be both worthy of spiritual love and available to secularists. In so doing, I seek to carve out a space for my positive view, which appeals to the concept of tradition. The defense of that view will be saved for Part 3.

Notes

1 William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 11.
2 Philip Kitcher, *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism* (Yale University Press, 2014), 143.
3 See, for example, Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Viking, 2011) and *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (Penguin, 2018).
4 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin Classics, 2006), 25, 105.
5 Arendt, *Eichmann*, 48–49.
6 Arendt, *Eichmann*, 26.
7 Christian Miller, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* (Oxford University Press, 2019), Chapter 7.
8 For a review of numerous studies on temperature and pro- and antisocial behavior, see Dermot Lynott, Katherine Corker, Louise Connell, and Kerry O'Brien, "The Effects of Temperature on Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviour: A Review and Meta-analysis," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 62, no. 3 (2023): 1177–1214. For the smell of baked goods, see R. Baron, "The Sweet Smell of…… Helping: Effects of Pleasant Ambient Fragrance on Prosocial Behavior in Shopping Malls," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23 (1997): 498–503.

9 So, Eichmann claimed, "The subject of a good government is lucky, the subject of a bad government is unlucky. I had no luck because the head of the state at that time issued the order to exterminate the Jews." Jerusalem Trial, Session 88, July 7, 1961. Cited in Arendt, *Eichmann*, 175.
10 Kitcher, *Life After Faith*, 141.
11 Matthew Stichter, "The True Self as Essentially Morally Good – An Obstacle to Moral Improvement?" *Journal of Moral Education* 51, no. 2 (2022): 262.
12 See, for instance, George Goethals, David Messick, Scott Allison, "The Uniqueness Bias: Studies of Constructive Social Comparison," in *Social Comparison*, ed. Jerry Suls and Thomas Wills (Routledge, 1991).
13 Nicholas Epley and David Dunning, "Feeling 'Holier than Thou': Are Self-Serving Assessments Produced by Errors in Self- or Social Prediction?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 6 (2000): 861.
14 Epley and Dunning, "Feeling 'Holier than Thou'."
15 See, for instance, Jennifer Jordan, Elizabeth Mullen, and Keith Murnighan, "Striving for the Moral Self: The Effects of Recalling Past Moral Actions on Future Moral Behavior," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 5 (2011): 701–13; D. A. Effron, "Making Mountains of Morality from Molehills of Virtue: Threat Causes People to Overestimate Their Moral Credentials," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40, no. 8 (2014): 972–85; Daniel Lapsley, "Moral Self-Identity and the Social-Cognitive Theory of Virtue," in *Developing the Virtues*, ed. J. Annas, D. Narvaez, and N. Snow (Oxford University Press, 2016).
16 John Monteleone, "Emotional Depth," *Philosophical Quarterly* 68, no. 273 (2018): 779–800.
17 John Monteleone, "Attention, Emotion, and Evaluative Understanding," *Philosophia* 45, no. 4 (2017): 1761.
18 Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 2001), 53.
19 Murdoch, "'God' and 'Good'," 60.
20 Miller, *Character Gap*, 215. Along similar lines, Miller has suggested that directing our attention to role models is a promising path to moral improvement.
21 Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality" in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): 423, 425; George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review* (January 1949); Todd May, *A Decent Life: Morality for the Rest of Us* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).
22 Wolf, "Moral Saints," 419–20.
23 Robert Adams, "Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 81, no. 7 (1984): 400.
24 Wolf, "Moral Saints," 432.
25 Wolf, "Moral Saints," 421.
26 Wolf, "Moral Saints," 424.
27 Wolf, "Moral Saints," 425.
28 Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Urge to Help* (Penguin Books, 2016).
29 Peter Singer, Toby Orb, and William MacAskill are mentioned as particularly influential.
30 Adams, "Saints," 398.
31 Adams, "Saints," 396–7.
32 Adams, "Saints," 396.

33 See Barrington Moore, *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (Princeton University Press, 2021).
34 *Old Regime and the French Revolution*, tr. John Bonner (1856), Chapter 3.
35 Klaus-Georg Riegel, "Marxism-Leninism as a Political Religion," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 1 (2005): 97–126; Rana Mitter, "Maoism in the Cultural Revolution: A Political Religion?," in *The Sacred in Twentieth-Century Politics*, ed. Roger Griffin, Robert Mallet, and John Tortorice (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
36 Moore, *Moral Purity*, Chapter 3.
37 Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 1990), 15.
38 Berlin, "Pursuit of the Ideal," 6.
39 The primacy of morality is widely assumed by ordinary people and defended by some philosophers. Some philosophers, however, disagree.
40 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, tr. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Secker and Warburg, 1953–60), 183. Cited by Samantha Vice, "On the Tedium of the Good," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8, no. 4 (2005): 459.
41 This concept is the basis of May's *A Decent Life*.
42 May, *Decent Life*, 26–27.
43 See Susan Wolf, "Why it Matters" in *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 58–59 and Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality."
44 Section 2.
45 Wolf, "Moral Saints," 423. She is speaking specifically about Saint Francis.
46 Orwell, "Gandhi."

Part 2

Three Humanist Perspectives

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3 Aristotelian Humanism

1.

The most recent revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics began in the middle of last century. At least two philosophical works can be credited with this turn. First, Elizabeth Anscombe's enormously influential "Modern Moral Philosophy" identified Aristotle's as a moral philosophy that did not depend on a conception of "ought" that necessitated the existence of a divine lawgiver. Later, Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, an equally groundbreaking work, presented Aristotle as a bulwark against a modern subjectivism that threatened to make moral life impossible. Both works were responding to challenges of a modern context that was growing increasingly secularized, materialist, individualistic, subjectivist, and, ultimately, nihilistic. And both presented Aristotelian virtue ethics as a viable way forward – indeed, perhaps the only way forward. Describing Aristotelianism as the most "*philosophically* powerful" among premodern modes of thought, MacIntyre claimed that "If a premodern view of morals and politics is to be vindicated against modernity, it will be in *something like* Aristotelian terms or not at all."[1] Here, the urgency of the Aristotelian project is made clear: the revival of Aristotle is not just a recommendation to reengage with a thinker of immense historical interest, but a philosophical call to arms to reinvigorate morality in a secular world. In the decades since these works appeared, Aristotelian virtue ethics has grown into a robust field of inquiry. Some strains of the view, modeled on Aquinas's adaptation of Aristotelian thought, are theistic. But the dominant form of neo-Aristotelian ethics – prominently represented by thinkers such as Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, John McDowell, and Martha Nussbaum – is staunchly, even proudly secularist.[2] I will call the views that fall under this secularist umbrella *Aristotelian humanism*.

Broadly speaking, Aristotelian humanism is an ethical framework that conceives of human goodness in terms of virtues such as courage, moderation, and honesty. Virtues are, in turn, conceived as dispositions to

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action, feeling, and thought that both benefit their possessors and make them good *qua* human being. That is to say, the virtues are conceived as parts of human flourishing. A key concept in this framework – incidentally, one that makes it appealing to secularists who welcome the sheen of scientific respectability – is human nature. The definition of human nature is debated among Aristotelians; some see it in more scientific terms, while others embrace an interpretative approach. But they all agree that human nature is morally significant as the basis of human goodness. Thus, Aristotelian humanists call for a deep engagement with the question of what makes us human – that is to say, our distinctive capacities, needs, desires, and vulnerabilities – and they encourage us to see moral development as part of natural human development. This view embodies a deeply rooted optimism about human beings and their capacities for goodness. Aristotelian humanists assure us that "there is absolutely nothing wrong with human beings."[3] They reject "despair and misanthropy," and counsel us to maintain hope for humanity.[4] In a world devoid of cosmic meaning and divine authority, Aristotelians think that morality is best supported by a deeper appreciation of what it means to be human. Theirs is a fundamentally humanistic position.

It is worth noting that Aristotle would likely never have anticipated this particular development of his thought. While he was certainly no Christian, he was in no way a secularist, and it would be grossly anachronistic to see him in those terms. Instead, he belonged to a world thoroughly shaped by Greek polytheism. Aristotle assumed the existence of Greek gods and the practices and institutions of Greek religion. His conception of the divine differed in important respects from conventional representations in antiquity, but not so much so that he could not appeal to a common sense about the gods in his ethical works. Thus, an orientation toward the divine is woven into his conception of the happy life, and he believed that humans should strive to be as godlike as possible:

> One should not follow the advice of those who say 'Human you are, think human thoughts', and 'Mortals you are, think mortal' ones, but instead, so far as is possible, assimilate to the immortals and do everything with the aim of living in accordance with what is highest of the things in us; for even if it is small in bulk, the degree to which it surpasses everything in power and dignity is far greater.[5]

In statements like these, we see that a religious sensibility is an integral part of Aristotelian ethics. It can be easy to dismiss such comments, and to treat Aristotle as a modern secularist. Unlike Christianity, Greek religion is so remote from modern consciousness that it is hard to take seriously. Nevertheless, at least on this matter, it is worth keeping in mind how far

Aristotelian humanism departs from its ancient source. That is not because we wish to be historically accurate, but because we need to be aware of the possibility that a live ethical system, such as Aristotle's, may not fully survive being brought into a new context.

In this chapter, I consider whether Aristotelian humanism might provide the resources to accommodate a spiritual dimension in moral life.[6] Most Aristotelian humanists are not particularly concerned about spirituality; some appear positively hostile to it.[7] However, Nussbaum, one of Aristotle's greatest modern expositors, is eager to accommodate the spiritual dimension of moral life. She believes that human nature is the basis of a special form of transcendence, such that the fullest realization of human flourishing may be considered not just a moral, but a spiritual achievement. This view represents an especially promising approach to the spirituality problem because it appeals to a deep regard for the authority of nature that exists among people today. Nevertheless, I will argue that it fails. In the following, I claim that human transcendence cannot anchor a secular spirituality because it lacks the "note of infinitude and mystery" that is proper to objects of spiritual love.[8] I conclude that, insofar as it centers on the concept of flourishing, Aristotelian humanism – at least, its secular versions – lacks the resources to provide an adequate resolution to the spirituality problem.

2.

Nussbaum's primary concern is to reject the idea that human beings should strive to transcend humanity, rather than to accommodate the possibility of spirituality in moral life. But she acknowledges that a sense of transcendence is "a powerful part of human ethical experience," and that "the life of godlike transcendence [is] a beautiful and valuable ethical norm."[9] Such statements implicitly recognize the importance of spirituality in moral life. Using examples of "specifically human heroism," she elucidates what might be considered a secular spirituality based on what she calls "internal" or "human transcendence." This sort of transcendence is attributed to specifically human flourishing, which is the fullest realization of human capacities or functions. In this way, human flourishing may be viewed as a sort of transcendent good that is "intelligible without reference to inadequate or obscure metaphysical conceptions" – that is, a good that is transcendent without being supernatural.[10]

Nussbaum's account begins with athletic excellence, which she deems the "simplest, clearest case" of human transcendence. She observes that we marvel at the strength, speed, agility, and skill of great athletes. Although we sometimes describe athletes as superhuman, the truth is that our admiration assumes the context of human capacities. The average

cheetah could easily outrun the fastest human, and no human would be able to overpower a mature, healthy bear. So, in appreciating athletic excellence, it is not the speed or strength in itself that we admire, but the speed or strength of a human being with species-specific limitations and possibilities: "such achievement has point and value only relatively to the context of the human body, which imposes certain species-specific limits and creates certain possibilities of movement rather than others."[11] If we were not the kinds of beings that we are – if we had a different kind of skeletal or muscular structure, if we were not susceptible to pain or injury, or did not need rest and replenishment – the speed and strength of sports heroes would not be meaningful. But we do have characteristic physical abilities and limits, such that athletic excellence depends on a "vague and yet powerful notion of the possibilities of the human species as such," a "vague and yet not so unclear notion of the normal human life."[12] To excel is to concretely realize this notion of human flourishing.

Nussbaum distinguishes this excellence from what she calls "our ordinary humanity."[13] Ordinary humanity, which is exemplified by the common run of people, is contrasted with what might be considered "full humanity." Most people are physically lazy and out of shape; it is easy – perhaps, even, in some sense, natural – to be this way. The full actualization of human capacities requires dedication and effort that few are willing to commit; this work is difficult and uncomfortable and requires pushing past one's limits. In contrast, great athletes use their abilities "especially fully," and in this way, they exemplify humanity at its highest functioning.[14] Human flourishing is clearly not supernatural. But it may be considered a form of transcendence because reaching the standard of full humanity entails going beyond or overcoming one's ordinary humanity.

On Nussbaum's telling, the moral analog to athletic excellence is virtue. She identifies individuals such as Pericles, the Athenian statesman, and Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, as moral heroes. Their excellence consists in their "Aristotelian virtues" of courage, moderation, justice, and practical wisdom.[15] Like athletic excellences, these virtues presuppose the human condition. It is only because we are mortal and susceptible to physical pain and humiliation that courage is a virtue. Justice presupposes human needs and desires; practical wisdom assumes that human knowledge is limited and human life risky and uncertain. These character traits would be meaningless for immortal and limitless gods.[16] But they are critical aspects of flourishing for human beings. A person who achieves virtue excels in the ways a human being can with respect to actions, thoughts, and emotions.

Analogously, it is exceedingly difficult to achieve virtue. Nussbaum contrasts morally excellent with morally ordinary people. Most people are "lazy, inattentive, unreflective, shallow in feeling."[17] They are obtuse to

the nuances of persons and situations, unimaginative and unmotivated to cultivate their souls. Becoming virtuous requires a high degree of attentiveness, sensitivity, and devotion. It requires a person to cultivate perception and judgment that evince a sense of what it means to be human in an empathetic, yet clear-eyed way. For this reason, Nussbaum describes the human transcendence of virtue as a sort of "transcendence by descent," one that delves more deeply into the human condition.[18] Describing Nehru, Nussbaum claims that transcendence consists:

> Simply in the fact that he displayed great intelligence and courage on behalf of others, and a lifelong commitment to justice more unwavering that most human beings could achieve. He sat in jail for long periods, he endured isolation and risk, he spent his life forging a nation. Moreover, he did so without denigrating people or setting himself up above them … What spells transcendence to me is the concerted effort to remain morally awake on behalf of others, and to put one's own mental and physical comfort at risk for their sake.[19]

While it is within reach for almost everyone, most people are unwilling to make the effort to become virtuous, and almost no one succeeds.[20] As in the case of athletic excellence, virtue is a way in which human beings transcend ordinary humanity.

If Nussbaum is correct, it is possible to see how an Aristotelian humanist can accommodate a sort of secular spirituality. Flourishing is a human good, through and through, with no trace of the supernatural. At the same time, this achievement may be considered transcendent insofar as it exceeds ordinary humanity. As the examples of physical and moral excellence show, flourishing both encompasses morality and exceeds it. Finally, on Nussbaum's telling, this sort of good elicits admiration and awe; our affective responses to the most shining examples of human excellence might be thought to approximate spiritual love. Thus, Nussbaum shows how human flourishing can plausibly take the place of God in a secular morality. A person who devotes herself to this good will have a deepened and enriched sense of moral life, a source of inspiration, and a model of aspiration. For this reason, Nussbaum's view gives Aristotelian humanists the best chance to address the spirituality problem.

3.

One challenge to assessing this view is that spirituality is an experiential matter. Nussbaum's examples of human transcendence – great athletes and virtuous people – may or may not strike us as objects of spiritual love and devotion. My own intuition, which I will return to later, is that great

athletes are spiritually moving in a way that merely virtuous people are not. Still, it is difficult to deny that something or other is a source of spirituality if some people in fact experience it that way. Instead of comparing experiences, I want to consider whether human flourishing is the kind of thing that can elicit spiritual love. Unfortunately, I do not think that it is.

Let us begin by considering the logic of flourishing. To flourish is to perform one's characteristic functions or actualize one's characteristic capabilities well, where "well" means in accordance with one's nature. Aristotle concludes that a thing's nature is its form or, equivalently, its end or good.[21] Thus, flourishing can be conceived through an ideal form or a concept of perfection. This point is perhaps most easily appreciated in the non-human realm, where the language of "ideal" or "perfect specimen" is most familiar: think of Foot's healthy houseplant, Hursthouse's cooperative wolf, and the subjects of Michael Thompson's nature documentaries.[22] These are ideals that embody the characteristic functioning of their respective species. We do not typically speak of people as specimens, but the same sort of thinking can apply. Physically speaking, the ideal human specimen is the subject of medical textbooks and standard measures of health. Ethically, the ideal specimen even has a special name among Aristotelians – namely, the *phronimos*, who is a figure of complete virtue. The *phronimos* will not only have cultivated all the habits of character that make for human virtue, but also the excellence of practical judgment to get things right in every situation. He will have developed the perceptual capacities to always discern the correct decision, which will be backed by the emotional and behavioral dispositions to act accordingly. He is the embodiment of moral perfection.

What kind of affective attitude is possible or appropriate with respect to the perfection of ideal specimens? An ideal specimen could certainly be an object of pleasure and delight. Think of the pleasure associated with appreciating flourishing wildlife or healthy human beings in the prime of their lives. More saliently, Aristotle reminds us that, at least for those who are sufficiently virtuous, there is a sort of delight in perceiving virtuous people doing virtuous things.[23] I think it is even appropriate to say that, *qua* exemplars of flourishing, healthy organisms and virtuous people elicit a kind of love. We admire them and appreciate their existence; we enjoy their company and try to be near them; we want what is good for them. But there is a difference between pleasure and awe, and love comes in varieties. To establish the possibility of secular spirituality, the sort of transcendent good we need should be more awesome than delightful; it must be the sort of good one could imagine being an object of spiritual love. I doubt that the perfection of flourishing or, more specifically, the perfection of the *phronimos* could be such a good. And that is because it lacks what James called "the note of infinitude and mystery."[24]

As Aristotelians will admit, the goodness of flourishing is a sort of limit. Individuals may be assessed according to the degree to which they approximate this limit through what has been called an overall "summing-up evaluation": "an individual *x* might be perfect in this way, defective in that, fairish in another, and eventually best described as 'an almost perfect specimen apart from such-and-such', 'a superlative specimen given its age', 'rather a poor specimen given its environment', and so on."[25] There is admittedly some indeterminateness about how to sum up these variables, which ones to give more weight to, how to compare perfection in one area and mediocrity in another, and so forth. When the ideal is a form as complicated as human nature, it can be especially difficult to make an overall assessment. And when human nature incorporates values and beliefs about what makes us human, the assessment requires an extra level of attunement, sensitivity, and judgment. But regardless of how one conceives of human nature, the logic of flourishing remains the same: "if it is no way bad then it is good."[26] That is to say, the fewer the defects, the better the specimen – but only up to a certain point. For perfection is the limit, at which point, goodness is complete, and there is no more goodness to achieve. The goodness of flourishing is, thus, finite and limited, neatly defined by the boundaries of species form.

In consequence, flourishing is entirely unmysterious. Although the ideal of perfection is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, it is neither difficult nor impossible to comprehend. We can know reasonably well what flourishing, ethically speaking, means through some amount of philosophical reflection. Some have suggested that this reflection is *a priori*, since the concept of the human and, by extension, human flourishing is "a pure concept of the understanding devoid of even the least empirical accretion."[27] Others believe that the determination of human nature and human flourishing is the subject of empirical observation and shared dialogue.[28] Either way, the ideal of human flourishing is definable and knowable with a reasonable degree of precision. Indeed, one might see the articulation of this ideal as the practical aim of Aristotelian ethics. Flourishing – at any rate, moral flourishing – is thought to comprise "standard virtues," such as justice, courage, moderation, and honesty, and it is only a matter of time before the elucidation of these forms of human excellence is complete.[29] So, we might not ever meet a *phronimos*, but since the concept of human flourishing can be fairly well defined, we will know what he should be like. And were we ever to encounter this individual, there would be little more to say – not because his perfection escapes our comprehension, but because it is already defined. We might marvel *that* he exists, but we will not be surprised by what he is like.

But the things that inspire the greatest love and devotion are not like this. Our great loves – works of art, passion projects, friends, and romantic

interests – are not "perfect" or "ideal." They elude complete comprehension because they fit no mold. They are continuously able to surprise us, and we are always uncertain about what to expect from them, what we might find next, and how we might respond. And that is part of their appeal. When this is no longer true, when we can explain exactly what is good and worth loving about them, they sadly cease to charm.[30] What is true about our great loves applies to an even greater degree to the objects of spiritual devotion. These objects do not just elude our understanding contingently – because we are not knowledgeable or sophisticated enough to know better – but because they are essentially infinite, mysterious, and unknowable. This is a way in which divine perfection, which points to something that is always beyond, is essentially different from human perfection, which can be articulated and known. Interest in divine perfection is inherently inexhaustible, whereas interest in human perfection runs out quickly.

In terms of addressing the spirituality problem, the perfection of flourishing is "all too finite."[31] The perfection of flourishing is limited and fixed, unattainable perhaps, but knowable. Nothing that is so limited and unmysterious could be an object of spiritual love. While it is true that perfection is uncommon and extraordinary, the transcendent good of spirituality must be more than simply statistically anomalous or difficult to achieve. We need to feel that there is something more, something beyond, something "more than this" – and not just in a quantitative way.[32] Moreover, the transcendent good needs to be a positive good, rather than an absence of bad. It should attract us with its astonishing brilliance, rather than daunt us with our deficiencies. Thus, limited and fundamentally unmysterious, the perfection of flourishing cannot be a source of spirituality.[33]

None of what I have said here means that Aristotelian humanism does not capture something essential about moral life. Flourishing or, more specifically, moral perfection is a worthy ideal. Though there are complexities to how to determine it, there is indeed such thing as human nature, and the virtues are excellences of being human. This ideal is also critical for the operation of normal moral life. We could not have moral education or moral progress without some determinate goal toward which to aspire, and the significance of virtuous role models cannot be underestimated. My point is only that human flourishing cannot be the transcendent good of secular spirituality. And since flourishing is the centerpiece of Aristotelian humanism, I conclude that Aristotelian humanism is unable to account for spirituality in moral life.[34] This means that Aristotelian humanism, as it stands, is an incomplete ethical view. If the Aristotelian humanist wants to accommodate spirituality, she will need to look to another source, one that is not contained in the extant framework.

4.

Those who are sympathetic to Nussbaum's view will likely question my depiction of flourishing. I claim that human flourishing cannot elicit spiritual love because it is a closed concept, one that is defined by limits and that does not afford novelty or surprise. However, some may defend flourishing as a worthy object of spirituality by asserting its openness and mystery in two ways.

First, the Aristotelian may concede that plant or wolf flourishing is a closed concept, while holding that human flourishing, in particular, is not. This is because humans play a role in determining what counts as normal functioning, and the parameters of what counts as flourishing in a human being are subject to refinement and revision. Our conceptions of flourishing can and have changed as we come to gain a deeper appreciation of humanity. For instance, views on the natural differences between men and women have undergone significant revision through history. We have come to see certain features as relevant to a proper conception of human flourishing, and others as not. So, childbearing, say, need not be essential for a woman to flourish. This revision has resulted in women doing things previously unimaginable, and that, alone, is a source of newness and surprise. Indeed, the Aristotelian will say that it is important to subject our conceptions of human nature and human flourishing to critical scrutiny on occasion. In this way, we can see how the concept of human flourishing is flexible, open, and unlimited and, hence, allows for a significant degree of novelty and surprise.

This objection is based on the shifting content of flourishing. That is to say, what we consider human flourishing – and human nature – is subject to change. However, the problem I have identified is with the logic of flourishing, not any specific view of what counts as flourishing in some particular society or historical era. Flourishing is derived from a concept of nature, and the concept of nature must have some stability in order to be meaningful. Remember that, on the Aristotelian view, nature is form or essence. Of course, it is true that our conceptions of human nature can change. But as soon as something's nature gets defined with reasonable precision, we know what its flourishing is or ought to be. Not only is nature something's form, but it is also that thing's good.[35] So, our conceptions of human flourishing in men and women have changed with a revised outlook on what features are most essential to human nature, and, as a result, there is a new way for women to be in society relative to other times. But the conception of human flourishing in a particular society is fixed, derivable with reasonable precision from its conception of human nature. The closed quality of the concept of flourishing is intrinsic, not accidental. Indeed, this is a good thing, since the notion of

perfection has a place in moral life: we need to have some stable conception of flourishing for the sake of moral education and personal development. My only claim is that this good does not adequately address the spirituality problem.

A second objection now arises. Even if the conception of human flourishing is more or less stable, how it is instantiated will differ depending on context and situation. Accordingly, the Aristotelian might object that the concept of flourishing can accommodate novelty in specific contexts. Flourishing is a formal concept, and the exact ways in which people embody it can be novel and surprising. The virtuous person will often be put into new situations, which call for new applications of justice, honesty, loyalty, and so forth. Historical changes, technological developments, and cultural shifts call for new ways to inhabit the virtues. Thus, novelty and openness exist in the details of how some specific conception of flourishing is realized. The transcendent goodness of flourishing is not seen in the *phronimos* considered as an abstract ideal, but rather in its embodiment in exceptional individuals. To experience the mystery and infinitude of human flourishing, we need to look at specific instances. To this point, it seems significant that Nussbaum's discussion of human transcendence relies heavily on examples.

This objection asks for sensitivity and attunement to concrete individuals. Nussbaum's examples of Pericles and Nehru are worthy of our admiration, but they hardly elicit the sort of love that is associated with transcendent goodness. Nehru is described as a person who embraced his "lonely, flawed, needy" humanity, "trying his level best to cultivate a wide range of virtues."[36] Admirable, indeed, but not the sort of thing that quickens the heart. True, these individuals may have been more virtuous than any of their contemporaries. They applied virtues in novel ways and responded to unprecedented situations. But this is not the sort of novelty and surprise that we expect from a transcendent good. They did not change our conceptions of the virtues or challenge our ways of living, at least not as Nussbaum describes them. They reflected great ideals, while leaving them intact. There is nothing fundamentally new in what they did, and they did not surprise anyone. The newness and surprise that we expect from a transcendent good is a newness and surprise of form, not instantiations of an already known form.

In terms of resolving the spirituality problem, the Aristotelian faces an obstacle that has to do with the very logic of the concept of flourishing. Flourishing is based on an Aristotelian concept of nature, which is intrinsically closed and defined by limits. Aristotelian nature – as opposed to, say, the sublime, infinite nature of the Romantics – may be the basis of some positive feelings of delight or endearment, but not the sort of love and devotion that is associated with spirituality.

5.

At this point, one might recall that Nussbaum spends a fair amount of time discussing athletic excellence, which she considers the "simplest, clearest case" of human transcendence. It is surely relevant that individuals such as Roger Federer and Michael Jordan are described as supernatural or, even, divine. David Foster Wallace famously likened watching Federer to a "religious experience"; Larry Bird attributed Jordan's record-breaking playoff performance to "God disguised as Michael Jordan." Through such feats, it is said, the "sacred shines."[37] If Nussbaum is correct about such individuals, then we would have to admit that at least some exemplars of human flourishing can elicit a sort of spiritual response. And if that is correct, then the framework of Aristotelian humanism is not, as I have claimed, entirely unsuited to resolving the spirituality problem. Accordingly, one might think that the problem I have raised could be resolved with more inspiring examples of moral flourishing.

But while I believe that great athletes do evoke something approximating spiritual experience, I deny that they are exemplars of human flourishing. Human flourishing, as I have already noted, is physically exemplified in terms of health. However, athletic greatness is decidedly not a function of health. While it is true that great athletes may be superior on many measures of health, there are also many measures on which they are the opposite. The stresses and strains of elite athletic competition, both mental and physical, pose real health risks. Broken bones, bloodied faces, torn ligaments, and psychological distress are hardly components of human flourishing. Some athletic greatness actually demands the development of non-ideal physiques in what would normally be considered to be hypertrophied musculature, hypermobility, and obesity. *Contra* Nussbaum, great athletes do not exemplify maximal flourishing, the "normal human life" in its most shining state, and they are not ideal human specimens who embody human nature "especially fully." Their greatness is not adequately understood through the lens of flourishing, but something else completely.

Nussbaum endeavors to carve out a sort of non-supernatural transcendence by bringing attention to forms of human excellences that surpass "our ordinary humanity."[38] But in bringing great athletes into her discussion, she conflates two logically distinct ways in which one can surpass ordinary humanity. Human flourishing surpasses our ordinary humanity insofar as it is an ideal that is rare and difficult to achieve. As Thompson rightly points out, "nobody's perfect."[39] Thus, the (nearly) perfect human specimen, just as the (nearly) perfectly virtuous individual, stands out among ordinary people. On the other hand, athletic greatness surpasses ordinary humanity insofar as it exceeds all normal conceptions and ideals of human abilities. Great athletes use human capacities in astonishing, new,

and extraordinary ways, ways that go beyond what anyone previously imagined was humanly possible. They do not fit any preconceived ideal or standard. Instead, they "change the game," as the colloquialism goes, altering our conceptions of human excellence and creating new aspirations in those who follow. Thus, while human flourishing may be considered a sort of transcendence, we should keep this sense of transcendence distinct from that exemplified in athletic greatness.

The moral analog to great athletes is not very virtuous people like Pericles and Nehru (at least as Nussbaum describes them), but rather people like Socrates, Jesus, and Gandhi, who fit Robert Adams's description of the saint:

> Saints, and especially the most interesting and attractive among them, are typically rough-edged and controversial characters, liable to quite reasonable and often serious criticism from various directions. What is wonderful about them is nothing so tame as a freedom from faults, but something much more positive – and much stranger…[40]

Bracket the fact that saints are typically understood as figures with religious significance. They are also human beings, and their greatness is conceivable as a specifically human achievement.[41] Saints exemplify capacities for compassion, empathy, endurance, imagination, and so forth that go far beyond the normal or ideal. But they are compelling because they embody new ways to be good; they "envisage and do, and show others how to do, things that no one else had thought of doing."[42] They are utterly unique, and their achievements are inextricable from a certain degree of strangeness. Their greatness is a moral form of human transcendence, but it is not an example of human flourishing.

Importantly, saints are a far cry from the anodyne, impersonal perfection of the *phronimos*. This does not mean that saints are not, in some sense, virtuous, just as athletes can be, in some sense, healthy. But it would not be correct to explicate their transcendence in terms of flourishing. They are not perfect, and they do not fit some ideal of what a good person is like. In addition to being very good, real saints are "eccentric" and "charismatic," "rough-edged and controversial."[43] They might be edgy, unconventional, rude, impatient, immoderate, or problematic in any number of ways. Just consider how Socrates's arrogance and coldness often elicits our sympathy for his interlocutors. There is something repugnant about his ironic manner, even though it is inseparable from his alluring brilliance. Jesus was said to be an "exceptionally strange and powerful personality," who consorted with sinners and outcasts and counseled behavior that has been criticized for being insufficiently attuned to human needs.[44] Gandhi's teachings on nonviolence have been described as somehow inextricable

from a "weird sort of life," which included extreme views on sex and self-mortification.[45] Like great athletes, these people reshape how we conceive of what it means to be human.

These examples show that what makes saints great cannot adequately be accommodated with the idea of flourishing. That is because flourishing is a sort of natural goodness, whereas great athletes and saints are freaks of nature. Not only are they non-ideal specimens, but they appear to be highly unusual accidents, not unlike Aristotle's "man-headed calves."[46] This sense is most familiar in sports heroes, who can give the appearance of near physical impossibility. Similarly, Adams notes that saints "expand the human repertoire, and in ways that may never seem entirely natural."[47] On the logic of flourishing, which assigns some degree of badness to everything that falls short of the human *telos*, these extreme individuals must therefore be bad. Nussbaum articulates this thought with the claim that "non-naturalness is either a vice or inseparable from vice."[48] But this principle misses the possibility that the goodness of these individuals is precisely not natural or positively unnatural. Instead, these individuals present us with the prospect of an altogether new kind of goodness and, hence, a kind of human transcendence that is neither natural nor supernatural.[49]

Thus, not only is Aristotelian flourishing not a form of transcendence that elicits spiritual love, but the framework of Aristotelian humanism, which is keyed to the logic of natural goodness, is not equipped to make sense of important forms of human transcendence that sometimes shine right before our eyes. The latter, exemplified in great athletes and saints, is a non-natural transcendence, which is unaccountable within an Aristotelian framework that takes non-naturalness to be either a vice or inseparable from vice.[50]

6.

If Aristotelian humanism is going to accommodate spirituality, it will be in terms similar to the ones Nussbaum has laid out – namely, through the notion of flourishing as the fullest actualization of humanity. I have argued that flourishing is, by its very logic, not an appropriate object of spiritual devotion because it is essentially defined in terms of limits. Moreover, the examples of human transcendence that plausibly do merit such love and devotion elude the conceptual framework of Aristotelian humanism. Thus, despite offering genuine insights on the goodness of virtue, this view is unable to accommodate spirituality in moral life.

This conclusion is not purely negative. The example of the saint shows that the "full development of the normal and natural is not the capstone of ethical aspiration."[51] Although it is indeed a worthy end, it is too constraining to limit ourselves to the normal, natural achievement of virtue.

Our highest ethical aspirations – our spiritual aspirations – must transcend not only ordinary humanity, but the natural strictures of human form. These aspirations are critical to sustaining a rich, imaginative, and spiritually fulfilling relationship to moral life, even if most of us are unable to realize them. The saint, whose imagination for goodness is unbounded by the normal and the natural, is inspired to go beyond the human form through his love of God. The challenge that faces the secularist is how to have such aspirations without believing in a "superhuman, transcendent Good."[52]

This challenge is ostensibly met by atheistic existentialism, which Sartre described as a form of humanism. Existentialists believe that morality is based on radical freedom. Freedom means that we are capable of determining ourselves independently and that we are not bound by any external constraints, including nature. We can choose our own values, ends, and purposes, and though natural goodness may be real, it is not dispositive in questions of human action. This view places full responsibility for morality in the hands of the individual. Many have seen in it an intensity and depth of feeling that borders on religious. Indeed, it is perhaps easier to see the saint as an existentialist than a *phronimos*. While I do not believe that existentialist humanism can ultimately resolve the spirituality problem, its themes of freedom and self-determination hold a great deal of appeal to secular humanists in the contemporary context. If only for that reason, it is a view worth considering.

Notes

1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 118.
2 Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999); Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001); John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998); Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge University Press, 1995).
3 This quote comes from Michael Thompson, who was a keynote speaker at the "Virtue, Skill, and Practical Reason" Conference at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, in August 2017.
4 Hursthouse, *Virtue Ethics*, 264–5.
5 *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe and ed. Sarah Broadie (Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.7.1177b33-1178a3. All quotations from this text will subsequently be denoted *NE*.
6 David McPherson has recently argued that contemporary Aristotelianism falls short in this regard. I agree with his conclusion, though I come to it through a different way, and unlike him, my ultimate aim is not to argue for theism. See *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective* (Cambridge, 2020).

7 See, for instance, Hursthouse's remarks on piety as a virtue in *On Virtue Ethics* (232–4).
8 William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," *International Journal of Ethics* 1, no. 3 (1891): 352.
9 Martha Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 368.
10 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 368.
11 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 372.
12 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 373, 378.
13 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 379.
14 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 372.
15 Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64, no. 2 (2002): 451.
16 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 374.
17 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 378.
18 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 379.
19 Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," 451.
20 Following Aristotle, Nussbaum refers to people who are naturally "maimed" with respect to virtue in "Transcending Humanity" (378). However, she notes that very few would fall into this category.
21 Aristotle, *Physics* 2.7.198a22–7
22 Foot, *Natural Goodness*; Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Michael Thompson, "The Representation of Life" in *Life and Action* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 63–64.
23 See Aristotle, *NE* 9.9.
24 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 352.
25 Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 203–4.
26 Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 76. Here Foot is channeling Anscombe and Aquinas.
27 Michael Thompson, "Apprehending Human Form," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 54 (2004): 47–74.
28 Nussbaum indicates the importance of dialogue and interpretation. See, for instance, "Aristotle on Human Nature."
29 Aristotelians refer to this set in different ways, but they agree that such a set exists. Hursthouse refers to the "standard list," MacIntyre to the "conventional catalogue," and John Hacker-Wright to the "traditional set" of virtues.
30 See Alexander Nehemas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton, 2007), 72–78 and *On Friendship,* (Basic Books, 2016), Chapter 4.
31 James, "The Moral Philosopher," 352.
32 See Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 2001), 71.
33 Somewhat ironically, the Aristotelian view allows for more mystery and novelty in defect than in goodness: there are "many ways of missing the target, and only one way of hitting it," unlimited ways to be bad and only one way to be good (*NE* 2.6.1106b30–1, cited by Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 379). Consider, for instance, Hursthouse's observation in *On Virtue Ethics* of how the terms for vice far outstretch those for virtue (41–42).
34 It is worth noting that this is not a problem for Aristotle's ethics, Thomistic versions that infuse Aristotle's ethics with Christianity, or the spiritual Aristotelianism advocated by McPherson in *Virtue and Meaning*.

35 Aristotle, *Physics* 2.7.198a22–7.
36 Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," 450.
37 Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (Free Press, 2011), 194.
38 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 379.
39 Thompson, "The Representation of Life," 72.
40 Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 52.
41 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 54.
42 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 56.
43 Robert Adams, "Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 81, no. 7 (1984): 392–3 and *Finite and Infinite Goods,* 52.
44 Michael Grant, *Jesus* (Phoenix, 1977), 35, 76. Jesus is holy, but not properly a saint. His not being a saint does not change the point.
45 Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," 448.
46 Aristotle, *Physics* 2.8.199b.
47 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 56.
48 Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," 449, 451.
49 The reference to non-natural goodness has nothing to do with the metaethical theory of non-naturalism, of the sort associated with Moore.
50 Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," 449, 451.
51 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 53.
52 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 56.

4 Existentialist Humanism

1.

Represented by a wide range of thinkers and artists, existentialism was enormously influential in the middle part of last century. This philosophical perspective represented an immediate response to the profound sense of disenchantment that took hold in the wake of two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[1] But its roots go further back to more general developments associated with modernity, such as the rise of scientific materialism, the emergence of the centralized state, the advent of industrialization, and, of course, the weakening of religion. Thus, in his public lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism," Jean-Paul Sartre proclaims that existentialism (or, at least, his brand of it) is "merely an attempt to draw all of the conclusions inferred from a consistently atheistic point of view."[2] What is meant by this is that the existentialist acknowledges that the world is bereft of meaning, design, or purpose. He accepts that there is no ultimate moral authority and no hope for cosmic justice. He recognizes that human existence has no set end and that there will be no redemption in the afterlife. And so he embraces the sense of alienation, loss, and despair felt by his contemporaries. The existentialist faces the bleakness of the world head on.

Yet, the goal of Sartre's lecture is to counter the popular misconception that existentialism is pessimistic or gloomy. On the contrary, Sartre claims, existentialism is the most optimistic view because it is the only one that endows humans with dignity.[3] That is to say, existentialism is a sort of humanism:

> This is humanism because we remind man that there is no legislator other than himself and that he must, in his abandoned state, make his own choices, and also because we show that it is not by turning inward, but by constantly seeking a goal outside of himself in the form of liberation, or of some special achievement, that man will realize himself as truly human.[4]

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Existentialist humanism is based on a zealous commitment to individual freedom or autonomy. The central tenet of this perspective is "existence precedes essence." On this view, humans are unlike any other beings in the world in having the ability to self-determine. We are, as Sartre says, "condemned to be free."[5] While we did not choose to be born, we exist. And insofar as we exist, we have freedom to decide who or what we will be. Thus, the self is "an ongoing, self-interpreting activity or process," something that is continuously being created by each individual.[6] There are no authorities to guide this process or templates to shape it, and no excuses for what one becomes. Accordingly, this view promotes a personal responsibility to think and act for ourselves. As Sartre sees it, the pessimistic views are those that place our fate in the hands of divine authority or human nature – views, such as Aristotelian humanism, which prescribe a set human end. Such views deny human freedom and the possibility of self-determination. Only existentialist humanism points the way to living a life that is authentically and fully one's own.

This view does more than just promote optimism. Noreen Khawaja has recently called existentialism the "religion of existence" insofar as it is dedicated to carving out a meaningful life for human beings in a godless world. As Khawaja points out, "something about existential philosophy *feels* religious to its readers, even at its most atheistic pitch."[7] The feeling of religion can be attributed to what Mary Warnock describes as a "moral *tone of voice*" that suggests that "there is, if we will only face it, a deeper significance in what we do than we are ordinarily, in our unreflective state, prepared to allow."[8] Freedom is a form of human transcendence. It means that we are able to go beyond the limits of our situation to create ourselves, to invent values and new ways of being. Thus, existentialism speaks to the same sorts of cravings as religion without assuming anything supernatural. To those who feel the despair of a godless world, it offers a way to inject a sense of seriousness, depth, and purpose into life. The existentialist insight is that the experience of transcendence can survive the loss of God because, even if He no longer exists, we are still free.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore existentialist humanism as a potential answer to the spirituality problem. Although the existentialist movement has passed its heyday, there are reasons to think that this view still appeals to people in Western societies, for the contemporary landscape is, in many ways, saturated with existentialist ideas. Freedom, choice, and decision are deeply valued in today's culture. People want to be individuals and crave authenticity; they are suspicious of traditional norms and artificial conventions that limit and promote conformity. And the idea that each person is responsible for self-creation, often expressed through the careful cultivation of social media accounts, resonates with large segments of the population. Admittedly, these ideas are somewhat

facile in their present state. The fact that "freedom," "individuality," and "authenticity" are buzz words used to sell everything from fast food to footwear indicates a perversion of existentialist themes that Sartre would want no part of.[9] Nevertheless, their appeal suggests that existentialism offers promising prospects for addressing the spirituality problem.

My discussion begins with a brief sketch of the existentialist view of spiritualized morality. This overview is based primarily on Sartre's depiction of moral choice. While Sartre does not speak for all existentialists, his account captures what I take to be a compelling, if somewhat caricatured, picture of moral choice in a godless universe. On the existentialist view, each person is responsible for creating her own morality, a burden that is also the ground of spiritual fulfillment. I then raise two, interrelated objections to the existentialist picture. The first, which draws on Iris Murdoch and Charles Taylor, claims that the existentialist view is morally trivial. The second, which appeals to Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, claims that the existentialist view is humanly unlivable. The objections show that existentialism ultimately fails to resolve the spirituality problem because it is unable to accommodate the need for obedience to some good outside of the self.

2.

Existentialist humanism has significant ethical implications, though it is not so easy to say what, exactly, they are. Generally speaking, this view denies the existence of objective, universal norms, whether based on God's command, nature, or rationality, as illusions. This denial has led some to claim that existentialism has no substantial morality or, even, that it supports a kind of immoralism.[10] But it is possible to see in this view a morality that revolves around the idea of freedom. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, "to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision."[11] Accordingly, existentialist morality does not consist in any particular dictums or principles, but rather in realizing one's capacity to create value. This freedom also accounts for what one might consider the spirituality of existentialist thought. This section briefly lays out the contours of such an account.

How does the existentialist conceive of the relationship between freedom and morality? On this view, freedom does not mean that we can do or choose absolutely anything. An individual is only free within a particular situation, and there are facts about the world that present certain constraints on action.[12] For example, we are biological creatures that need certain things in order to live, we find ourselves situated in social, cultural, and historical contexts that afford certain possibilities and preclude others, and we are bound by decisions and actions that we have already made and

taken.[13] However, within those constraints, we are able to choose what to do and who to be, and in so choosing, we are creating values. For example, when a person gets married or has children, she chooses one possibility among others. In so doing, she is, in effect, asserting the value of marriage or family. She does not choose marriage or family because it is good prior to her choice. Rather, things in the world have values, make demands, lay down expectations, and so forth only because one endorses those values, demands, and expectations. To regard those norms as objectively good independent of one's acts of self-creation is an example of bad faith or inauthenticity; it is a way of attributing power to things that are in fact within one's own power. One sees oneself and others as determined, whether by nature or circumstances, to be certain ways and do certain things. Feeling like there is no choice, the inauthentic person avoids grappling with her own freedom and taking responsibility for her action. However, the individual is "the one finally who makes the values exist in order to determine his actions by their demands."[14] This is true whether one recognizes it or not.

Thus, existentialist humanism emphasizes personal responsibility for making morality. A person must recognize that, in choosing to act one way rather than another, she is creating value. And she must recognize that, in creating value, she is creating value "for all men."[15] She is essentially affirming through her choices that some course of action is good for all people in that situation. Her choices and actions have universal significance, and she is responsible for all the consequences that follow from them. So, in getting married or having children, a person is never simply acting for herself. She is, instead, making a decision with profound political and social implications for all people in society, including those who are prohibited from marrying, children who lack families, and so on. Failure to appreciate this is another form of bad faith.

In judging the morality of a particular decision, what matters most is not the course of action one takes, but the principle behind it. Sartre illustrates this point using the example of two similarly situated women who make what appear to be completely opposed choices.[16] Both are in love with engaged men. One chooses to renounce her love in the name of solidarity and respect for the institution of marriage; the other chooses to pursue her love for the higher good of passion. Sartre sees these decisions as both moral, and, in fact, morally equivalent. In each case, the woman recognizes and exercises her freedom to determine values. Her choice expresses a principle that she affirms "for all men," and she would live according to this free commitment even if she ended up on the opposite side of circumstances. Her commitment to the institution of marriage or passion transcends the particular details of her person. In contrast, Sartre imagines the same actions being taken for different reasons – renouncing love

out of fear of social judgment or pursuing love out of lust. These actions or choices lack any moral quality because they are not executed in the name of freedom. Rather, the person feels bound by an external constraint – societal expectations or irresistible sexual desires – that determines her actions. This person acts in bad faith because she fails to acknowledge her freedom to decide. Insofar as she fails to take responsibility for her freedom, she is a moral failure.

The spirituality of existentialist humanism is based in the conscious devotion to exercising freedom and the profound power it accords us. As a formal capacity to choose and act, freedom is not, like God or the Good, a transcendent good in the traditional sense. Although it can be described as infinite, it has no essential nature or form. Indeed, the whole point of existentialist humanism is that no such good exists – and that is itself the opportunity for a different kind of spiritual aspiration based in freedom. Existentialism calls upon each of us to be heroes of a sort – "ready to survive mid-air," "noble enough to live with emptiness, and strong enough to choose a course which [we are] even ready to die for."[17] The undertaking is daunting, but also not without consolation. The sort of spiritual exhilaration that is available to the existentialist is captured by Nietzsche's description of the "free spirit":

> Indeed, we philosophers and "free spirits" feel, when we hear the news that "the old god is dead," as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea."[18]

Through exercising the freedom to create value, each of us is able to transcend our situations and take on a role traditionally ascribed to God, the Creator: "to be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God."[19] This aspiration is at the core of the existentialist's "religion of existence."

Existentialist morality is thus infused with a sense of spiritual mission. Based on the principle of freedom, it opposes the easy and all-too-common temptations of bad faith and thoughtlessness. In urging us to take full responsibility for the creation of value, it calls upon us to stake our whole lives and those of others on our decisions. This requires an inordinate amount of honesty about what one's choices mean, as well as courage to face how they impact the whole of humanity. When every decision is potentially the creation of value, the scope of morality quickly expands to

the whole of life. And when it implicates the fate of humanity, morality becomes profoundly consequential.[20] Existentialist humanism thus offers an experience – an "intensification of life" that is modeled, consciously or not, on a model of religious conversion as a "deepening" of one's commitments through thought and action.[21] Its vision of moral life is a far cry from the "don't care" mood and the milquetoast morality feared by James. Existentialist humanism promotes the morality of heroes. It is not difficult to see it as a response to the spirituality problem.

3.

While a resolution to the spirituality problem might change one's conception of morality, it should not do so beyond recognition. In "The Idea of Perfection," Iris Murdoch shows how the existentialist view violates common sense about morality. She claims that the "ideal situation" in morality is not free choice, but "something very much more like 'obedience'."[22] In aspiring to be moral, one aims to conform to a kind of necessity, which pertains to what must be done or chosen because it is good, right, just, kind, honest, and so forth. Closely related to concepts such as "must" or "ought," the concept of necessity is familiar in moral life, and it is critical to the phenomenology of moral experience. The act of assisting someone in need or respecting a person one disagrees with, say, feels like a response to an external demand rather than an individual decision; it seems like something that must be done. This sense of necessity accounts for the seriousness that we associate with moral life, and the appropriate response is obedience. Insofar as existentialist morality fails to account for the importance of obedience to demands one did not choose, it misses an essential feature of moral life. If this is correct, it cannot resolve the spirituality problem.

Of course, Sartre denies the existence of necessity in moral choice. We might feel the pressure of "must" and "ought," but there is nothing, he thinks, that we must do or choose. This is the lesson of what he calls "abandonment," which he spells out in the following way:

> There could no longer be any *a priori* good, since there would be no infinite and perfect consciousness to conceive of it. Nowhere is it written that good exists, that we must be honest or must not lie, since we are on a plane shared only by men. Dostoevsky once wrote: "If God does not exist, everything is permissible." This is the starting point of existentialism.[23]

As Sartre notes here, the force of moral necessity, of "musts" and "oughts," is traditionally attributed to divine command. However, he

denies the existence of a divine commander, and he thinks that secular attempts to reinstate a sense of necessity through the assertion of *a priori* values or rules are simply *ad hoc* ways to avoid facing that reality.[24] Commandments make no sense without a commander.[25] Sartre illustrates the concept of abandonment with the example of a student who is torn between joining the Resistance and staying with his mother.[26] The student has reasons for both courses of action, but there is no necessity – no "must" or "ought" – in either choice. Between the two options, he is totally free to decide, which means he must create or invent a law for himself. Sartre compares the student's choice to the creation of a work of art: there is nothing, he says, that an artist ought to paint and no *a priori* rules for what a painting must look like.[27] The point of the comparison is that there is no more necessity in moral choice than there is in art.[28]

However, Murdoch's conception of necessity does not refer to anything that could be known *a priori*. On the contrary, it is known through "attention," or the "just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality."[29] This gaze is not the neutral observation of science, and the truth that it yields is not available to just anyone. Rather, attention demands effort, sensitivity, compassion, and imagination; it requires a person to set aside her own interests and needs to appreciate the full and particular reality of another. A person who attends to things achieves "a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline."[30] This sort of attention takes time. It is the prelude to knowledge, and it is itself a moral achievement.[31] It is also, she thinks, required for moral action. Someone who fully attends to a situation knows what needs to be done; all that is left to do is to act accordingly. That is what obedience means.

Indeed, in what might be seen as a direct rebuttal to Sartre, Murdoch claims that obedience to necessity is something that "any artists will readily understand."[32] Although there are no *a priori* rules for art, there is a standard that exists beyond the artist's decisions. That standard is reality or the way the world is, and it would not be a stretch to say that the artist must obey it insofar as she strives to render her subject in a faithful way. Arguably, this is what all artists seek. Even if their subject is a matter of personal experience, the goal is to be truthful to something real. If one is a good artist, novelty and imagination are brought in service to this end. (Bad art, which Murdoch labels the product of "self-consoling fantasy," reflects nothing more than the will of its creator.[33]) This means that, in depicting reality, good art will not all look the same. But all of it brings us to see things in a new light and shows the world for what it really is. It is the

product of obedience to necessity, since it reflects goods and oughts that were not products of a free act of the will.

So while Sartre may be correct that moral choices do not proceed according to *a priori* rules and that there are no divine authorities, the moral person, like an artist, might still seek necessity. In making moral choices, she seeks to discern what is good or what must be done truthfully and to respond appropriately. This should not be taken to mean that there is only one way to adjudicate any given moral dilemma or that every similar moral situation will be resolved in the same way. Like good art, moral choice yields different results depending on the particularities of each situation. Flexibility, innovation, and creativity are key, though these qualities are not deployed to express or actuate one's personal wishes. They are instead brought in the service of meeting a standard beyond oneself, to which the appropriate attitude is obedience. This sense of obedience does not undermine one's personal responsibility. On the contrary, it expands it, as one is responsible not just for one's actions, but also for one's habits of attention. That is to say, we are responsible for how we see the world and the moral challenges it poses; we are responsible for being able to discern what is necessary.

That is, of course, not always easy to do. It is not always clear what a situation demands. Sometimes we are forced to choose between incompatible courses of action with little sense of what we ought to do. And it is worth pointing out that it is exactly cases like that – should the student stay with his mother or join the Resistance? – that make Sartre's picture of moral choice seem credible. These situations induce a sense of paralysis because reality seems to offer no clear directive. Indeed, we might add, only those who pay close attention are capable of even appreciating such dilemmas. Someone less sensitive to the nuances of the situation than the conflicted student would likely have been more decisive. Thus, Sartre thinks that uncertainty about what to do forces us to create values through our choices.

But as Charles Taylor points out, moral dilemmas only make sense if we are torn between visions of value that precede our choices.[34] On the one hand, the student thinks that loyalty and filial piety are necessary, and he would feel wretched by being disloyal. On the other hand, he thinks one must have the courage to stand up to evil, and he would be ashamed to be cowardly. In seeing a potential action as loyal or disloyal or as courageous or cowardly, the student is responding to an external reality laden with values. These evaluations exist within a "horizon of evaluation" or moral perspective, in which there is a difference between noble and base or higher and lower that the student did not himself create. The evaluations are not themselves the products of radical choice, though there is a choice to be made – one might even say, a radical choice – between them.[35]

We could say that the student decides which necessity to obey, and for that, he must take responsibility. He is responsible, for instance, for being able to explain his choice and to articulate the values it expresses, and he is responsible for reflecting on those values so as to confirm or even disconfirm their legitimacy.[36] But he is not responsible for the creation of value itself.

In contrast, Taylor suggests that the existentialist hero – a person who really did make moral choices without a sense of necessity – would appear disturbingly shallow. This gives us a more precise way of articulating why the existentialist conception of morality seems so lacking. Without the backing of antecedent values, the existentialist's choices could register nothing more than preferences or, perhaps, something even less than that. This individual would be what Taylor calls a "simple weigher," who can say nothing about his decisions besides the fact that he felt like it.[37] As a decider, he could feel no sense of real regret, since he would not have experienced any sacrifice of value. The road not taken would simply have been an option that he did not choose, not a value whose desertion leaves some moral residue. And he would have no substantive way to compare his options or to explain the evaluative superiority of the road he did take. Indeed, it is unclear that he would even be capable of recognizing a moral dilemma in any deep sense of the term. In this light, the existentialist's heroism appears quite small. As Taylor explains, his moral decisions would be qualitatively no different than selecting pastries off a dessert tray. Untethered to any external sense of necessity, his creativity comes off as shallow and trivial. And in asserting his choices as applicable "to all men," it is hard not to think that he takes himself a bit too seriously.

The existentialist hero does not, then, embody a picture of moral agency that coheres with common experience. His failure to appreciate the weight of necessity and the importance of obedience undermines the notion that he has a serious relationship to morality. On the contrary, his relationship to morality seems quite shallow, which makes the heroic intensity with which he approaches moral choice seem delusional and self-aggrandizing. If this is the most that existentialist humanism can offer us, it does not deserve to be considered a real option for resolving the spirituality problem.

4.

A second, related objection to existentialist humanism is provided by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly. In *All Things Shining*, the authors take a broad perspective on the influence of existentialist views in modern life. The aim of their book is to help people find meaning in a secular age. While the authors are not particularly interested in morality, their

argument has bearing on our concerns. For it suggests that a sense of obedience to external necessity is critical for the very possibility of sustained human agency. In essence, their argument shows that the existentialist vision of a spiritualized morality is not just morally shallow, but ultimately unlivable for human beings.

Dreyfus and Kelly's argument take form through a discussion of the novelist David Foster Wallace, whom they depict as engaged in what could be described as a life-long struggle to realize the spirituality of the existentialist hero. On their view, Wallace was uniquely attuned to the sadness of the modern secular age, which originates in what they call the "burden of choice" – or what Sartre would see as the responsibility of freedom – that confronts people today.[38] He rued the fact that he and his generation failed to inherit any "meaningful moral values" and, like a good existentialist, took it upon himself to fill the void.[39] Believing that the "sole possibility for meaning…is found in the strength of the individual will," he tried to cultivate control over how and what he thought.[40] He thought that meaning could come from any activity as long as one is "conscious and aware enough to choose what [one pays] attention to and to choose how [one constructs] meaning from experience."[41] This means that a community of IRS examiners skilled in the art of thought control could find ecstatic bliss in the soul-crushing boredom of checking tax returns day in and day out.[42] And it means that, through the sheer force of will, it is possible to "experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type of situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down."[43]

The authors make clear that they think that Wallace, who committed suicide at age forty-six, failed in the endeavor, though they do not attribute his failure to weakness. The problem is alleged to be the existentialist idea of freedom that he tried to realize. Wallace believed in the spiritual promise of an "infinite freedom" to create meaning out of anything, such that there are "literally no constraints whatsoever to the meaning we can construct for our experiences."[44] Infinite freedom is the freedom to give meaning to one's experiences without a sense of necessity, or what needs to be done or chosen because it is antecedently meaningful, worthwhile, or good. According to Dreyfus and Kelly, the problem is that such freedom is "impossible" for a human being; it is "the freedom of a god, a freedom no mortal life can sustain."[45] A person might be able to live with this freedom for a while, but it is ultimately unlivable for a human being. Thus, despite his best efforts, Wallace was unable to achieve infinite freedom and its promise of spiritual fulfillment. On their view, his failure was caused not by weakness, but by "the deep and abiding humanness in his spirit."[46]

Dreyfus and Kelly are not explicit about what, exactly, it is about humanness that makes infinite freedom unsustainable. Extrapolating from their discussion, I suggest that the difficulty comes from the fact that our agency is truth-directed. It matters to us that our decisions and choices rest on some external necessity outside of us. We crave a kind of legitimacy or appropriateness that can only be conferred by the world. This is an expression of our capacity to reflect on ourselves and to recognize truth and error. We want to get things right in our decisions, not just to have them be ours. If all that mattered to a person is what he decided, there would be no need to make claims of meaning or value, claims which ostensibly aim at some objectivity or truth. A person who tried to live out choices grounded only in infinite freedom, who took himself to be inventing meaning and value with no constraints at all, cannot be assured that they have any external legitimacy. All he can say for certain is that they reflect his personal fiat. Most people would find this unsettling; they need more reason to believe that their choices are legitimate. It matters to them that their actions and decisions are appropriately fitted to the world and supported by external reality. Living out a commitment to choices that are backed by nothing more than their freedom would require a level of confidence that no normal human can have.

What is true in general about meaning and value is even truer with respect to spiritual meaning and value. The desire to hit on the truth is particularly acute for spiritual devotion, the whole point of which is to be in contact with – I would even say, to "obey" – ultimate reality. However passionately or intensely a person felt, this devotion would be entirely undermined by learning that the object of one's devotion was false or empty. Moreover, unlike other activities, spirituality has little to no extrinsic or material benefits in the world. Even if examining tax returns were an intrinsically meaningless activity, it still could be a way to make a living. But outside of itself, spirituality is good for nothing. Wrongly directed spiritual devotion is thus especially costly for a person, and the recognition that one is fallible is a key motivator in seeking validation. As Dreyfus and Kelly explain, this is why "sacred communities" are so important: "The sense that one is joined with one's fellow human beings in the celebration of something great reinforces the sense that what one is celebrating really is great."[47] The experience of others offers additional confirmation that one's agency is directed at the right things. While such confirmation is certainly not foolproof, it is highly desirable for finite knowers like us, who have limited perspectives and experiences. It is perhaps no accident that Wallace depicted his spiritual tax examiners as part of a community.

Thus, the life of the existentialist hero is not just morally shallow. A life centered on infinite freedom is unsustainable, because we have a

deep-seated need for our values to be legitimate. The only way to meet this need is to accede to the demands of external necessities, which precede the act of the individual will. But this is what existentialists reject. In so doing, they reject the very grounds on which we might hope for redemption.

5.

I conclude that the spirituality of existentialist humanism presents something of a mirage. The prospect of the existential hero, who takes responsibility for creating value in a godless world, has some appeal. It is certainly a way to take moral choice seriously. However, moral life involves more than making choices. It involves recognizing goods and values that precede our choices and that are not of our own making, goods and values that bind us with necessity and demand our obedience. Insofar as it is blind to such goods, the existentialist approach to morality is shallow, and while this approach might offer some consolation in a godless world, it is ultimately unsustainable for a normal human being. In the words of one critic, there is "a sort of heroism in this attitude, but very little humanity."[48]

But though the existentialist does not take the existence of external values into proper consideration, we should not lose sight of what made his view so appealing in the first place. The existentialist conception of infinite freedom reflects the ethical aspiration to transcend beyond the normal and the natural. This aspiration, which is properly described as spiritual, is not merely a matter of conformity to an ideal of human flourishing, compliance with moral principles, or anything else of that sort. The existentialist's failure to deliver a spiritualized morality does not mean that the aspiration to transcend the natural is misguided, but rather that it cannot come from personal fiat alone. Our spiritual aspirations are not a matter of grit and resolve, but inspiration. They are conjured by something outside of ourselves that is breathtaking and worthy of reverence. These aspirations must be realized in obedience to a higher good. In short, for the kind of spiritualized morality we seek, it is necessary to submit to a sacred reality that is greater than the self.

Between Aristotelianism and existentialism, the challenge facing the secularist comes into better view. Nature embodies the necessity of perfection but lacks the spiritual quality of infinitude, while freedom offers the spiritual quality of infinitude but lacks the necessity of a perfection. The secularist who seeks a spiritualized morality toggles between these two options – something too mundane to support spiritual love and something too empty to support a serious morality. Given this, it is understandable why one would be skeptical of the prospects for a secular resolution to our problem, for it seems that the only thing that could get both spiritual uplift and moral necessity is a supernatural perfection: "it

is no accident that expansions of the repertoire of human virtue have so often been associated with aspiration and devotion directed toward a superhuman, transcendent Good"[49] And to this point, it is worth noting that Murdoch, Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly – each, in his or her own way, attuned to the spirituality problem – are all theists of a sort. Taylor is a traditional Christian. Murdoch, as we have seen, advocates for a neo-Platonism based on a supersensible Good or perfection that retains all the essential characteristics of God. And Dreyfus and Kelly argue for a polytheism that is modeled after the worldview of Homer. Unfortunately, these views are forms of religion or, at least, refined religion, and for that reason, they must be seen as options of last resort for a secularist. To put it rather crudely, they all require one to believe in the existence of some perfect being or beings that are unaccounted for in the regular inventory of the natural world. Most secularists will find this proposition difficult, if not impossible, to accept.

But while the spiritualized morality of theists is centered on a perfection, perhaps that of secularists need not be. What if it were possible to not see things in the light – or the shadow – of perfection? This, it seems to me, is the possibility we find in the thought of Confucius. Roughly contemporaneous with Socrates, Confucius lived during a particularly violent and turbulent period of Chinese history. I would not say that he confronted the spirituality problem *per se*, but he did face something similar, for it seemed to him that, despite numerous pretensions to moral refinement and rectitude, almost no one among his contemporaries even cared to be good. Confucius sought to bring people back to goodness through awareness of the "one vast, spontaneous and Holy Rite" that is human life itself.[50] The consciousness he sought to instill does not require belief in the existence of perfect or divine beings. Instead, he finds freedom and necessity in the social world of culture and community. This moral perspective, which is still very much alive in East Asian societies today, draws on many assumptions and sensibilities that are foreign to the modern West, and I do not think it can be adopted by Western secularists wholesale. But it is possible to learn from it. Above all, it provides just enough leverage to see things anew and to catch a glimpse of a sort of non-supernatural, but transcendent form of goodness that, while not perfect, might be just great enough to inspire spiritual love and devotion.

Notes

1 Kevin Aho, *Existentialism: An Introduction* (Polity, 2014), 5–9.
2 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Yale University Press, 2007), 53. Existentialists have traditionally been divided between the religious and atheistic. What I say here applies to the atheistic existentialists.

3 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 41.
4 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 52–53.
5 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 29.
6 Aho, *Existentialism*, 55–56.
7 Noreen Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 16.
8 Mary Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics* (McMillan, 1967), 16 (italics original).
9 A good discussion of this can be found in Matthew Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (Penguin, 2010), Chapter 2.
10 See, for example, Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics*, 56–57 and Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001), Chapter 7.
11 Simone Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Philosophical Library, 1948), 24.
12 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* tr. Hazel Barnes (Washington Square Press, 1992), 629.
13 Jonathan Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 60–62.
14 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 77.
15 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 23.
16 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 50–51.
17 Norman Mailer, "On Sartre's God Problem," *The Nation*, June 6, 2005.
18 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Kaufman (Vintage Books, 1974), Book 5, sec. 343.
19 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 724.
20 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 46.
21 Khawaja, *Religion of Existence*, 48–54.
22 Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 2001), 39.
23 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 28–29.
24 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 27–28.
25 See Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19.
26 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 30–34.
27 Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 45.
28 One could say that there is a necessity that emerges once the decision has been made or the painting has been painted. But this is not the sense of necessity raised by Murdoch. Its source is not external, and it does not command obedience.
29 Murdoch, "Idea of Perfection," 33.
30 Murdoch, "Idea of Perfection," 37.
31 Murdoch, "Idea of Perfection," 37.
32 Murdoch, "Idea of Perfection," 38.
33 Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 2001), 83.
34 Charles Taylor, "What is Human Agency?," in *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 29–30.
35 Taylor, "What is Human Agency?," 33.
36 Taylor, "What is Human Agency?," 35–42.
37 Taylor, "What is Human Agency?," 31.
38 Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (Free Press, 2011), 21.
39 Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, *All Things Shining*, 25.

40 Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, *All Things Shining*, 45.
41 Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, *All Things Shining*, 38.
42 Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 31–36.
43 Dreyfus and Kelly are here quoting Wallace, though the source is not cited (40).
44 Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 49.
45 Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 49, 51.
46 Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 42.
47 Dreyfus and Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 193.
48 Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics*, 38.
49 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 56.
50 Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Waveland Press, 1972), 17.

5 Confucian Humanism

1.

Since Jesuits first made contact with China in the 17th century, Western attitudes toward the Chinese have contained a mix of puzzlement, suspicion, and admiration. Mutual understanding has not come easily, if at all, and this is so particularly on the topic of religion. Aspects of Chinese life, such as the practice of ancestor worship and a belief in the existence of ghosts and spirits, seemed amenable to religion. But the Chinese also evinced a distinctively pragmatic, even transactional, approach to religious matters that indicated a failure to internalize what the proselytizers regarded to be the right sorts of attitudes and beliefs.[1] The American missionary A. H. Smith, having spent fifty-four years in China, explained the difficulty by attributing to the Chinese an "absolute indifference to the profoundest spiritual truths in the nature of man" and a "ready acceptance of a body without a soul, of a soul without a spirit, of a spirit without life, of a cosmos without a cause, a Universe without God."[2] The verdict, harsh but not exactly wrong, speaks to a tendency in Chinese thought that has been noted by scholars and non-scholars alike.[3] Religion has simply had a weaker hold on the Chinese imagination than it has had on the West. The Chinese never sought creation myths, which are the foundation of many religious creeds. And spirits and ghosts are conceived as parts of nature rather than supernatural phenomena.[4] Given all this, it is not surprising that modern sociological studies consistently identify China as one of the most atheistic countries in the world.[5]

More importantly, Chinese morality was never intertwined with religion in the way it has been in the West. This, too, has struck observers. James Bruce, the 8th Earl of Elgin, describes Chinese morality with a tone that is, at once, both admiring and patronizing:

> When the barriers which prevent free access to the interior of the country shall have been removed, Christian civilization of the West

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> will find itself face to face not with barbarism, but with an ancient civilization in many respects effete and imperfect, but in others not without claims to our sympathy and respect. In the rivalry which will then ensue, Christian civilization will have to win its way among a sceptical and ingenious people, by making it manifest that a faith which reaches to heaven furnishes better guarantees for public and private morality than one which does not rise above the earth.[6]

Speaking in the mid-19th century, Bruce is responding to what might be called an ancient tradition of Chinese humanism. Some scholars trace the emergence of humanistic thought among the Chinese to the beginning of the Zhou dynasty (11th century, B.C.E.), when the influence of religion began to decline.[7] But it is Confucius (trad. 551–479 B.C.E.) who is credited with "[bringing] Chinese humanism to its climax," and it is Confucian morality that is the subject of Bruce's remarks.[8] The *Analects*, which is a record of Confucius's conversations with students, contain the outlines of a moral perspective that is focused squarely on questions of human conduct with little to no appeal to anything supernatural or divine. As Confucians see it, virtue is realized through learning (*xue*) and cultural refinement (*wen*). They looked to an inherited ancient Zhou tradition as a template for living, and their primary objective was to bring people back to this way (*dao*), a project that involved the study and practice of traditional culture and customs (*li*). Based on this description, one could make the case that *Confucian humanism* represents a viable, non-religious approach to morality.

But while Confucianism might be viewed as promoting a sort of secular morality, it does not seem very promising for resolving the spirituality problem. A significant portion of the *Analects* is concerned with what many would dismiss as mere matters of etiquette. We learn, for instance, that Confucius would contract his body slightly when entering the gate of the Duke, never wear reddish-black or maroon for informal dress, and only leave events after all the elderly people had left.[9] He would not sit on a mat unless it was straight or talk after he had gone to bed, and he would bow before, rather than after, ascending the dais to meet the ruler.[10] Accordingly, many have seen the *Analects* as providing "an empirical, humanist, this-worldly teaching" that lays out the rules of good behavior.[11] Much of this may have been good advice to people in the day, but those looking for more spiritual sustenance are likely to be disappointed. Hegel was particularly unimpressed with its "speculative" potential:

> We have conversations between Confucius and his followers in which there is nothing definite further than a common-place moral put in the form of good, sound doctrine, which may be found as

> well expressed and better, in every place and amongst every people. Cicero gives us *De Officiis*, a book of moral teaching more comprehensive and better than all the books of Confucius. He is hence only a man who has a certain amount of practical and worldly wisdom – one with whom there is no speculative philosophy. We may conclude from his original works that for their reputation it would have been better had they never been translated.[12]

To add insult to injury, *De Officiis* is not a particularly impressive book. But it is rooted in the metaphysically and theologically ambitious ground of Stoic philosophy, whereas nothing comparable can be said for Confucius or the *Analects*.

Nevertheless, it would be hasty to dismiss Confucian spirituality out of hand. While Confucius does not expound on speculative topics, his teachings are littered with remarks that one would hardly expect from a "common-place moral." He says, for instance, that truly good people are distinguished, above all, by their capacity to love and to take joy in goodness, and he asserts the power of their virtue to inspire virtuous behavior in everyone around them.[13] He claims that moral progress culminates in the total freedom to follow the heart's desires, and he describes moral goodness in terms of harmony with the whole world.[14] These descriptions are more reminiscent of saints than mundane moralists, and we should take them as subtle intimations that some sort of spiritual fulfillment can be found in the midst of his humanist morality. More pointedly, the descriptions suggest that Confucian humanism might embody precisely the sort of thing we seek to discover – namely, a kind of spiritualized morality that does not depend on religion.

The purpose of this chapter is to tease out the outlines of this morality using the work of Herbert Fingarette, who credits Confucius with discovering the "sacredness of the secular." It is worth noting from the start that this discussion does not exactly parallel the discussions of Aristotelian and Existentialist humanisms. I will spend more time on exegesis and less time on critical discussion than in the previous chapters. My reason for this departure is twofold. First, I anticipate that Confucianism is less familiar to most readers and, thus, requires more explanation than the other two views. Second, and more importantly, while I think that Confucian humanism suggests a promising approach to the spirituality problem, I do not think that it can be adopted by modern secularists without modification. Although it will be useful to identify the obstacles to its adoption, critical discussion is only relevant once modifications have been made. Thus, in teasing out the outlines of Confucian morality, my primary goal here is to extract insights that will be useful for advancing a resolution to the spirituality problem that can speak to modern secularists.

These insights will be deployed in Part 3, where I advance and defend a view that draws heavily from Confucian thought.

2.

The spiritual dimension of Confucian thought is the subject of Herbert Fingarette's 1972 groundbreaking study, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. Fingarette's account is based on the Confucian conception of *li*. The word "*li*," which is usually translated into English as "ritual," originally denoted religious or sacrificial ceremonies. But by the time of Confucius, it had come to refer to "the authentic tradition and reasonable conventions of society," and a useful comparison for many *li* would be etiquette.[15] Accordingly, *li* govern high ceremonial occasions such as funerals and the meetings of dignitaries, as well as the most ordinary moments of workaday life such as sitting, commuting, and eating meals. They stipulate propriety in both public and private life, in action, emotion, expression, gesture, timing, spacing, clothing, the use of implements, the organization of physical settings, and even sleep. Confucius holds that facility with *li* is morally necessary and that "restraining oneself and returning to ritual" constitutes moral goodness.[16] According to Fingarette, his most profound insight is to see that, for this reason, they are also that by which human existence is made sacred or holy. Here, I briefly lay out the contours of this view.

The Confucian view of *li* – subsequently referred to as "rituals" – depends on the assumption that morality is an intrinsically social phenomenon. On this view, Goodness (*ren*), the highest human virtue, is an inherently social excellence, and morality is largely conceived in terms of "taking one's place" within society.[17] A society is not a mere collection of individuals, but a culturally unique system of living. No matter how primitive, every society is organized by distinct types of relationships and roles. Thus, the moral significance of rituals can be explained, in the first place, through their function in facilitating social life. This function has been usefully described in two ways. First, rituals articulate the "choreography" of social life.[18] They coordinate how people relate to each other across various contexts and situations. Coordination of action is necessary so that people can accomplish their ends together. As such, they are that through which people can successfully take their place in society, such that a lord can be a lord, a minister a minister, a father a father, and a son a son.[19] Second, rituals function as a kind of "cultural grammar" that enables people to communicate with each other.[20] Like rules of grammar, these conventions are culturally specific and arbitrary, but they are necessary to make oneself understood. So, the proper performance of ritual is a way that people can express love and respect, whereas failure to perform ritual can lead to grave misunderstanding.

In addition, rituals play a critical role in the formation of moral character. Although they think that human beings are social by nature, Confucians believe that goodness is not possible without a great deal of instruction and "deliberate effort" (*wei*). Human nature contains impulses that both draw people together and pull them apart – love and attachment, as well as hatred, disgust, selfishness, and so forth – and that, left unchecked, tend toward social chaos.[21] Thus, human nature must be shaped through a process that is likened to "cutting," "polishing," "grinding," and "carving."[22] Xunzi, a Confucian of the 3rd century B.C.E., compares moral formation to bending a straight piece of wood into a wheel and fashioning a chunk of metal into a blade, and he identifies rituals as the primary implements in this undertaking: "*li* cuts off what is too long and extends what is too short" and "subtracts from what is excessive and adds to what is insufficient."[23] By imposing patterns of behavior upon natural impulses, rituals make a person pleasing to others and acceptable to society. Formalized expressions of gratitude, say, promote congeniality; codes that restrain selfish impulses inhibit hostility. Through continued practice, one develops a second nature in which the rules of ritual have become internalized in everything one does, feels, and thinks. Eventually rituals cease being mere constraints or proddings on natural impulses, but forms of satisfaction and release that "nurture" desires and enable their satisfaction.[24]

Thus far, the Confucian view does not do much more than advocate the importance of social codes of conduct. This explains why it might be considered "good, sound doctrine," though it is also understandable why few would be spiritually moved by it. According to Fingarette, Confucius's brilliance was to appreciate the "magical power" of ritual, which is so familiar that it can escape notice. Fingarette illustrates this power with the modern example of a handshake. A person can initiate an entire chain of events by simply raising his hand to another. The other person will spontaneously raise his hand to grasp the extended hand, make eye contact, and shake. This act can convey a world of subtle meaning – mutual respect, goodwill, warmth, indifference, or perfunctory acknowledgment – with almost no effort or coordination. Another example is making a request in the customary way. This ritual enables a person to accomplish her will without any force or effort on her part. She can, for instance, "magically" retrieve a book from the library by making a request of another person. Through rituals, people are able to effect changes in the world that go beyond their individual capacities.

Thus, while rituals may appear trivial and superficial, they have profound significance:

> These complex but familiar gestures are characteristic of human relationships at their most human: we are least like anything else in the

> world when we do not treat each other as physical objects, as animals or even as subhuman creatures to be driven, threatened, forced, maneuvered. Looking at these "ceremonies" through the image of *li*, we realize that explicitly sacred rite can be seen as an emphatic, intensified and sharply elaborated extension of everyday *civilized* intercourse.[25]

Human beings are not mere animals, who accomplish their ends among others through natural impulses and drives. Instead, human interactions take the form of intercourse with "others as beings of equal dignity, as free coparticipants in *li*."[26] Rituals are "truly human patterns of mourning, marrying and fighting, of being a prince, a father, a son, and so on," through which it is possible to be respectful, kind, courageous, honest, and so forth.[27] Our natural impulses are formed or shaped by rituals, and by acting through them, we are able to relate to each other openly and transparently as moral subjects.[28] This is what it means to be civilized, and what distinguishes us from non-human animals.

On Fingarette's view, the Confucian promotion of cultural learning and social codes is not just a flat-footed moralism aimed at social harmony. It is, rather, part of a civilizing project that enables us to recognize each other as moral subjects and coparticipants in the "holy rite" of human community.[29] The parts of our lives that are "peculiarly human" are lived through ceremony.[30] These rites are deemed secular because they are not based in a "mysterious appeasement of spirits external to human and earthly life."[31] Instead, the holy and the sacred is found within human life itself, in the wondrous achievement of civilization. In this way, Confucian humanism might be said to embody a sort of spiritualized morality that is possible in a secular world.

3.

One might be skeptical of Fingarette's use of terms such as "magic," "sacred," or "holy." To the degree that these words apply, they seem to be little more than metaphors. The sorts of social interactions he is describing exist well within the laws of nature, and we can account for them through sociological, anthropological, and even biological means. No one will deny that they shape our lives in profound and subtle ways, but it is difficult to see them as magical or holy. In terms of approximating the sacred, the foregoing description of morality does not differ much from a sort of Kantian humanism, which enjoins us to respect others as persons, or as ends in themselves rather than things.[32] If we are to accept the Confucian view as a spiritualized morality, we need more than just a poetic redescription of the rules of civilized interactions as sacred rites.

To appreciate the spirituality of Confucian morality, we need to understand its relationship to *dao*. Though more often associated with Daoist thinkers, *dao* is one of the most fundamental, and mysterious, concepts of Confucian thought. The word simply means "way" or "path." In this context, *dao* is not just any way or path, but *the* Way. As such, *dao* has come to be classified as a sort of "ultimate," not unlike God, in being the "most fundamentally real, valuable, or fulfilling among all that there is or could be."[33] Fingarette claims that rituals are the "map or the specific road-system" of *dao*.[34] That is to say, *dao* is what differentiates sacred rites from mere rules of conduct.

Unfortunately, Confucians – seemingly on principle – do not provide a definition of *dao*, and there is nothing approaching a scholarly consensus on its meaning.[35] Worse, those who know best seem to think that we are poorly equipped to understand this concept. According to Robert Ames and Henry Rosemont, *dao* cannot be conceived through any of the typical categories of Western thought:

> Aristotle's categories demand from us that experiences be factored into things, actions, attributes of things, and modalities of actions – nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Hence, our first impulse in encountering the unfamiliar is to make such a determination. *Dao* becomes reified and objectified as "the *dao*." Yet *dao* has as much to do with subject as it does with object, and as much to do with the subject's quality of understanding as it does with the various aspects of the felt experience. Said another way, *dao* defies Aristotle's categories, being all of them at once.[36]

In a similar vein, François Jullien claims that *dao* defies Western understandings of being and becoming. Whereas the Greeks conceive of becoming in terms of the more fundamental concept of being, the Chinese concept of *dao* evokes pure becoming, or becoming without being.[37] And Fingarette observes that *dao* upends Western assumptions about activity and goal-directedness: *dao* should not be conceived as a way or path that leads anywhere in particular or that aims at any particular goal; it is a way without an end or *telos*.[38]

But though we cannot define *dao*, we know that it is strongly normative. Fingarette describes *dao* as "the right Way of life, the Way of governing, the ideal Way of human existence, the Way of the Cosmos, the generative-normative Way (Pattern, path, course) of existence as such."[39] This norm encompasses all things, both human and non-human. It does not exist separately from the world like God or a Platonic Form; it is not a perfection or an eternal ideal that can be articulated or known independently of how things are. Rather, *dao* is immanent in all of reality: "There

is no norm that transcends reality…instead, normativity is constantly at work, which is what eternally controls the whole 'flow' of reality."[40] The normativity of *dao* should not be conceived as the "right" way as opposed to a "wrong" way. Similarly, we do not say of the only door in a windowless room that it is the "right" way in or out. The door in that room is the only way.[41] And *dao* is the only way of reality, the alternative to which is "disorder, chaos."[42]

Confucius claims that it is up to humans to "broaden" *dao*.[43] To broaden a way is to make it more accessible or traversable. Since they participate in the flow of reality spontaneously or by nature, non-human animals and things do not need to broaden *dao*. But that is not the case for human beings, who are naturally both capable of and prone to acting in ways that are out of tune with the things around them. Humans access *dao* through rituals and culture, more generally. For instance, relationships between parents and their offspring exist by nature in humans and non-human animals alike. Whereas non-human parents and offspring can follow their natural impulses, human parents and offspring need the regulation of rituals. Loving relationships between parents and children must be realized through rituals that make distinctions in actions, expectations, and responsibilities.[44] In so many ways, culture brings human life into alignment with *dao*. Thus, Fingarette's claim that rituals are the "map or the specific road-system" of *dao* means that they bring us into alignment with ultimate reality.[45]

Although Confucians do not think it common, this alignment is realized in some exceptional people, such as the morally superior figure of the *junzi* or "gentleman," through the mastery of ritual. One useful example is Gongshu Wenzi, a virtuous minister who was known for never speaking, laughing, or taking. His reputation is explained in the following way:

> [He] only spoke when the time was right, and so people never grew impatient listening to him. He only laughed when he was genuinely full of joy, and so people never tired of hearing him laugh. He only took what was rightfully his, and so people never resented his taking of things.[46]

That is to say, Gongshu Wenzi was not silent or passive. Indeed, the description is compatible with a great deal of speech, laughter, and taking. However, he gained the reputation he had because his actions never came to be conspicuous. This achievement resulted from the masterful performance of ritual. Regarding speech, we can imagine that Gongshu Wenzi only spoke when it came his turn and only for so long as the occasion required. He would refrain from interrupting others and monopolizing conversations. He would not make inappropriate remarks or

speak unnecessarily loudly. He would pay attention to his interlocutors and speak about topics of interest or importance to them. One might come away from a conversation with Gongshu Wenzi with a sense of mutual understanding, or a sense of having learned something interesting, or even a sense of mutual disagreement. But whatever it was that left an impression, it would not be his actual speaking. Rituals governing speech enable communication and connection without friction, and allow us to share in thought and feeling. When we notice the speech itself – either because rituals are flouted or exaggerated – something has gone wrong. It is only bad conversationalists that are conspicuous in speaking.

What Gongshu Wenzi achieves with his mastery of ritual is the capacity for non-action (*wu-wei*). Non-action is not inactivity, but rather action that is so seamlessly integrated into the context and situation that it becomes unnoticeable. Whereas inactivity can be quite obtrusive, this sort of action does not stand out or call attention to itself. It happens naturally or spontaneously. Indeed, it flows so effortlessly from the "agent" that it does not appear to be a discrete action at all. From the outside, things around the *junzi* will simply be as they should be – whether that is celebratory, serious, workaday, or somber. Relationships will be sources of support, respect, and love; emotions will be satisfactorily released and expressed; events such as aging, sickness, and death happen smoothly. If this description seems to blur the distinction between agent and world, that is because the *junzi* acts in a way that harmoniously integrates everything around him. Through the expert performance of ritual, the interface between the person and the world becomes seamless.

Internally, the sense of integration in non-action is reminiscent of "flow states."[47] A good illustration of this is Confucius, who reports that, by the age of seventy, he was able to "follow his heart's desire without overstepping the bounds of propriety."[48] The sense of freedom mentioned here is the hallmark of a person who has been completely – physically, emotionally, and psychologically – transformed by ritual. So, Confucius was not riddled with doubt or anxiety. He did not need to resist temptations to improper action, nor did he need to overcome emotional obstacles to propriety. All his desires and impulses facilitated human intercourse and connection. This did not mean that he never encountered complicated or challenging situations, or that he was never conflicted or torn over difficult choices. It is appropriate to experience emotional distress and ambivalence in certain contexts, and certain situations call for careful deliberation. These can be appropriate responses to a complicated reality, and the *junzi* is more equipped than others to meet this challenge. However, he experienced a sense of complete freedom because his natural impulses had been disciplined to spontaneously harmonize with *dao*.

As Edward Slingerland argues, non-action differs from flow states in that it has an objective aspect as well. Flow can be achieved in isolation – say, in writing, fixing an engine, or taking a bike ride – because what matters is the sense of inner ease, focus, absorption, and enjoyment. While phenomenologically similar, non-action is essentially an achievement of integration with a larger whole: non-action "represents the highest degree of objectivity, for it is only in wu-wei that one's embodied mind conforms to something larger than the individual."[49] This "something larger" can include other people, institutions, historical communities, and even the natural world. Here, Xunzi describes the extent of ritual's reach:

> By ritual, Heaven and Earth harmoniously combine;
> By ritual, the sun and the moon radiantly shine;
> By ritual, the four seasons in progression arise;
> By ritual, the stars move orderly across the skies;
> By ritual, the great rivers through their courses flow;
> By ritual, the myriad things all thrive and grow;
> By ritual, for love and hate proper measure is made;
> By ritual, on joy and anger fit limits are laid;
> By ritual, compliant subordinates are created.
> By ritual, enlightened leaders are generated;
> With ritual, all things can change yet not bring chaos.
> But deviate from ritual and you face only loss.[50]

The point of this passage is to convey a sense of completeness: rituals integrate the whole world, and the person who masters them is aligned with all of reality. This is most dramatically expressed in Confucius's observation of Shun, a sage-king known for his virtue: "Is Shun not an example of someone who ruled by means of *wu-wei*? What did he do? He made himself reverent and took his proper [ritual] position facing south, that is all."[51] A masterful practitioner of ritual, Shun put his entire kingdom in order merely by sitting properly. Thus, Confucian spirituality is not just, or primarily, an internal matter of subjective experience or personal contentment.[52] Rather, it is realized in one's harmonious integration into the entirety of reality, both human and non-human.

This view challenges a familiar picture of spiritual life. The *junzi* is not otherworldly or ethereal. His spirituality is attained in the midst of ordinary life through a mastery of social conventions, and its defining mode is non-action. Save for the quiet joy of unimpeded spontaneity, his spiritual condition is essentially unnoticeable. But though it differs from the familiar picture, it is possible to recognize in this life a spiritual vision. Through his mastery of ritual, the *junzi*'s actions are broadened to integrate and be integrated into an ever greater reality. He moves harmoniously with

everything around him, swimming effortlessly in a vast sea of becoming that connects everyone and everything together – not just all of human society, including institutions, practices, customs, and relationships with others, but also non-human animals and plants, the seasons, the tides, the past, the future, the sun, the moon, and the stars. At its fullest, every action and gesture, no matter how small, reverberates through the entire world and *vice versa*. Thus, the Confucian view suggests the startling possibility that the most seemingly mundane act, such as wearing a certain sort of cap or walking with a certain sort of gait, performed in the appropriate way, can contribute not only to the realization of moral goodness, but also to the harmony of all things. Based in the workday rituals that organize daily life, this is a radically worldly vision of morality. However, it is also a spiritualized morality insofar as it is fundamentally oriented toward the ultimate reality known as *dao*.

4.

The Confucian view of spiritualized morality centers on the concept of *dao*. *Dao* is not a perfection. It is not an ideal form or pattern – or even being – to which people can aspire. While it is manifested through the actions and attitudes of people, *dao* is not created by individual acts of choice. But insofar as it comprehends the flow of all of reality, including morality, it is an appropriate object of spiritual devotion. For humans, *dao* is accessed through learning the culture and rituals that regulate moral life, and what distinguishes the morally accomplished from the morally mediocre is the ability to love and take joy in it.[53]

As a result, the *junzi*, who is moved through a spiritual devotion to *dao,* is neither a perfect specimen of natural goodness nor a godlike creator of values. He is neither Aristotelian nor existentialist. By developing facility with ritual, he shapes himself in ways that extend beyond nature and bends to a necessity that is not of his own choosing. The point of mastering ritual is not to conform himself to any ideal pattern or to assert his will on the world, but rather to harmonize with everything around him. In so doing, he becomes more deeply entrenched in the normative reality of *dao* and therein lies his greatest freedom. One is reminded of the saints, who are most free in their obedience to God – though, of course, the *junzi*'s obedience is not to a supernatural perfection, but to a generative-normative process that is immanent in the empirical world.[54]

Nevertheless, I do not see Confucian humanism as a live possibility for people living in secular, Western societies. For one thing, Confucian rituals are culturally and historically specific, which means that they cannot be simply adopted by those in Western societies. Of course, the view can perhaps be reconfigured with different rituals or, if one prefers a less loaded

term, customs or conventions. The more important obstacle is that the Confucian worldview originates in a very different cultural and historical context, one that shares no roots with the Western tradition. It is based on basic intuitions and starting points – for instance, a comfort with hierarchy and authority, a prioritization of the community over the individual, a relatively weak interest in personal agency – that are at odds with core Western beliefs, and these differences are not easy, if at all possible, to overcome.[55]

Two obstacles, in particular, are worth noting. First, any uptake of Confucian humanism requires deference to customs and social conventions. This will not be acceptable to most people in the West. A deep suspicion of human conventions can be traced back to the foundations of Western thought.[56] Since that time, Western moral theorists have tended to ignore the conventional or customary aspects of moral life – and, many will think, for good reasons. While the logistical value of customs is clear, their moral value, let alone their spiritual value, is not. Morality is often considered universal, whereas customs are particularistic and local. Morality is a domain of principles and ideals, whereas customs are the products of history and habit. Morality is serious, whereas customs are often trivial. Worst of all, some customs – such as those that encode hierarchies between different racial groups or genders – are outright harmful or unjust. Confucians have little to offer in response to these objections. Despite acknowledging that they are the invention of fallible humans, they are surprisingly uncritical of their rituals.[57] They do not seem bothered by the seeming arbitrariness of their customs – should one have six rows of dancers or eight, wear a hemp cap or a linen one? – or their relativity, and there is little awareness of the potential for rituals to do harm. If the spirituality of Confucian morality depends on the unquestioned acceptance of customs, we must consider it a non-starter.

The second obstacle concerns *dao*. *Dao* is what elevates the Confucian promotion of ritual to a moral and spiritual necessity. But the very concept of *dao* is itself questionable. It does not help to be told that *dao* is not a being or that it defies all categories of thought. Neither is it reassuring to learn that *dao* is immanent in all things or that it is, like the only door in a windowless room, the only reality. In short, the problem is that *dao* is metaphysically murky. Without being able to define or comprehend it, few people will come around to "believing in" it. And that would lose the whole point. For without *dao*, Confucianism is little more than a plea for conventional morality.

The worries compound when we consider that Confucians also say that *dao* is decreed by Heaven (*tian*). Carried over from ancient religious beliefs, Heaven is the supreme authority over all things and thought to be responsible for the turning of the seasons, the existence of living things,

the legitimacy of rulers, culture, and individual virtue.[58] The appeal to Heaven effectively gives up the whole game of secular morality. For while it may be possible to conceive of *dao* naturalistically, the same, it seems, cannot easily be said about Heaven.[59] Accordingly, some have argued that Confucianism is better understood as a sort of religion.[60] At the very least, it seems at least plausible to give it the label of refined religion. This thesis upends the prevailing understanding of Confucianism as a secular philosophy, and there would be nothing wrong with that in itself. But it would mean that Confucian thought would have little to teach us about how to resolve the spirituality problem, which a problem that afflicts modern people who have no truck with religion.

Nevertheless, since my goal is not to defend Confucianism as a viable option for modern secularists, it does not matter to me whether it ultimately counts as a religion or a secular way of thought. Regardless of its secularist credentials, it is possible to extract from this view an insight about the relationship between human culture, morality, and spirituality that speaks to secular audiences. I venture to say that most of us have encountered glimpses of this relationship on certain momentous occasions, such as weddings and funerals, in which we are brought together in communion with others. Such occasions tend to be heavily regimented by customs, and when the performance of customs is poor, their artificiality shows. But when the performance of custom is good, we are joined in a common experience with a shared sense of its significance. Our ties to others, the connections and dependencies that bind us together, are clarified and brought to light. We are able to express respect, love, and care for each other and to be respected, loved, and cared for in return. Our emotions spontaneously feed off of each other, finding release and expression in the world; they resonate through the landscape, plants and animals, physical structures and artifacts, celestial objects. The beautiful interconnectedness of things makes itself apparent. It would not be a stretch to say that, in these moments, the holiness of life comes to light. Confucians would see in these moments an alignment with the reality they know as *dao*. I suggest that a more ordinary way to describe this reality is tradition.[61]

In the following Part, I advance a view that is inspired by the spiritualized morality of Confucian thought. This view centers on the concept of tradition, and my claim is that tradition can take the place of God in secular moral life. Tradition is a comprehensive way of life that incorporates both moral and non-moral goods. Of course, as a product of human invention, it invites the same sorts of objections that are brought against customs, and these objections will need to be answered. It is also true that tradition is not viewed especially favorably by modern secularists, who tend to see it as retrograde, parochial, and unsophisticated. But, unlike the concept of *dao*, there can be no worry about its metaphysical status.

Every secularist belongs to some tradition or other. And, though it is not exactly clear what kind of thing it is, there can be no doubt but that tradition is part of the normal inventory of the natural world. The primary aim of the next Part will be to show it as a worthy object of spiritual love and devotion, one that can broaden, deepen, and motivate moral life.

Notes

1 See D. E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodations and the Origins of Sinology* (University of Hawaii Press, 1989).
2 Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier, 1900), 313.
3 The topic of religion and China is complicated and controversial. See, for example, Anthony Yu who argues that religion has been part of the state, both imperial and post-imperial, for over two millennia in *State and Religion in China* (Open Court, 2005), 3.
4 Frederick Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Thought* (Knopf, 1989), 13, 23.
5 China is cited as having the "largest number of positive atheists in the world" in "A world of atheism: global demographics" by Keysar and Navarro-Rivera in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford, 2015), 583.
6 Cited in Smith, *Chinese Characteristics*, 15.
7 See Ch'u Chai, "Chinese Humanism: A Study of Chinese Mentality and Temperament" in *Social Research* 26 (1959), 31–46; Charles Moore, *The Chinese Mind* (East-West Center Press, 1967), 5.
8 Wing-Tsit Chan, "Chinese Theory and Practice, with Special Reference to Humanism," in *The Chinese Mind*, ed. Charles Moore (East-West Center Press, 1967), 18.
9 Confucius, *Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Hackett, 2003), 10.4, 10.6, 10.13. Subsequent references to this text will be denoted *A*.
10 *A* 10.12, 10.10.
11 Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Waveland Press, 1972), 1–2.
12 G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, trans. Haldane (University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 120–1.
13 *A* 6.20, 2.1, 12.19.
14 *A* 2.4, 3.23.
15 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 6. There is some disagreement over the scope of *li*. See, for instance, Kwong-Loi Shun, "*Ren* and *Li* in the *Analects*," in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, ed. B. Van Norden (Oxford University Press, 2002), 53–54.
16 *A* 12.1.
17 *A* 8.8, 12.1, 16.13, 20.3.
18 Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (SUNY Press, 1990), 31. Amy Olberding draws attention to these two tropes in *The Wrong of Rudeness* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 95–97.
19 *A* 12.11; *Xunzi*, 19.20–3. All subsequent references to Xunzi will be noted as *X*. Quotations are taken from *Xunzi*, trans. Eric Hutton (Princeton University Press, 2014).

20 Chenyang Li, "*Li* as Cultural Grammar: The Relation between *Li* and *Ren* in the *Analects*," *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 3 (2007): 311–29.
21 *X* 19.1–11.
22 *A* 1.15.
23 *X* 1.3–11; 23.19–22; 19.304–5.
24 *X* 19.6–18.
25 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 11.
26 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 16.
27 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 7.
28 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 16.
29 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 16.
30 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 14.
31 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 16–17.
32 Arguably, there is something sacred in persons, and some would see this as pointing to a spiritual background. However, it is also possible to explain the dignity of persons without recourse to anything spiritual.
33 Jeanine Diller, "God and Other Ultimates," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/god-ultimates/>.
34 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 20.
35 *A* 5.13.
36 Robert Ames and Henry Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (Ballantine Books, 1998), 22.
37 François Jullien, "Did Philosophers Have to Become Fixated on Truth?" *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 4 (2002): 803–24.
38 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 20.
39 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 19.
40 François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things* (Zone Books, 1995), 246.
41 *A* 6.17.
42 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 20.
43 *A* 15.29. See also *X* 5.104–121.
44 *X* 5.115–21
45 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 20.
46 *A* 14.13.
47 See Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper, 2008).
48 *A* 2.4
49 Edward Slingerland, "Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Ideal of Wu-wei," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2000): 311.
50 *X* 19.126–138.
51 *A* 15.5. See also 8.18.
52 Fingarette, *Secular as Sacred*, 46.
53 *A* 6.20.
54 See Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, Book 2, 13; Descartes, *Meditations* 4, 58.
55 See, for instance, Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2016).
56 A major debate in the ancient Greek period was whether traditional morality is based on *nomos* or *physis*. See W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge, 1971), Chapter 4.

57 A lack of critical scrutiny is noted even by their strongest defenders, who sometimes try to minimize the significance of ritual. See, for instance, Philip Ivanhoe, "Reweaving the 'One Thread' of the *Analects*," *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 1 (1990), 31 and Jiyuan Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (Routledge, 2007), 102.
58 *A* 9.5, 7.23, 14.36.
59 However, Xunzi's discussion of Heaven does seem more naturalistic; the work of Heaven is just "that which is accomplished without anyone's doing it and which is obtained without anyone's seeking it" (*X* 17.27–9).
60 For instance, May Sim has argued that Confucianism qualifies as a religion because it offers resources for recognizing "an absolute" that is transcendent and providential and a form of "self-transformation…that identifies the human and the absolute." "Identifying with the Confucian Heaven: Immanent and Transcendent Dao," in *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 214.
61 Fingarette objects to the term "tradition," but this is because he conceives of tradition as merely historical patterns. See "The Music of Humanity in the *Conversations* of Confucius," *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10, no. 4 (1983): 334–5.

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Part 3

The Spirituality of Tradition

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6 The Way of Tradition

1.

In Part 1, I argued that the so-called death of God left a void that threatened to weaken moral life. Something subtle happened when mysticism drained out of morality. Despite areas of significant moral progress, people began to wonder whether "being good was no longer a good thing."[1] No longer illuminated by the light of a transcendent good, moral life grew smaller and moral sensibility coarsened. Moral goodness became less interesting. A weaker, less demanding standard of decency came to be seen as the more sensible moral ideal. And those who still aspired to be as good as possible became susceptible to new forms of moral extremism. I argued that these developments reflect a deficit of spirituality in the secular world. Through their love of God, theists are naturally inspired to a sort of personal transformation that enhances their commitment to goodness. Without a similar object of love, secularists are faced with the threat of moral mediocrity. Part 2 explored three options for reintroducing spirituality into secular moral life. While this discussion did not produce a solution, it revealed that a replacement for God cannot be found in either Aristotelian nature or existentialist freedom. A spiritualized morality must capture our aspirations to go beyond nature, while also including obedience to a good that is not of our own making. The challenge is to identify something that both fits that description and does not assume the existence of anything supernatural.

Over the course of Part 3, I will argue that traditionalism, or the love and devotion to tradition, can resolve the spirituality problem. A product of human invention that exceeds anything found in nature, tradition is not only a repository of both moral and non-moral values in their most concrete forms, but it also provides the larger context against which we come to be and make sense of ourselves as members of an enduring ethical community. Thus, I will argue, those who love tradition are connected to an infinitely rich source of meaning that can enhance moral life.

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I take this thesis to be reflected in the experience of people who, in their various and sundry ways, love and are devoted to tradition – preserving customs, celebrating holidays, practicing arts, handing down stories, studying history, collecting memorabilia, keeping memories alive, and so forth. These individuals are not necessarily better than others, but they see themselves as part of a larger whole that, while not perfect, is intrinsically good. This identification supports and enlarges their conception of what is noble and fine and infuses a sense of meaning into their engagement with morality. It is, I will argue, plausible to see their orientation toward tradition as spiritual. The traditionalist's experience thus suggests that we can address the spirituality problem by attending to and coming to love tradition.

In advancing this view, I realize that I face considerable headwinds. Modern secular societies – at least in the West – tend to be broadly cosmopolitan or globalist in character. Tradition is not viewed especially favorably in this climate, and traditionalism may appear just as unpalatable as theism. For this reason, my proposal will likely strike many as tribalistic, retrograde, or hopelessly old-fashioned. I will address these concerns directly, but it is worth saying from the start that they are never very far from my mind. While I certainly do not deny that pernicious forms of traditionalism exist, I think a healthy form of traditionalism is not only possible but redemptive. Thus, in addition to defending the moral and spiritual significance of tradition, my challenge over the next several chapters will be to separate good forms of traditionalism from the bad. This concern will be especially salient in Chapters 8 and 9, where I consider objections to my view.

Before that time, I will need to make a positive case for traditionalism. Part of the difficulty of envisioning it as a possible solution is a misunderstanding or, at least, lack of understanding of what tradition is. Thus, the goal of this chapter is simply to elucidate the nature of tradition with a view to addressing the spirituality problem. Specifically, I seek to reveal tradition as a sort of non-supernatural, but transcendent good that can potentially take the place of God in moral life. The full explanation of how traditionalism resolves the spirituality problem, including why tradition is a worthy object of spiritual love and how the love of tradition enhances moral life, will be reserved for Chapter 7.

2.

Tradition is a relatively familiar concept that, in one sense, needs little introduction. Through no choice of our own and even if we never think much about it, we all belong to some tradition or other. And though we may not like that idea, we do not tend to find it puzzling. Of course,

there are many kinds of tradition – literary, family, school, and sports traditions, just to name a few. But since my goal is to address the spirituality problem, I will only be concerned with the broadest and most comprehensive level of human tradition possible – namely, cultural traditions. By this, I do not mean particular traditions, such as eating turkey at Thanksgiving or throwing up mortarboards at commencement, but rather the wider framework that contains these examples – American tradition, English tradition, French tradition, Chinese tradition, and so forth. The latter are sometimes referred to as "ways of life." As such, traditions are often, but not always, distinguished by language, history, and geographic location. They tend to have characteristic contents – that is, determinate features such as customs, practices, institutions, beliefs, literatures, and art forms – as well as distinct self-conceptions. They are usually transmitted through a culturally and historically defined community. As a provisional definition, we might think of tradition as a comprehensive way of life that is passed down from generation to generation.

In defining tradition as a way, I reject the view that tradition can be defined in terms of its content. For example, Samuel Scheffler defines tradition as a "set of beliefs, customs, teachings, values, practices, and procedures that is transmitted from generation to generation."[2] Of course, every tradition must be realized through some content or other. However, no particular content is necessary to what a tradition is. This is because, contrary to popular belief, traditions are not fixed or static.[3] As long as a tradition is alive, it is continuously in flux, changing in light of new circumstances, undergoing modifications, receiving innovations, shedding some parts, adding others, and so on. And in this constant flux, no content lays claim to permanence. Everything can change in time, even what might appear at a given moment to be a tradition's most central or distinctive features. This is why, over the course of centuries, traditions that were once deeply religious can become secular and agrarian traditions industrial. So, life in 16th-century France looked radically different from 21st-century France, and no one knows what the 26th century will bring. But this does not mean that we are not talking about the same tradition. Adaptation is more challenging, and traditions more at risk, when radical shifts happen suddenly, as when Native American tribes were pushed onto reservations by the United States government. But even then, some were able to survive the loss of central practices through a combination of imagination, courage, and "radical hope."[4] So, although a tradition is realized through specific contents, it cannot be identified with them.

By invoking the concept of way, I also deny the view that tradition can be defined in purely historical terms – for instance, in the act of

transmission or teaching, or the fact of historical continuity. Here is an example from the historian, J. G. A. Pocock:

> [A] tradition, in its simplest form, may be thought of as an indefinite series of repetitions of an action, which on each occasion is performed on the assumption that it has been performed before, [where] each performance presupposes a previous performance, in infinite regress.[5]

This approach emphasizes the temporal aspect of tradition, its linking of the past, present, and future. It is true, of course, that history is an integral part of what defines a tradition. And since all contents in a tradition do not change at once, there will inevitably be values, customs, practices, and so forth that are repeated or shared between one historical phase of a tradition and another.[6] Nevertheless, we should reject that simple historical continuity or transmission alone defines tradition. If it did, extinction would not be possible unless every member of a tradition died at once, since simple inertia guarantees that some features will inevitably be carried over to or repeated in future generations. The fact that remnants of some Native American traditions – names or myths, say – continued to be transmitted once tribe members assimilated to Euro-American culture does not mean that those traditions survived. These vestiges only serve as sad reminders of what was lost. Something more robust is needed to ensure the survival of a tradition. In other words, tradition is a normative concept, something about which one could be right or wrong.

Finally, my definition is offered as a contrast to a teleological conception of tradition. An example of the latter is provided by Alasdair MacIntyre, who defines tradition as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[7] The goods that constitute tradition are primarily conceived in terms of overarching projects – democracy, say, or martial dominance – that are historically important to a particular society. Because projects can be realized through a variety of different contents, this definition allows for the reality of change. And because projects have purposes or ends, it also captures the sense of normativity lacking in the historical conception of tradition. However, this definition fails to account for what is right about the historical conception, since it makes tradition into something far more deliberate and consistent than it is. Traditions are just as much products of contingency as intention. They are full of contradictions and inconsistencies. Not only is it not possible to rid a tradition of such contradictions and inconsistencies, but it is not necessary. Michael Oakeshott says about tradition that "there is no sovereign purpose to be perceived or invariable direction to be detected; there is no model to be

copied, idea to be realized, or rule to be followed."[8] In other words, a tradition is not an ideal, essence, or "form of life."[9]

The concept of a way accounts for the strengths of these three approaches without their downsides. A synonym for "way" is "manner" or, even better, "style." Most often associated with the arts, styles are notoriously difficult to define because they resist articulation in terms of rules or principles and lack necessary or sufficient conditions.[10] They cannot be understood as forms or ideal patterns. But that does not make them the product of mere historical association. Styles have distinctive identities. They are identified by, but not reducible to, certain contents through which they can be realized. And as long as we have sufficient exposure to it, we know a style when we see it. Thus, the art historian Ernst Gombrich defines style as "any distinctive, and therefore recognizable, way in which an act is performed or an artifact made or ought to be made."[11] In apprehending style, one perceives "an elusive unitary physiognomy" – one could say, a family resemblance – that runs through disparate items.[12] There is no formula or hidden principle for how the elements of style must fit together. But, in their overall appearance, they "harmonize" with each other in recognizable ways.[13] The unity of style shows on the face of the whole.

Thus, I propose that we see tradition as a distinctive, and therefore recognizable way (or style) of living. Living is obviously more complex than arts such as painting or dance, but the basic thought can be adapted. Tradition can be recognized through all the activities that comprise the more comprehensive activity of life, such as dressing, dwelling, dining, parenting, making art, worshiping, working, celebrating, and mourning. Emerging in response to different material needs, contingent circumstances, and human decisions, there is no overarching principle or end that unites these activities into a whole. They will display a countless variety of internal ends and purposes, be embodied in or executed through an array of heterogeneous artifacts, and be regulated by myriad customs, practices, and institutions that do not necessarily have anything in common besides their historical properties. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern an "elusive unitary physiognomy" that runs through all contents from the projects and practices that are most central to society to the most subtle traces of culture – the utensils used for eating, the proportions of roadways, the color of interior light, the shape of handwriting, the signage of subway stops, the sounds machines make, the materials used for buildings, fashion, recreation, sports, and slang.

Of course, physiognomy is a visual metaphor and, as such, applies most clearly to physical things. It is perhaps not difficult to see how a unity might be manifest in a tradition's material culture – visual arts, cosmetics and fashion, architecture, gardening, furniture and utensils, roadways, machines, and the myriad artifacts that are used in everyday life. Disparate

as they are, these elements convey a culturally specific unity of appearance through similarities and affinities of shape, color, proportion, material, and so forth. Just consider, for instance, how the physical appearances of East Asian traditions contrast with Western European ones. It is hard to imagine a Japanese rock garden next to a French château, or silver utensils and crystal stemware on chabudai tables and tatami mats. Rock gardens, chabudai tables, tatami mats, châteaus, silver utensils, and crystal stemware are very different kinds of things, but we recognize which things go with which. The things that go together share a physiognomy that is evident in their appearances.

The contribution of non-material content such as language, ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, customs, practices, and institutions to a culturally specific unity is less obvious.[14] Ideas, attitudes, and values can find visual expression in material form. Other contents such as customs, practices, and institutions are embodied in or executed through material things that reflect their purposes and contexts – funerary customs in clothing and implements, farming or hunting practices through equipment, religious institutions in structures or shrines, and so on. Moreover, qualities such as simple, ornate, narrow, and broad can apply to both material and non-material items alike. This is why there is virtually nothing that scholars of particular traditions, such as cultural anthropologists and art historians, do not or cannot take into account. Ervin Panofsky's analysis of British style draws on architecture, gardens, the marginalia of illuminated manuscripts, poetry, the writings of Shaftesbury, and industrial design to explain the design of the Rolls Royce grill.[15] And the architect Adolf Loos famously claimed to be able to infer how an extinct people dressed, built their homes, lived, worshiped, made art, and thought by inspecting the shape of a single button.[16]

Loos's claim is surely overstated, and Panofsky may have oversimplified. But what both are getting at is the particular manner in which tradition unifies or gathers a manifold. A tradition is a way of life that integrates all parts of human living, however contingent or accidental, into a distinctive whole. It appears in everything from the grill of a Rolls Royce to a button on a shirt, to a tea ceremony, a garden, and a song because each part is "marked by the expression of the whole."[17] But while a tradition is manifest in everything within it, it is only recognizable in light of the whole. Everything within life is part of tradition, and in apprehending the whole, everything has bearing on everything else. So it is that learning a tradition is "unavoidably knowledge of the details," a matter of gaining sensitivity to "a concrete, coherent manner of living in all its intricateness."[18] Like Loos or Panofsky, a person with an eye for detail and an aesthetic sensibility can come to get a strong feel for a tradition, though it is also important to acknowledge that this kind of knowledge can never

be complete. Not only is there always more detail to know, but because a tradition can never stand still, there will always be new contents that alter the complexion of the whole.

There is, admittedly, some imprecision about the scope of particular traditions, and it can be difficult to discern where one tradition begins and another ends. This is a feature of my view rather than a defect. The boundaries of traditions are fluid and shifting; they can, in principle, never be defined as long as a tradition is alive. Traditions can relate to each other in complex ways due to historical circumstances. When groups of people come into contact with each other, traditions sometimes merge into one, or stay distinct but mutually influence each other. They can also diverge from a common source. In addition, traditions can be nested within each other, as French and English traditions are nested within a larger Western European tradition. These traditions share some key features based on common influences while diverging in others. However, this sort of nesting will end somewhere. For there is no largest human tradition. The traditions that exist were passed down from societies that emerged in geographically distinct regions of the world and developed in relative isolation for thousands of years. Their ways of life are based in history and contingent circumstances, and the differences are in many ways arbitrary. This development yielded a plethora of cultures that are not only distinct but also in many ways incompatible. Thus, while it can be difficult to distinguish one tradition from another, meaningful distinctions do exist. And insofar as each of us belongs to some tradition or other, we are, beyond any of our own doings, parts of historically contingent processes that differentiate us in deep and meaningful ways from others.

3.

Having defined tradition, I now argue that tradition is the ground of our *humanity* – that is to say, our being creatures that belong to a broadly ethical community, capable of responding to reasons and values, reflecting on what is worthwhile, cultivating virtues, fulfilling responsibilities, taking on projects, and living meaningful lives.[19] The concept of humanity is not equivalent to the biological concept of *human animal*, though they are related. As I see it, every human being is born a human animal and, in the normal course of development, becomes what I will describe as a *bearer of humanity*. My claim will ultimately be that the goodness of tradition derives from the way in which it elevates the human animal into a bearer of humanity. Because both tradition and humanity are things we tend to take for granted, this point is not easily apprehended. But we can catch sight of it by paying closer attention to the process of normal human development.

To begin, every human being comes into the world as a human animal. Human animals are part of the natural order, alongside plants, bees, and wolves; they are organisms that bear the specifically human form of life. Human life form is another way to refer to human nature or, to anticipate a later move, human "first nature."[20] It is articulated by what have been called "natural-historical judgments," or normative judgments that describe what it means to live as a member of a certain species.[21] So, for example, human animals metabolize through the consumption of food and drink; they reproduce sexually and perceive their environment through particular organs of sight, hearing, smell, and so forth. Such propositions are not based on statistical facts or even the behavior of the human animals that happen to exist. Rather, they describe an ideal of what a normally functioning human animal is like, and as such, they are the basis for determinations of health, or natural flourishing, in particular human animals.[22]

The development of humanity begins soon after birth through a process often described as *habituation*.[23] Habituation is usually considered as a specifically moral education, but it is in fact a much broader process whereby "all of our social animal nature is transformed by its being activated, as we live, in a rational way."[24] Initiated by parents and educators, this process seeks to cultivate certain dispositions of action, feeling, and thought in the young. To this end, educators treat the "motivational and evaluative propensities" of the human animal, such as natural needs for physical comfort and natural responses to pleasure and pain, as a sort of "raw material" to be shaped in particular ways.[25] They encourage the formation of new habits by guiding the young to practice certain sorts of actions – say, moderate, just, or courageous actions – that give shape to natural impulses. This work happens alongside and in concert with the natural emergence of rational capacities. Due to a natural "ability to internalize from a scattered range of particular cases a general evaluative attitude which is not reducible to precepts," practice calls into use the young person's developing perceptual, affective, and deliberative capacities.[26] As a result, natural impulses are formed in particular ways and "the practical intellect acquires a determinate shape."[27]

The end product of this process is a bearer of humanity.[28] The bearer of humanity might be described as a new kind of animal, one that has acquired a "second nature" that is rational. She remains a possessor of human life form and all the natural impulses that are essential to it. However, these impulses have taken new shape as her eyes have been opened to reasons to act, feel, and think in various ways. In contrast to the mere human animal, the bearer of humanity is a (more or less) autonomous member of an ethical community. She possesses a broadly ethical outlook, one that takes ways of acting, feeling, and thinking that are in line with

virtue as rational. She can reflect critically on the dictates of nature and choose to conform or depart from them. She can form an interpretation of what it means to be human and what it means to flourish. And while she will likely take what humans need for health into consideration, her conception of flourishing will reflect the projects, ends, and purposes that she and her community find valuable. The bearer of humanity may not be very virtuous, but unlike the mere human animal she was born, she at least knows better.

What I have recounted up until this point is rather familiar ground. What may be more controversial is my claim that tradition plays an essential role in this transformation. But consider how the bearer of humanity comes into her new habits. Scholars are keen to emphasize the novelty of this process, insisting, sometimes excessively, that nothing rule- or principle-like can have a place within it.[29] Especially at preliminary stages, however, something recognizably rule-like is required for the learner to latch onto. Habituation presupposes the existence of repeatable patterns that are clear and common enough to be recognized by the learner and projected onto new cases. These patterns do not come from nowhere. Instead, educators draw from the considerable resources of the traditions in which they live. This includes customs, practices, institutions, narratives, histories, myths, arts, landscapes, buildings, shrines, utensils, values, beliefs, and so forth – all the contents through which a tradition is realized. Thus, by tying the learner's emerging practical and cognitive capacities to the cultural resources of a tradition, habituation imparts culturally distinctive shapes onto the natural impulses and the emerging practical intellects of the young. In other words, when the learner transitions from being merely animal to being a bearer of humanity, she comes to exhibit the same culturally specific unity – or "physiognomy" – that defines the tradition in which she has been habituated.

To take just one example, customs of the dining table, practices of food preparation, and dining utensils shape natural needs and desires for food. By practicing these conventions, the learner acquires habits such as avoiding certain bodily functions at the table, eating three times a day, and suppressing the impulse to gorge. He comes to see meals as possible occasions for human solidarity and fellow-feeling, forms of hospitality, expressions of religious observance, and so on. In all, the nutritive functions of the human animal are brought into a world of meaning and value. Similar sorts of convention-guided habituation can be found in every part of life, as no part of the human animal is immune to being worked over.

That is not to say that educators cannot depart from tradition in particular areas. One might have reasons to instill non-conventional habits, and no one is perfectly conventional anyway. Nevertheless, the vast majority of habituation follows conventional patterns because there is simply

too much that must be coordinated if a person is going to successfully live within a society with others. This training need not be deliberate, and educators will not necessarily think of themselves as instructing their charges in tradition. Indeed, a tradition is often least recognizable to those who live within it: we tend to notice the traditions of others as "the way they live," while our own traditions appear simply as "the way things are." Thus, a culturally insulated Westerner may find eating with knives and forks around a dinner table only natural, and in raising her children, these habits may be transmitted without much thought or sense of their cultural specificity. That does not mean that tradition or "the way we live" is not transmitted, but only that it is not done so deliberately.

Knowingly or not, those who guide the development of the young induct their charges into a particular way of life. This work requires the introduction of a significant amount of content, as initiates must acquire a great deal of cultural knowledge before they can take their place in society.[30] They will need facility with the specific practices and institutions that organize everyday life, as well as the material objects through which life is lived. More importantly, initiation confers a way of seeing the world and a sense of how to go on within it. The initiate develops a feeling for what counts as appropriate action, feeling, and thought for the society in which she lives. She acquires a culturally specific sense of humor and beauty, of the fitting and the unfitting, the pleasurable and the painful, the relevant and the irrelevant, the admirable and deplorable. And she develops the sort of imagination and sense of possibility that will enable her to adapt her tradition to new circumstances and to provide criticism in meaningful ways. We tend to not notice how extensive and deep the initiation into tradition is because much of it happens before we are aware of it. However, anyone who has tried to assimilate to another culture knows just how extensive and deep, as well as how intricate and nuanced, it can be.

Given the account of habituation taken for granted by many philosophers, it follows that, if one is a bearer of humanity, then one has necessarily been initiated into some tradition or other. Earlier I defined the bearer of humanity in terms of participation in a practical reality defined by reasons, meaning, values, purposes, and ends that is unavailable to the mere human animal. We can now add that this participation is grounded in tradition. The bearer of humanity engages with practical reality through a framework that is cast in culturally laden concepts that reflect the interests and concerns of a historical community, structured according to certain ends and goods that are given, though not fixed, by what has come before, realized through culturally specific customs, practices, institutions, and dispositions that have come to organize shared life, and embodied in material objects that share a common history. For example, bearers of humanity in ancient Greece would have conceived of their lives in terms of

the concepts and language found in the texts of Homer and Hesiod. They would have realized action and thought through myriad religious sacrifices and prayers to Greek deities, preparations and training for hand-to-hand combat, the craft of shipbuilding and the art of navigating the Mediterranean seas, the harvesting of olives and the making of wine. They would have taken the courage of Achilles and Hector and the industry and justice of the Hesiodic farmer as models of virtue, and their conceptions of flourishing would have reflected ends and purposes brought into focus by the poets or "teachers of the Greeks." They would have conducted their everyday lives in the structures and through the furnishings and utensils available to Bronze Age humans. In short, the ancient Greek bearer of humanity, like all bearers of humanity, was a participant in a particular tradition.

Many philosophers, influenced by Aristotle and Kant, have acknowledged the origins and significance of humanity: it is widely recognized that human beings are rational animals that take shape through processes of habituation. The novelty of my account consists in the claim, borrowed from Confucius, that the shape that infuses the rational animal in habituation is given by the distinctive unity of style or "physiognomy" of tradition.[31] One might be tempted to say that tradition is human second nature. But since nature is associated with form and, as I argued above, tradition is not a form, that description is somewhat misleading. It would be more accurate to say that we are human animals in virtue of our form of life, but bearers of humanity in virtue of our way of life. Tradition is thus inseparable from one's humanity. So it is, I say, that tradition is the ground of one's humanity.

4.

While conceding that the development of humanity takes place in the context of a particular tradition, many philosophers may disagree with my conclusion that one's humanity is essentially grounded in a tradition. Tradition is the historically contingent and particular way of life in which one was habituated. However, many people consider humanity to be a universal concept that belongs to all human beings. In that case, it would be mistaken to ground humanity on tradition.

One way to understand this objection assumes that the "fundamental ingredients" of humanity are "reason and moral capacity," which are universal features that are common to all humans.[32] These capacities need to be developed through and practiced on particular content, but once they have been established, they are the basis of an autonomy that enables one to separate from tradition. Although she will continue to physically live within a particular way of life, a bearer of humanity will be able to assess

situations and make decisions based on her considered judgments about what is good, meaningful, and worthwhile rather than the way of predecessors.[33] That does not mean that she will abandon the responsibilities and obligations of her local community. But it does mean that the legitimacy of these responsibilities and obligations, to the degree that it exists, will have to be vindicated in terms of the responsibilities and obligations of rational or moral agency as such. On this view, humanity is membership in a universal, ethical community of rational agents, a community that transcends tradition. Tradition is only incidentally related to humanity as the condition of its development. This condition can be dispensed with altogether once the learner reaches the stage where she can reflect upon whether she ought to see, act, and deliberate as those in her tradition of origin do.[34]

This objection conflates what could be described as an aspect of humanity for the whole. Rational agency is certainly necessary for humanity, but it is not sufficient because humanity entails engagement with a practical reality that is inescapably determinate. We never act simply *qua* rational agent. Instead, our actions are taken and decisions made *qua* parent, child, teacher, student, employee, employer, producer, consumer, citizen, friend, neighbor, and, at the very limit, member of a local community – roles that are defined by the contexts, values, and expectations of particular ways of life. So, although it is in all cases a manifestation of our species' capacity for rational agency, what humanity means in ancient Greece, say, is very different from what it means in ancient China or modern America. The determinate considerations to which the bearer of humanity responds, and her self-conception in acting rationally, always refer back to her respective tradition.

However, there is another version of the objection that does not depend on such a formal understanding of humanity. One may say that I fail to recognize significant commonalities among bearers of humanity that go beyond rational capacity. Although traditions differ, a set of core concerns about issues such as child-rearing, friendship, aging, and death exists among people everywhere. These commonalities, which are about the substance of life rather than the form of rational agency, explain the roles through which we live. And while there is significant variation among societies, there also seem to be broad points of agreement over how to perform these roles well. These observations undercut the idea that one's humanity depends on tradition. For how is it that people from different traditions, especially those with no historical or geographical connection, turn out to have so much in common? And how is it that they are able to interact with and relate to each other? Accordingly, one might say that humanity consists in features that are common to all human beings – universal facts about human nature – rather than something as contingent, varied, and

particular as tradition. On this view, tradition can provide the colorful "fillings" for a universal conception of humanity, but its role is not more fundamental than that.[35]

While the universal conception of humanity is more determinate than rational agency, it is still quite abstract. In terms of conducting everyday life, there is no getting around the fillings provided by tradition. There is, for instance, no such thing as child-rearing *per se*. While all societies do rear their young, it must be done in one particular way or another – in communes, extended families, atomic families, and so on. The objection assumes that these differences are relatively trivial in that they are inessential to the understanding of one's humanity, but it is unclear why one must think that. Facts about human nature are unquestionably common to human beings everywhere. However, for a bearer of humanity, the activity of child-rearing is a function of how those facts are given form, and the ethically significant role of "mother" or "father" is not, or not merely, biological. There is no reason to think that the differences between communes, extended families, and atomic families are less significant than the similarities. At the very least, it does not seem possible to deny that the differences entail different senses of humanity by argument alone, for any argument must presume some controversial understanding of humanity that would itself be open to additional questioning.

Moreover, it is possible to explain commonality between traditions without appealing to a universal humanity. Consider the biological concept of analogy. Biological analogies are similar structures that arise from different origins – bird and bat wings, for example. Although they appear similar and have the same function, these structures evolved entirely independently from each other. They are "coincidences" of a sort, but the coincidence is not merely a matter of luck. Rather, analogies develop through what is known as "convergent evolution," which is to say, as responses to "similar environmental pressures and selective challenges."[36] Wings, it turns out, are a highly effective way to meet certain realities faced by animals in the natural world. So, the convergence of independent lines of evolution should not be surprising.

My point here is not to suggest that bearers of humanity are simply products of biological evolution. Since it integrates rationality, the development of tradition-bound conceptions of humanity is much more complicated than the development of wings. Nevertheless, the logic of analogy can be used to explain sameness and commonality between conceptions of humanity. Traditions are ways of specifically human life, and human life – by which I mean, the life of a specific sort of animal with the capacity for reason – presents its own, distinctive pressures and challenges. Insofar as all traditions give shape to the very same human animals, we should expect them to yield similar results. All bearers of

humanity develop in response to the same pressures and challenges of animal life and the same formal standards of reason. The fact that they resemble each other – that they share common concerns, hold similar values, develop similar relationships, take on similar roles, and so forth – is no mere coincidence.

Neither is the fact that bearers of humanity across traditions are able to understand and interact with each other. Traditions bring a person into contact with practical reality, and because traditions are so disparate, this reality will be experienced very differently across different traditions. Nevertheless, understanding and interaction between members of different traditions are possible because all traditions deal with common natural impulses and needs, as well as similar material environments. The challenges and opportunities that face human beings are close enough to allow for people of different cultures to be minimally intelligible to each other. Understanding and interaction, facilitated by translation, require formal rational capacities, but they do not require a common humanity. This is evident from the fact that it is possible to understand enough about a foreign people to know that they do not share one's conception of humanity.[37]

Thus, the fact that there are commonalities among bearers of humanity everywhere is not evidence for a more fundamental, universal conception of humanity that transcends tradition. Of course, we may sometimes speak of a universal humanity. But that concept is a loose way of speaking, which abstracts from the concrete conceptions of humanity on the ground. While all human beings possess humanity, humanity is itself a culturally specific concept. In other words, humanity is itself a pluralistic concept. There are as many conceptions of humanity as there are traditions.

5.

I now want to argue that a tradition is intrinsically good insofar as it is the ground of one's humanity. The nature of this goodness is not easy to articulate. At the same time, I venture to say that the goodness itself is entirely perceptible. It is perhaps less obvious to insiders because it is easy to take one's own tradition for granted. But it is, I think, quite evident to outsiders, who are better positioned to appreciate a tradition as a distinctive way of life. Whether we realize it or not, our response to foreigners tells us something about their traditions. Specifically, insofar as we apprehend them as bearers of humanity rather than human animals, we implicitly perceive the intrinsic goodness of their traditions – or so I argue.

The goodness of tradition is apparent, for instance, to the character of Cyril Fielding in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Fielding's response to

Indian civilization, which I take to refer to the same thing as tradition, is described in the following way:

> Civilization strays about like a ghost here, revisiting the ruins of empire, and is to be found not in great works of art or mighty deeds, but in gestures well-bred Indians make when they sit or lie down. Fielding, who had dressed up in native costume, learnt from his excessive awkwardness in it that all his motions were makeshifts, whereas when the Nawab Bahadur stretched out his hand for food or Nureddin applauded a song, something beautiful had been accomplished which needed no development…When the whirring of action ceases, it becomes visible, and reveals a civilization which the West can disturb but will never acquire. The hand stretches out for ever, the lifted knee has the eternity though not the sadness of the grave.[38]

Through the reach of a hand for food or applause for a song, Fielding glimpses the profound effects of tradition on the Indians. In particular, he is moved by the beauty of their gestures. Awkwardly dressed in native costume, Fielding is made aware that this beauty is the product of considerable artifice. However, in the Indians, the artifice reveals something unexpectedly beautiful. Sitting, lying down, reaching for food, applauding, movements that have been inscribed in the body through years of training, are of a piece with great works of arts and mighty deeds. And like many beautiful things, they carry intimations of indestructibility and eternity.[39]

I suggest that this experience is a response to what is known to artisans as *truth to materials*.[40] Truth to materials is a kind of intrinsic goodness in art and artifacts. The truthful art or artifact elevates and enhances its materials. In the words of John Ruskin, it "honors" its materials, "brings out their beauty," and "recommends and exalts their peculiar qualities."[41] Because raw materials tend to occur naturally, this achievement is usually thought to have a special connection to nature. The truthful artifact embodies a "reinterpretation of nature's principles as they had been filtered through the intelligent minds of men and women who could then build forms which are more natural than nature."[42] The result is something that appears like the spontaneous work of nature despite being the product of human artifice. So, for example, stone in nature is simply stone, and its full beauty is hidden from view. A building or sculpture that brings out the beauty and special properties of stone – its hardness, solidity, color, or, in short, its "stoniness" – exemplifies truth to materials.[43] The goodness of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, constructed out of slabs of black granite that appear to be emerging from the earth, can be explained, in part, in this way. An example that is closer to Fielding's is bonsais, trees shaped

out of the raw material of trees: good bonsais bring out and clarify the distinctive beauty of their respective species.

Elsewhere, I have used the term *humaneness* to refer to truth to materials in the shaping of human beings.[44] What Fielding experiences as the beauty of Indian tradition is its humaneness. Molded by the trappings of their tradition, the Indians and their movements are seen as kinds of artifacts that are crafted out of the material of human animals. Their natural impulses are shaped and refined, cut, trimmed, and polished through customs, practices, institutions, and artifacts – elevated into forms that bring out the distinctive beauty of human beings. So, the Nawab Bahadur reaching for food and eating are not the movements of a mere human animal seeking to satisfy its bodily needs, but artful gestures in the practice of sharing meals with others. His movements are the product of artifice and training, and they will not appear in any catalog of natural-historical facts about human animals. Instead, they are humane insofar as they reveal the distinctively human way that our need for food is bound up with our need for others, our capacities for pleasure, and our faculties of invention. For us, dining can be an expression of hospitality or care, an occasion of fellowship, a venue for creativity and skill. We are not cattle grazing side-by-side, but guests, hosts, friends, and family members, who are not nurtured by bread alone. In admiring the humaneness of Indian tradition, Fielding recognizes its intrinsic goodness.

In short, he sees the Indians as bearers of humanity. A bearer of humanity is an artifact of sorts, a product of creative processes of habituation that give form to the raw material of human first nature. This individual is not, like the human animal, a product of nature. But she is also not entirely unrelated to it, for the natural impulses that belong to the human animal are material necessities that she cannot avoid. Through the shaping that has come by way of habituation, these impulses are refined, beautified, and reinterpreted in ways that are more natural than nature. But this shaping, as I argued above, is essentially traditional. Without tradition, this individual is a human animal living alongside others to meet the natural needs and desires of the present. Through tradition, she is a member of an ethical community, jointly engaged in projects and pursuits, party to relationships based on love and respect, and integrated into a spatio-temporal world that is a locus of meaning. The bearer of humanity is a beautified or elevated human animal, and insofar as tradition produces this result, it is humane.

We do not have to be as poetic as Fielding to appreciate the humaneness of a tradition. Whenever we recognize people as bearers of humanity, we implicitly appreciate the humaneness of their traditions. The humaneness of our own traditions is more or less taken for granted as most of daily life involves interacting with other members of our own

ethical communities. More remarkable is how we apprehend people from other traditions, especially those at great historical and cultural distance. Despite finding their ways of life entirely unfamiliar or unnatural, we do not see these individuals as mere human animals.[45] Neither do we see them as mere rational agents – at least, not most immediately. Rather, we see and interact with them as bearers of humanity engaged in lives that are sometimes foreign and strange, but, for all that, intelligible as interpretations of human nature. In so doing, we implicitly recognize the humaneness of their traditions. We need not know very much about a people or their activities to do this. Because each part of a tradition is "marked by the expression of the whole" or a distinctive "physiognomy," the humaneness of a tradition is apparent in even the smallest details.[46] This is why Fielding was able to recognize something as profound as civilization in an outstretched hand. So too, anyone who has seen an ancient Incan or Assyrian artifact can have no doubt that its makers and users were bearers of humanity. This recognition, however unconscious or automatic, is a perception of the humaneness of the respective traditions. Tradition shows its goodness on its face, though it is usually too obvious to be noticed.

To be clear, to appreciate the humaneness of a tradition is not necessarily to admire or approve of everything within it. Fielding's observation does not commit him to any position on particular matters of Indian tradition. But it is to recognize a certain kind of intrinsic goodness that pertains to the whole *qua* whole. A tradition is a way of life. The number of possible ways of life is theoretically limitless. Because a way is not a form, there is no such thing as a perfect or ideal way of life, and a way of life has no end or *telos*. But insofar as it shapes human nature, a way of life can be good by being truthful or humane – that is to say, by bringing out the distinctive beauty and peculiar features of human nature. Passed down from generation to generation, tradition is a way of life that produces bearers of humanity. And insofar as it produces bearers of humanity, a tradition is humane. Thus, every tradition is not merely a way of life, but a good way of life. So it is that I conclude that all traditions are good.

6.

Many will object to the claim that all traditions are good. What about traditions that promote slavery, for instance, or the subjugation of women? How is it possible to describe these traditions as intrinsically good? Indeed, flaws of this sort belong to every tradition that has ever existed, as no human society has ever been perfectly just, and adherence to tradition has often only served to perpetuate oppression. For these reasons, the idea that tradition as such is good will strike many as preposterous.

This objection registers a specifically moral concern. It is important to note that I am not denying that the content of traditions – their particular customs, practices, institutions, values, or beliefs – can be morally bad or unjust. That much is undeniably true, and it is entirely appropriate to evaluate traditions in this way. Moreover, I am not claiming that a tradition's bad content is something to be tolerated.[47] It should not, and it is up to members of each tradition to ensure that these problems are resolved. I consider this issue at greater length in Chapter 8, where I address objections to the morality of traditionalism, but I will bracket them for now.

Here, it is critical to emphasize that my claim about the goodness of tradition hinges on its humaneness, which is not the same as moral goodness. To describe something as humane is to make an aesthetic evaluation about how it honors or elevates its raw materials. A tradition is humane in virtue of its status as a sort of art form – that is, as a way that gives shape to materials. We can evaluate the shape of tradition aesthetically. The moral evaluation of a tradition is a separate question. Indeed, it is not only possible but important that we can, however implicitly, appreciate the humaneness of traditions that we find morally objectionable. We need to see these traditions as worthy of criticism and blame; that kind of response involves being able to appreciate these traditions as grounds of humanity.

Having set aside the moral issue, I think that we already implicitly recognize the intrinsic goodness of tradition. Consider our attitudes toward the threat of cultural extinction, such as that faced by Native American tribes and remote communities in the Pacific Islands. Most of us are not indifferent to the plight of these people. We care about their safety and welfare and hope that they are able to survive the economic, cultural, and environmental hardships that threaten their existence. These are, of course, moral concerns. But I venture to say that our worries go beyond such concerns. We also feel distress that their traditions themselves are endangered, and we sense that it would be terrible and even tragic for them to be lost. We mourn the loss of their languages, histories, memories, myths, practices, cuisines, dances, songs, and arts. It does not assuage us to be told that newer generations will be able to adapt to a more dominant culture or, even, that their lives will be healthier, more secure, more stable. While we would prefer the suffering of these individuals to be minimized, those considerations miss the point. The point is that the existence of their traditions is threatened, and we judge their loss to be an objectively bad thing – not just for them, but for the world.[48]

One might argue that what we lament is the loss of specific good contents – traditional songs and dances, art forms, technologies, knowledge – that are beautiful, interesting, or useful, rather than traditions themselves. And we do value such contents. But that is not all. The judgment that it is bad for a tradition to go extinct does not await confirmation by an assessment

of its merits and achievements. It applies even when we know very little to almost nothing about the cultural contributions of a threatened society. Most of us who are disturbed by the destruction of Native American or Pacific Islander traditions know almost nothing about these societies. Yet, we find the loss of their traditions unfortunate, or even perhaps a tragedy. This reaction is appropriate, given the fact that every tradition is a unique and, thus, irreplaceable way of life. As the ground for bearers of humanity, tradition lays out a unique path to a future and enshrines a unique set of "spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead."[49] Once this path is destroyed, there is no way to retrieve it.

Moreover, this judgment that the very existence of traditions has value applies even when traditions include bad customs and practices. Over the course of history, no tradition is entirely innocent, and every tradition contains a mix of good and bad. The Native American practice of scalping enemies is objectionable on moral grounds, but that does not cancel the humaneness of their practices of war, in which generations of courageous people were raised. We can lament the loss of a tradition even while acknowledging its imperfections. Our aversion to the loss of a tradition is not based on a summing up of pros and cons, a considered judgment that it contained more good than bad. Rather, our reaction arises in response to the loss of the tradition *qua* tradition.

Assuming that such responses indicate some kind of valuing, this suggests that tradition is not simply seen as a neutral thing that can be good or bad, but something whose very existence is positively good in its own right. My claim is that these responses are, in fact, responses to the humaneness of tradition.

7.

The purpose of this chapter was to explain how tradition is a kind of non-supernatural, but transcendent good that can potentially take the place of God in moral life.

Metaphysically speaking, this proposal should be acceptable to secularists. For there is nothing supernatural about tradition, and no secularist can deny that he belongs to some tradition or other. At the same time, tradition is also more than merely natural. As a way of life, tradition is the result of human freedom and a product of human creativity and, as such, exceeds everything contained within human nature. Though they give shape to the raw material of natural impulses, there is nothing natural about the conventions of dining or dress, the institutions of the family or marriage, the practice of law, the arts, architecture, sports, and so forth. Instead, tradition is a way that human beings transcend nature. And this explains its goodness. For in taking up a particular way of living, a human animal is elevated

into a bearer of humanity. She enters into an ethical community in which it is possible to act for values, take on responsibilities and obligations, and engage in meaningful pursuits. Thus, every tradition embodies a kind of intrinsic goodness – humaneness – that consists in elevating and bringing out the beauty of human beings. While none are perfect, every tradition is good.

It is true, of course, that the differences between God and tradition are enormous. One is perfect, the other a product of fallible human agency; one eternal and necessary, the other historical and contingent. Nevertheless, due to its normative nature, its comprehensive scope, and its mysterious reality, tradition can play a similar role in moral life. Tradition encompasses everything within life and beyond. It includes all values and meanings, both moral and non-moral. It is the ground of all possibilities for human action and thought. It gathers up the past, present, and future into an open-ended whole, and insofar as it is an endlessly changing way, it rings with the "note of infinity and mystery."

However, to resolve the spirituality problem, we must establish that tradition is also an appropriate object of spiritual love and devotion. In the following chapter, I look to the experience of traditionalists, people who are deeply devoted to tradition, as a guide. While some traditionalists are religious, non-religious traditionalists are living proof that traditionalism can be a viable answer to the spirituality problem. Drawing on their example, I explain why tradition is an appropriate object of spiritual love, and I elucidate how their devotion to tradition enhances the experience of moral life.

Notes

1 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, tr. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Secker and Warburg, 1953–60), 183.
2 Samuel Scheffler, "The Normativity of Tradition," in *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 290. Edward Shils conceives of tradition as "anything which is transmitted or handed down from past to present." *Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 12.
3 See Michael Oakeshott, "Political Education," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Liberty Fund, 1991), 61; Josef Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, tr. Christian Kopff (St. Augustine's Press, 2010), 15.
4 Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope* (Harvard University Press, 2006).
5 J. G. A. Pocock, "Time, Institutions and Action: An Essay on Traditions and their Understanding," in *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 190. Cited by James Alexander, "A Systematic Theory of Tradition," *Journal in the Philosophy of History* 10, no. 1 (2016), 10. Oakeshott also emphasizes historical continuity in "Political Education."
6 Oakeshott, "Political Education," 61–62.
7 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.

8 Oakeshott, "Political Education," 61–62.
9 See Michael Thompson, "The Representation of Life," in *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2008). I realize that "form of life" is also used in a pregnant sense by Wittgenstein and his interpreters. Their use of the phrase may be closer to my understanding of a way of life. However, I insist on the terminology because there is a distinction between a way and a form.
10 See Alexander Nehemas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 84–91; Susan Sontag, "On Style," in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (Picador, 2001).
11 Ernst Gombrich, "Style," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford University Press, 2009), 129.
12 Gombrich, "Style," 136.
13 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque* (London, 1964). Cited by Gombrich in "Style" (136).
14 Meyer Shapiro, "Style," in *Anthropology Today an Encyclopedic Inventory*, ed. A. L. Kroeber (University of Chicago Press, 1953), 287.
15 Erwin Panofsky, "The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator," in *Three Essays on Style* (MIT Press, 1997).
16 Heinrich Kulka (ed.), *Adolf Loos: Das Werk des Architekten* (Vienna, 1931). Cited by Gombrich, "Style," 136.
17 Shapiro, "Style," 292.
18 Oakeshott, "Political Education," 61–62.
19 In Chapter 1, I used the term "humanity" in a more colloquial way to refer to the human species. From here on out, "humanity" will be used as I define it here.
20 See John McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998), Irene Liu, "Elevating Human Being: Towards a New Sort of Naturalism," *Philosophy* 92, no. 4 (2017).
21 See Thompson, "The Representation of Life."
22 See Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent, Rational Animals* (Open Court, 2001).
23 The *locus classicus* for this view is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* 2.1. For contemporary discussions, see, for instance, Myles Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to Be Good," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Rorty (University of California Press, 1980); Nancy Sherman, "The Habituation of Character," in *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
24 Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?" in *Virtue Ethics, Old and New*, ed. Gardiner (Cornell University Press, 2005), 22.
25 McDowell, "Two Sorts of Naturalism," 185; Annas, "Virtue Ethics," 22; Liu, "Elevating Human Being."
26 Burnyeat, "Learning to be Good," 72.
27 John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 84.
28 This does not mean that individuals who are prevented from normal cognitive development are mere human animals. It is also not true that pure human animals, such as newborns, are treated as other animals are.
29 See Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, Chapter 3; Sherman, "Habituation of Character"; John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason" in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998).
30 The phrase "taking one's place in society" is Confucian. See *Analects* 2.4.

31 See Confucius, *Analects* 1.15 and Xunzi, *Xunzi* 1.3–11; 23.19–22; 19.304–5, as well as discussion in Chapter 5, Section 2.
32 Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," *Boston Review* (Oct. 1, 1994).
33 Aristotle, *Politics* 1269a3–4.
34 See Annas, *Intelligent Virtues*, 55ff.
35 Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (1988), 44.
36 "Convergent Evolution," *Understanding Evolution,* accessed June 22, 2025, https://evolution.berkeley.edu/glossary/convergent-evolution/
37 I take up this idea again in Chapter 8, Section 6.
38 E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (Random House, 1924), 251–2.
39 Plato, *Symposium* 211a. See Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 2001), 58.
40 This principle is closely associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement, as espoused by the likes of John Ruskin and Gustav Stickley. I discuss this concept at greater length in Liu, "Elevating Human Being," 610–15.
41 Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. 2 (1853). This passage is cited by Nigel Whitely, "Utility, Design Principles, and the Ethical Tradition," in *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design*, ed. J. Attfield (Manchester University Press, 1999), 192.
42 Kimberly Elman, "Frank Lloyd Wright and the Principles of Organic Architecture," *PBS*, accessed June 22, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/frank-lloyd-wright/essay-organic-architecture
43 Josef Albers, "Truthfulness in Art," in *Josef Albers in Mexico*, ed. Hinkson and Barriendos (Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2017), 50.
44 Liu, "Elevating Human Being"; Liu, "Ethical Pluralism and the Appeal to Human Nature," *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (2018); Liu, "The Art of Convention: An Aesthetic Defense of Confucian Ritual," in *Comparative Metaethics: Neglected Perspectives on the Foundations of Morality*, ed. Colin Marshall (Routledge, 2019).
45 It is true that the label "human animals" has been used to refer derogatively to people from other traditions. However, I take this epithet as an expression of hostility rather than a genuine perception. It expresses a desire to reduce others to the condition of human animals.
46 Shapiro, "Style," 292.
47 I address this problem in "Ethical Pluralism."
48 This claim might also be cast in terms of cultural heritages. Thus, many organizations recognize the intrinsic value of world heritages.
49 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1952), 8.

7 The Spirituality of Tradition

1.

In the previous chapter, I laid out the beginning of my case for seeing tradition as an answer to the spirituality problem. Greater than any single individual, a tradition is a way of life through which a person is elevated from a human animal to a bearer of humanity. As bearers of humanity, we are able to access practical reality and participate in an ethical community. We act for purposes and ends, pursue meaning, and affirm values both alongside and with others. In these ways, tradition makes us better than nature. And this, I argued, is proof of its humaneness or intrinsic goodness. This chapter seeks to complete my argument by explaining how *traditionalism*, or the love of and devotion to tradition, can enhance and deepen moral life without the need for God.

Before I begin, I should clarify what I mean by traditionalism, beginning with two things I do not mean. First, in common parlance, traditionalism is often associated with an ideology or a particular set of views and values – especially pertaining to gender, sexuality, and the family. The idea that women should be homemakers, say, or that children should be raised by a mother and a father are seen as tenets of traditionalism. This association arises because people who speak of traditionalism generally have a particular tradition in mind. However, traditions differ. They arise in different historical contexts and evolve under different circumstances. Some are religious, some are not, some are younger, some older, some more stable, others less so; they can be patriarchal or matriarchal, liberal or conservative, hierarchical or egalitarian. Accordingly, traditionalism will look very different depending on the tradition and its historical circumstance. As I see it, traditionalism is neutral with respect to specific views and values; it is not an ideology.

Second, traditionalism is also the name of a view that arose at the beginning of last century with René Guénon. This view, which is aligned with Sufism and has recently been revitalized through thinkers on the far

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right, represents an anti-modernist mysticism.[1] On this view, tradition is "a group of sacred teachings that are understood to have been handed down since time immemorial and are the basis for the proper order of things, a sacred order."[2] Proponents of the view believe that there is one, perennial Tradition, and that the goal of personal and political action is to realize this original truth. They seek to restore the sacred order, which includes a social hierarchy based on, among other things, race and gender. This conception of tradition is highly speculative, and it should be clear from what I have said that I disagree with it. As I see it, tradition is a fundamentally pluralistic concept that accommodates a multitude of ways of life.[3] The traditionalism I defend is thus distinct from the movement of Guénon and his followers.

On my view, traditionalism is a deep and serious devotion to a tradition. This dedication comes in degrees, but at its limit, it treats tradition as a sacred object that is worthy of maximal love and devotion. Just as there is no reason to be rigid about the boundaries of tradition, there is no reason to be rigid about the objects of traditionalism. The important thing is that people feel deeply identified with and devoted to a way of life that is bigger than themselves. Because many people think of their country or nation as the basic unit of cultural identity, a prevalent form of traditionalism today is patriotism or nationalism. Organized religion can also be the basis of traditionalism, since theists can be dedicated to the human transmission of their faith as a way of life. Catholics who defend the Latin mass, say, may be seen as practicing their faith according to tradition. An attachment to religion *qua* tradition can even be adopted by secularists. For instance, secularists who strongly identify with Judaism as foundational to their outlook can be traditionalists. So, people can honor and revere a variety of traditions. And because there is no person who is not a member of some tradition or other, traditionalism is a possibility for everyone.

Such devotion is more common than one might think. Insofar as tradition links past to future, the continuity of society depends on some degree of traditionalism. No society can survive without a sense of the past and an appropriate respect for the myriad forms of goodness embodied within it in some, if not many, of its members.[4] Thus, it is safe to say that traditionalists appear in every society. Indeed, it is important to me that tradition already has some place in the heart. Spirituality is not the sort of thing that one gets argued into. Insofar as it concerns a matter of lived experience, my view must be not only theoretically sound but practically viable. That is to say, it must be possible – even relatively accessible – for real people to derive spiritual fulfillment from tradition in a way that enhances moral life. To the degree that people already have traditionalist impulses, there is a foothold for my view. To the degree that traditionalism already enhances moral life for some people (as I believe it does), there is proof

of concept. If I am correct, tradition has already played and continues to play a critical, if underappreciated, role in moral life for many people. So it is that I take myself to be doing little more than elucidating a possibility that already exists. My goal is not to argue people into traditionalism *per se*, but to shed light on what it is and what it can do toward resolving a wider modern predicament.

My discussion will begin by describing what it looks like for tradition to be an object of spiritual devotion. The remainder of the chapter will be dedicated to showing how the traditionalist's evaluative outlook answers the spirituality problem. This requires showing, first, why tradition is an appropriate object of spiritual devotion and, second, how it enhances, broadens, and deepens moral life.

2.

I begin with three examples that illustrate the spiritual and moral potential of traditionalism. The first example, Native American traditionalism, might be viewed as inherently religious. The second, Confucian traditionalism, cannot be described as secularist without anachronism, but it is widely considered humanist. And the third, American traditionalism, is considered by many to be secularist. The variety of examples reflects the capacious character of tradition and traditionalism. Nevertheless, each case shows how tradition can support a sort of love and devotion that can be described as spiritual.

While there are a plethora of distinct Native American traditions, one important commonality is that they tend not to recognize a separation between the "religious" and the "non-religious." Native American languages have no word corresponding to "religion," which is why Native American religions are sometimes referred to as "lifeways."[5] A lifeway integrates all aspects of life – "economy, government, art, law, medicine, and landscape" – into a spiritual whole.[6] We could say that a lifeway is a tradition that is self-consciously spiritual. For people living in such a tradition, spirituality is expressed in "how they cook, eat, dance, paint, tell stories, mold pottery, dye clothes, decorate their bodies, design their homes, organize their villages, court lovers, marry, bury, dress, speak, make love, cut their hair, and so on."[7] These traditions are usually transmitted orally from elders to younger generations through stories about history, genealogies, morals, values, and the natural world. They are embodied in ceremonies, such as rituals of harvest, healing, puberty, and marriage, that "help to reinforce individual participants' roles and character, demonstrate and celebrate group identity, and define an individual's relationship to their larger community."[8] In these ways, Native Americans tend to view themselves as parts of greater, historical communities, and they tend to see the

achievements of their ancestors, the wisdom of their elders, and the work of their ceremonies as sacred. Thus, their lifeways support reverence for tradition. Or, we could say, traditionalism is part of Native American lifeways. Native American traditionalism is inherently spiritual.

The second example of traditionalism is Confucianism. Confucius saw himself principally as a transmitter of tradition, who "trusts" and "loves" the ancient ways.[9] His traditionalism took form through an unrivaled passion for learning, which included the study of arts such as music, archery, and calligraphy, history and historical figures as recorded in texts such as the *Spring and Summer Annals* and the *Book of Documents*, the three-hundred or so ancient poems collected in the *Book of Odes*, and, above all, the myriad traditional rituals or customs that regulate shared life. Through a lifelong commitment to study, Confucius sought to emulate the example of ancient sage-kings who ruled over a golden age of peace and prosperity and to extend their "brilliant" culture.[10] Thus, traditionalism became one of Confucius's most significant legacies. His followers were not just intellectuals interested in expounding upon his views, but traditionalists who committed themselves to learning and extending the ways of their predecessors.

Although it centers on cultural knowledge, Confucian traditionalism should not be viewed as mere aestheticism. Indeed, Confucians are highly skeptical of those who donned the trappings of culture without the right spirit.[11] This program of study and self-cultivation is viewed as a way to align with *dao*, or the ultimate normative reality through which all things flow. The point of learning is to "reanimate" tradition with the goodness of the ancestors, not to engage in precious refinements or to make a show of arcane knowledge. On their view, what makes a person learned is not sophisticated knowledge or social polish, but qualities such as "recognizing and admiring worthiness," fulfilling one's social responsibilities, and being "trustworthy in speech."[12] Cultural refinement is worthless unless it cultivates moral goodness; the person of empty refinement is not a traditionalist but a pedant. Conversely, moral goodness is impossible without knowledge of tradition.[13] Acquaintance with tradition is necessary to be a full participant in their moral community. And, they believe, mastery of tradition culminates with the capacity to harmonize effortlessly with all the world.[14] Confucian traditionalism is, thus, imbued with a strongly spiritual and moral sense.

Lastly, unlike Native American and Confucian traditions, reverence for tradition is not self-consciously a part of American tradition. But that does not mean that an American traditionalism is not possible. A final example is provided by Richard Rorty, whose *Achieving Our Country* is a defense of American patriotism. This work was written as a response to what Rorty perceived to be a widespread cynicism about the United States

and its moral standing. The spiritual resonances of his patriotism are fully explicit. Rorty sees himself as promoting a "civic religion." The "prophets" of this religion are Walt Whitman, the great American poet, and John Dewey, the great American philosopher.[15] Its foundational texts are *Leaves of Grass* and the writings of Dewey, along which we might include American classics such as Thoreau's *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience," Emerson's "Nature" and "Self-Reliance," and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. This religion envisions and promotes hope for an American utopia, in which the United States is "the paradigmatic democracy," classless, casteless, and unbound by any fixed authority.[16] The American utopia is described as "the unconditional object of desire."[17] And the American government and social institutions are credited with making possible "a new sort of individual," "one who will take nothing as authoritative save free consensus between as diverse a variety of citizens as can possibly be produced."[18] By drawing attention to this vision, Rorty explicitly seeks to awaken the "religious impulse…to stand in awe of something greater than oneself."[19]

In Rorty's telling, the aspect of America that is most worthy of devotion and love is its commitment to democracy and individualism. In particular, he looks to the progressive achievements of the "reformist left" in the early to mid-part of last century as glimpses of the American promise. The Civil Rights Act, the New Deal, and the creation of various social programs number among the most significant developments toward realizing the American utopia, though the work is yet to be completed. As Rorty makes clear, this civic religion means taking into account moral failings as well. One must not deny historical wrongs: the treatment of Native Americans, the institution of slavery, and misguided foreign wars are all sources of national shame. The traditionalism that Rorty advocates is not a crude tribalism that blindly defends all courses of action, however reprehensible, pursued by members of the tradition. He advocates for being clear-eyed about the ways in which American practices, institutions, and policies have failed to live up to moral ideals. More importantly, he advocates taking action to rectify or correct these wrongs or, at least, to learn from them so they are never repeated again. Thus, Rorty calls upon Americans to "achieve their country" through actions that fulfill the promise of democracy in new and unexpected ways. This work entails living up to an enduring commitment to social justice, by promoting generosity toward difference, compassion for the unfortunate, freedom, and communal spirit. Altogether, American tradition is represented as something that calls for faith and hope.

While only one might be described as fully secular, I take these examples to provide evidence that traditionalism fits what we are seeking to resolve the spirituality problem. Each shows that it is possible to see one's

tradition as an object of spiritual devotion. Each brings to light the role of tradition *qua* tradition in enhancing moral life. Across cultures and societies, traditionalists revere the ways of their predecessors and treat them as sacred. They experience tradition as something larger and wiser than themselves. They perceive themselves as beneficiaries and inheritors of age-old patterns of life that were passed down from their predecessors, and feel a sense of responsibility to promote and keep them alive for future generations. They derive a sense of meaning through their engagement with traditional customs and practices and the preservation of traditional values and beliefs. Through these activities, they feel connected to something deep, important, and, above all, good. In other words, traditionalists experience tradition as a transcendent good that encompasses morality and commands a spiritual love and devotion. Their relationship to morality is thus infused with a sense of height and depth that enhances moral life and motivates greater action.

Of course, it is one thing to say that traditionalism resolves the spirituality problem – quite another to understand how it does so. What these examples do not do is explain, first, why spiritual devotion is a legitimate response to tradition and, second, how this devotion thereby enhances moral life. The questions will be answered in turn.

3.

Why is traditionalism a spiritual orientation? That is to say, why is tradition a legitimate object of spiritual devotion? Spiritual devotion involves not just love or passion, but a sense of reverence, awe, and wonder. The object of spiritual devotion is not just good, but its goodness is sacred. Certainly, tradition is associated with many goods, such as personal relationships, arts, and institutions, that are worth admiring. But it is unclear that such goods can explain a spiritual devotion to tradition as such. For traditionalism is not an attitude one takes toward the particular contents of a tradition, but to a tradition as a whole.

We get closer to an explanation when we consider that traditionalism is not directed toward any tradition whatsoever, but the tradition perceived to be one's own. Certainly, a person can love and admire another tradition. In this way, she may be appreciating its humaneness as an objective fact. However, such a person would not count as a traditionalist unless she came to see herself as belonging to the tradition. We could say that traditionalism is "self-dependent" in that it is necessarily directed to an "uneliminable egocentric particular."[20] While some traditionalists might believe that their love for tradition is based purely on objective assessments of its worth, the more self-aware realize that their attachments are primarily dependent on their relationship to tradition rather than any

objective features it has. They may admit that they are disposed to seeing the objectively good qualities of their tradition precisely because of their prior identification with it. In fact, there is a natural feedback loop, in which their devotion to tradition disposes them to see the good in it and seeing the good in tradition reinforces their devotion. But, in the end, the traditionalist does not love a tradition simply because it has certain good qualities: she loves it because it is hers. The key to appreciating the spiritual appeal of tradition lies in understanding its relationship to one's self.

To that point, traditionalists often conceive of their tradition through the poetic image of roots. A root is a source or origin. In plants, it is also the organ of sustenance and nourishment. The organic quality of the metaphor is significant. A root is not just a starting point, a beginning that is left behind once things follow out of it from necessity.[21] And it is not a foundation, a solid ground upon which one builds.[22] Starting points and foundations invite understanding and articulation; they are fixed, stable, and open to view. In contrast, a root is a living thing that embodies the mystery of life. Existing under the surface and extending to barely visible tendrils, there is often no way to tell how deep roots are or how far they spread. Their entanglements and connections are not visible to the eye. Because they are always growing and expanding, they can never be fully traced, comprehended, or known. And they are absolutely essential to sustain life. The metaphor of roots expresses the thought that tradition is the source of one's life and the necessary condition of its continuance.

To unpack this metaphor, I suggest that tradition is an appropriate object of what is known as *existential gratitude*, which is "gratitude not for one gift or another but, rather, for one's *very existence* and/or *life as a whole*."[23] It is worth noting that ordinary gratitude and a willingness to see oneself as the beneficiary of tradition – of the particular sacrifices, inventions, or accomplishments of one's predecessors – is a dominant feature of traditionalism. However, existential gratitude is distinct from ordinary gratitude, which takes place within social practices of thanking that acknowledge others for particular acts of benevolence. Psychologists classify existential gratitude as a form of transpersonal gratitude that is directed to "God, to a higher power, or to the cosmos."[24] According to the Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast, it is a universal, mystical experience, or an "experiential communion with transcendental reality," that defies words and concepts: one is spontaneously moved by "the oceanic feeling of universal belonging" and "a willingness to open oneself to given reality, to make oneself vulnerable to say an unconditional yes to all that is."[25] Thus, he claims, existential gratitude is the "ground zero of religious experience."[26] This form of gratitude is most commonly associated with theism, where it is directed toward the divine creator and author of all things, though it is importantly not limited to theists. Secularists have also

reported experiencing such feelings of universal belonging and existential vulnerability; some have even seen these experiences as the basis of a sort of secular spirituality.[27]

If tradition is an appropriate object of existential gratitude, the spirituality of traditionalism begins to make sense. The traditionalist's attachment to tradition is deeply self-dependent, but it is not simple self-love. Rather, it points far beyond the self and brings to light the fundamental contingency of one's own existence. In conceiving of herself as enrooted by tradition, a person recognizes that her life is not a matter of necessity, that she is not self-caused. She recognizes that, in a very deep sense, her life did not begin at birth, and that it will not end in death. She is moved by a profound sense of belonging to something that transcends the self, a mysterious source of life that extends into the distant, mythical past and points toward an open-ended future. And, since tradition is not a choice or decision or anything one earns or deserves, she comes, however implicitly, to recognize the limits of her own agency. This recognition naturally induces both humility about one's own powers and reverence for the source of one's own existence.

Finally, it is worth noting that one need not consciously represent tradition as the source of one's existence to be moved by existential gratitude. Such gratitude may manifest simply in an unarticulated feeling of deep-seated attachment to tradition. Rorty's claim that the United States made possible "a new sort of individual" suggests that his patriotism is inflected with a sense of existential gratitude.[28] The same can be said for Native Americans who claim that their ancestors "dreamed" them into existence.[29] More negatively, it strikes me that existential gratitude – or something closely related to it – is behind the sense of ultimate vulnerability that people feel when elements of their way of life, such as rituals, beliefs, or industries, weaken or come under attack. In these individuals, the erosion or destruction of a tradition is experienced as a mortal threat to their own existence.

Thus, moved by a sense of belonging and vulnerability to something much bigger than herself, the traditionalist is attuned to the mysterious, life-giving power of tradition in the most personal way. In this way, traditionalism is not dissimilar to religion. In other words, it is a spiritual orientation.

4.

One might think that claims about existential gratitude to tradition are somewhat hyperbolic. Roots are a metaphor, and tradition is not literally the source of life. After all, a person must already exist before it is possible for her to be initiated into a tradition. If tradition is not the proper object

of existential gratitude, it can still be an object of ordinary gratitude. Indeed, there are many reasons to be profoundly thankful for tradition – arts, institutions, holidays, and so on. But none of these are appropriately described as the "ground zero of religious experience."[30] In that case, tradition cannot really be described as an object of existential gratitude and, hence, spiritual devotion.

In Chapter 6, I distinguished between a human animal and a bearer of humanity. This distinction reflects the difference between a biological sense of existence and an ethical one. Certainly, part of what it means for us humans to exist is to have a biological life. Each of us comes into being through biological processes, and as long as we live, we are human animals. However, through education and training, we also come into an ethical existence that is attributed to our humanity. It is as bearers of humanity that we live in light of purposes and ends that are not determined by nature. It is as bearers of humanity that we respond to values such as beauty and humor and engage in meaningful pursuits. And it is as bearers of humanity that we are members of a moral community, who are held to standards of justice, honesty, kindness, and the like. These aspects of our existence are arguably more central to who we are than the biological ones. Barring conditions of extreme deprivation where bare survival is at stake, they are the terms in which we understand ourselves as subjects – that is to say, as individuals with roles, purposes, narratives, and trajectories.[31]

There is, therefore, a very real sense in which we owe our existence to tradition. Adapting a Confucian thought about the importance of culturally transmitted customs, we could say that tradition is that by which "humans are humans."[32] We are all born human animals, but our humanity is due to tradition. Tradition provides not just the goods that make life meaningful or worthwhile, which are the bases of ordinary gratitude, but the very possibility of enjoying and living with such goods at all. Democracy, basketball, barbeque, and the Fourth of July, say, are fruits of a tradition for which one might be thankful. However, the ability to engage with these goods, to pursue and maintain them, and to treat them as ends or ideals, is itself an accomplishment that cannot be taken for granted. It is not inevitable that one becomes acquainted with these goods, and the fact that one did has nothing to do with the causes of one's biological existence. It is, instead, attributable to tradition.

This point is worth emphasizing, for it is a way in which the organic nature of the root metaphor is misleading. Unlike root, tradition is not a biological concept. It is true that traditions tend to be associated with racially or genetically similar people. However, a way of life has nothing to do with race or genetics. A tradition is not a product of nature, but culture. It is not transmitted through genes, but teaching and learning, not realized through untutored instincts, but customs, practices, institutions, arts,

languages, and artifacts. This is shown by the fact that any human could have been raised in any tradition. Thus, children raised a foreign tradition turn out culturally identical to everyone else in their adopted communities. And since one's formation is never entirely complete, deep assimilation to another tradition is also always possible.[33] Thus, people who think of tradition in biological terms are mistaken. Tradition is a phenomenon of books, not blood.

It is only because one is existentially dependent on tradition that cultural genocide, the "systematic destruction of traditions, values, language, and other elements that make one group of people distinct from another," is truly a form of genocide.[34] This possibility is brought into view by Jonathan Lear in his moving account of the Crow, one of a number of Native American tribes who were forced onto reservations by the American government in the late 19th century. Lear's account centers on the claim, voiced by their leader Plenty Coup, that after they moved to the reservation, "nothing happened."[35] The problem they faced was not that they would literally die, as physical survival would be assured on the reservation. There the Crow could continue the activities of biological existence – preparing food, eating, sleeping, having and raising children, and so forth. The problem was that, because traditional activities would become impossible, their lives were to be sapped of meaning and purpose. Ethical, as opposed to biological, existence requires being able to realize one's agency in a world defined by tradition.[36] On the reservation, the Crow were prevented from conducting their usual business – warring with their traditional enemies, planting coup, hunting buffalo. Not only did these possibilities end on the reservation, but they became unintelligible. For planting coup or celebrating victory, say, are not just physical movements done in space, but actions that "gain [their] identity via [their] location in a conceptual world."[37] The political and social changes on the reservation prevented the sort of meaningful relations necessary for those actions. As a result, the corresponding action concepts became meaningless. And without them, the Crow ceased to be able to imagine a future for themselves or their people.[38] They ceased to exist as Crow subjects since there was "nothing left for [them] to do" and "nothing left for [them] to deliberate about, intend, or plan for."[39] The death of a tradition means the end of what Lear calls "subjectivity," the possibility of ethical life for those who live within it.[40] Thus, cultural genocide is not a mere metaphor used to express the horror of cultural destruction, but genuinely describes the destruction of a kind of bearer of humanity, along with his actions, purposes, values, and hopes.

The vulnerability of the Crow to the loss of tradition is not unique to their particular tribal group or, for that matter, Native Americans. Existential vulnerability affects us all.[41] We depend on tradition for the very

intelligibility of action. Only within a tradition can a person have a determinate place and identity, a purpose for living and sources of meaning, possibilities of success or failure – in short, only within a tradition can a person have a life as a bearer of humanity. Tradition is the condition under which it is possible to conceive of and pursue a good at all. As such, it has a value that is separate from and more fundamental than anything within life itself. Thus, I submit that tradition is an appropriate object of existential gratitude.

5.

I conclude, then, that, since it consists in devotion to an appropriate object of existential gratitude, traditionalism is a spiritual orientation. However, the spirituality problem will have been resolved only if it can be established that traditionalism can enhance moral life. Accordingly, the goal of this section is to show how traditionalism broadens, deepens, and motivates a person's relationship to morality.

Begin with the broadening of moral life. Insofar as the traditionalist recognizes tradition as something sacred, she opens herself to a class of responsibilities and reasons for action that would otherwise go unnoticed. To recognize that tradition is sacred is to acknowledge that it holds a sort of value that is higher or nobler than ordinary sorts of value. There are appropriate and inappropriate ways of responding to this value. For instance, one recognizes that calculations of cost, efficiency, or convenience will have a limited place in thinking about the normative demands of tradition, and the traditionalist will feel obliged to value, honor, and protect certain things – customs, practices, institutions, and so forth – simply because they are parts of tradition. A straightforward example is the celebration of holidays. To a tradition skeptic, the Fourth of July is just another day in July, and, depending on what she gets out of it, hosting or attending a celebration may not be worth the inconvenience and cost. Not so for the traditionalist, who sees this celebration as having personal, historical, and moral significance. Similarly, a traditionalist may attach moral significance to the proper execution of rituals, the preservation of landmarks, the protection of language, and so forth. In these ways, the class of duties and responsibilities that have a serious and peremptory force is expanded for the traditionalist.

The traditionalist's insight on the unique and priceless value of her own tradition may also sensitize her to the unique and priceless value of other traditions. And so her eyes are opened to the ways in which respect is owed to traditions besides her own. Most basically, she understands the obligation to avoid harming the cultural treasures of other traditions. She would understand, for example, why the purposeful destruction of

antiquities and cultural heritage sites in war or the vandalism of cultural landmarks by tourists is wrong. She would be able to see encroachment on the viability of cultural practices as a reason to limit development and resource extraction. Her respect for other traditions may also entail positive obligations, such as the need to actively preserve the language and culture of endangered traditions. In both negative and positive ways, traditionalism supports moral concerns that go beyond one's own tradition.

In addition, because the appropriate response to sacred things is reverence, love, and devotion, the traditionalist can see traditionalism as itself a virtue worth cultivating. Alasdair MacIntyre identifies a virtue of having an adequate sense of one's tradition that "manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present."[42] One gains an adequate sense of tradition through learning history, arts, and culture and deepening one's appreciation for traditional ways. If this sort of sensibility is critical to discerning meaningful future possibilities, traditionalism could be viewed as part of moral cultivation. Thus, Confucius identified love of learning as his most distinguishing attribute, and cultural refinement is considered central to the Confucian conception of goodness.[43] And it is precisely a virtue of traditionalism, embodied in his knowledge and understanding of Crow ways, that enabled Plenty Coup to lead his people beyond their loss. No one lacking in this virtue could have succeeded in achieving a distinctively Crow future.

Finally, since tradition is an inherently temporal concept, traditionalism broadens the temporal scope of moral concern in at least two ways. First, it enlarges the moral community to include those who live outside the narrow boundaries of the present.[44] The traditionalist feels gratitude to her predecessors for their sacrifices and the goods they bestowed, and she recognizes an obligation to them to preserve and protect their gifts. The activity of preserving and protecting is not simply retrospective but prospective, as well. For the traditionalist also understands that members of the present generation inherit goods "not as sole beneficiaries but as persons able to share and pass on such goods to an indefinite run of future generations."[45] She thus appreciates a responsibility to future people to, at least, maintain the benefits she has inherited, if not also to improve them. In addition, traditionalism expands the temporal scope of moral action. Some moral projects – say, the American problem of race or economic disparity – last longer than a lifetime and cannot be solved in one generation. Such projects cannot be tackled without a considerable amount of historical knowledge, as well as an appreciation of the ways in which particular narratives and ideals can make sense of the proverbial "arc of history." The traditionalist is more equipped than others to contribute to such projects because she can see her actions within a context that extends well past her own life.

Beyond broadening, traditionalism can also deepen moral life. To see this, consider how appeals to tradition are often used to support moral causes. We see the appeal to tradition in American abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass and Angelina Grimké, who drew on the first principles of the republic to argue for the end of slavery. Over a century later, Martin Luther King, Jr. appealed to the values of multiple, overlapping traditions – American tradition as articulated in its founding documents, the Western tradition of critical thought as initiated by Socrates, and the religious tradition of Christianity – to argue for civil rights.[46] In his eyes, the lunch-counter protests and, more generally, the peaceful demonstrations being waged around the South were nothing but extensions of American tradition:

> I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American dream, and taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.[47]

There is a reason the likes of Douglass and King are considered American patriots: it is not despite, but because of their moral critiques.

Such appeals to tradition reflect a truth about moral causes. Simone Weil, who sees this truth reflected in the way that French trade-unionism drew on the spirit of medieval guilds, explains:

> The future brings us nothing, gives us nothing; it is we who in order to build it have to give it everything, our very life. But to be able to give, one has to possess; and we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated, and created afresh by us. Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past.[48]

Although moral progress looks to the future, it is a mistake to neglect the past. For the principles and values with which we criticize the present are themselves inheritances of tradition, and our sense of what needs to be done is inevitably based in the lessons of history. We do not arrive at historical moments as blank slates. Without an already established sense of value, we have nothing to draw upon when action is called for. Any meaningful future for oneself must be based in the achievements in one's past. This is why the Lakota leader Russell Means rejected the use of European concepts, however well-intentioned, to defend the rights of Native Americans at the end of the 20th century: "The strength for this effort can only come from the traditional ways, the traditional values that our elders retain. It must come from the hoop, the four directions, the relations."[49]

The way forward for his people would have to come from within their own tradition.

The truth is that moral life is embedded in tradition, and its vitality or "sap" comes from tradition itself. Morality is not something that we engage or do on its own. It is, rather, part of living within a community of people with whom one must navigate social roles that are determined by history, coordinate an embodied existence that has been shaped by culture, and cooperate in the service of myriad communal ends. It is always conducted in a particular language and couched in terms of what are known as "thick concepts."[50] Unlike concepts such as right and wrong, thick concepts both describe and evaluate the world, and these descriptions and evaluations are inextricably bound up with cultural markers. Moral ideals, claims, and values are interwoven both with and in myths, historical narratives, artistic representations, political events, social conventions, and personal etiquette. Thus, there is no such thing as a purely moral act or decision, with no admixture of the non-moral, in the wild. Embedded within narratives, customs, practices, institutions, and artifacts, every moral act or decision is at the same time, and to varying degrees, aesthetic, historical, social, economic, political, and more. In other words, morality is an exercise within a traditional way of living.

Of course, it is possible to use the language of universal ideals, principles, and values in the conduct of moral life. Sometimes this sort of rhetoric can be clarifying or, at least, effective. Nevertheless, they are properly seen as abstractions from the thicket of ideas that animate life more generally. Michael Oakeshott describes them as the "sediment" that remains after tradition, "the liquid in which our moral ideals were suspended," has been drawn off and poured away.[51] Free from the complications and contingencies of real life, one might be tempted to see the purity of these abstractions as evidence of their fundamentality. But it is, in fact, the other way around. They are the product of reflection and reasoning, processes of refinement that attempt to lay bare the essence of specifically moral goodness. Insofar as it purports to grasp the essential, this work has the appearance of progress. But it has in fact removed the substance that holds everything in place, leaving behind a "dry and gritty" residue of flavorless moral abstraction.[52] This is why, for the purposes of moral education, good literature is far more useful than moral philosophy. It is in the living embodiment of a person – an individual with a character and identity that can only be produced through a tradition – that the fullness of goodness, as well as badness, comes to light. Anyone who knows only principles and ideals will not get very far in the conduct of moral life, as supposedly tradition-free norms are only intelligible against the background of a tradition.

Insofar as she is attuned to the background of moral life, the traditionalist will thus have a much deeper sense of values. Due to her love

of and devotion to tradition, she is in a better position to appreciate the significance of moral ideals and the fullness of moral reality. Her moral sensibility is enlivened by an awareness of the cultural significance of values, narratives and myths, heroes and exemplars, historical struggles and triumphs. So, an American traditionalist, say, is not devoted to anything as abstract and bloodless as democracy or justice. Her values are interwoven with a particular brand of American individualism, which extols the "self-made man" and an uncompromising pursuit of personal freedom.[53] The values of democracy are modeled by the likes of Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Susan B. Anthony, justice by Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass. They are celebrated in the poetry of Whitman, given character by the prose of Dewey, and reanimated in the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. They are manifested in various shades and hues in the metropolises of New York City and Los Angeles, industrial towns across the midwest and the American heartland, enmeshed within the cultural web of American music, film, television, sporting events, national parks, cookouts, block parties, holidays, families, friendships, neighborhood associations, schools, and churches. That is to say, the traditionalist's conceptions of democracy and justice have a specifically American character, and they are inextricably integrated into the experience of her life as a whole. Similar descriptions could be given for Confucian, Native American, or any other sort of traditionalist.

Finally, due to her love of tradition, the traditionalist has special motivation to pursue moral goodness. Though traditionalists are attuned to many aspects of their traditions, the parts that relate to morality are particularly salient. Morality is central to every tradition, and among all its contents, moral values, ideals, principles, and achievements are arguably most significant.[54] This is why nothing is a greater source of pride to a traditionalist than moral accomplishment and nothing more shameful than moral failure. It is also why traditionalism is so often associated with the vigorous defense of moral values. It is no accident, for example, that the champions of workers' rights have more often been traditionalists than non-traditionalists.[55] An acute sensitivity to how moral values are intertwined in their way of life spurs traditionalists to a kind of "radicalism": moral movements "take place when people who do have something to defend…confront social transformations which *threaten* to take all that from them and thus leave them nothing to lose."[56] Morality is not just a set of requirements for the traditionalist, but something that is deeply implicated in something she loves. She is strongly motivated to moral action because she is clear about what she has to lose, and it is not just moral values.

Thus, the traditionalist's devotion to tradition contributes to the broadening and deepening of moral life, and it infuses morality with a sense of urgency. In this way, she resembles the theist, whose relationship to

morality is inextricable from her faith. My claim is not that the traditionalist is necessarily morally better than others. For that matter, neither is the theist. But for secularists who seek a spiritual connection to goodness, tradition is a viable alternative.

6.

Although traditionalists are more common than one might imagine, non-traditionalists abound in the modern, secular West. By "non-traditionalist," I mean a person who is unwilling or unable to appreciate the good of his particular way of life. Just as traditionalism, non-traditionalism includes a spectrum of attitudes. It can manifest, at one end, in a mere indifference to tradition or, at the other, in a rabid opposition and rejection. Regardless of where he falls on the spectrum, the non-traditionalist rejects or is blind to a dimension of reality and, in particular, moral reality that is not only practically significant, but spiritually nourishing. Accordingly, we should expect that his experience of moral life will differ from that of the traditionalist along the lines that James used to distinguish religious and secular morality – as a "contrast between the ethics of infinite and mysterious obligations from on high, and those of prudence and the satisfaction of merely finite need."[57] To complete our discussion, it is worth considering how non-traditionalism may show up in the actual conduct of moral life.

First, for those unable to appreciate the greater horizon of tradition, moral action may seem disconnected from history and culture, art and leisure, humor, wonder, and much else that people find meaningful in life. The non-traditionalist may thus be prone to experience tension between morality and meaning, which is an unsettling experience that could make moral goods seem less appealing and psychic harmony more elusive. Seeking release from the humorless yoke of moral obligation, he may even argue for the superiority of the weaker standard of "decency" as a more reasonable goal that balances meaning and morality.[58] And this is dangerous terrain. For although the pursuit of decency may be engaged with the best of intentions, it is unfortunately hindered by the very human tendency to overestimate our moral qualities.[59] Thus, non-traditionalism can lay the groundwork for moral mediocrity, or what James calls the "don't care" mood.

Then again, the non-traditionalist may also decide that morality is worth the sacrifice of personal meaning. But since he does not see moral action as essentially part of a richer cultural inheritance, he might be inclined to a sort of do-gooderism that requires the sacrifice of all non-moral goods to the greater good of morality. Exclusively focused on moral needs, his life may become, in Oakeshott's words, "a jerky, discontinuous affair,

the solution of a stream of problems, the mastery of a succession of crises."[60] And blind to the insight of traditional wisdom, he may turn to calculation and quantitative analysis as the most effective tools for moral action. His moral efforts may indeed be described as strenuous, but they could also be described as stingy, tight, and unimaginative. His goodness will lack beauty and joy.

Even worse, a morally strenuous non-traditionalist may take up the cause of pure principles and ideals. Next to the purity of principles and ideals, tradition, which inevitably contains a mixture of good and bad, may come to be seen as impure and retrograde. So this non-traditionalist may positively reject the wisdom of tradition, which is attentive to complexity and tempered with caution, as evil and wrong. And instead he may take up ideology, which is based on exacting standards of correctness that are abstracted from the living contexts in which they belong. This is the recipe for moral fanaticism. Because the world can never live up to its standards, this position calls for extreme measures, up to and including violence. Punitive and unforgiving, the goodness of this non-traditionalist is terrifying.

In these descriptions, I am referring, of course, to characters that we met in Part One. Earlier I argued that they embody forms of spiritual malaise; we can now see how they might be linked to indifference to or the rejection of tradition. To be clear, I am not saying that all non-traditionalists fall into these categories. But I do think that, given tendencies inherent in the human psyche, certain moral psychological dangers are likely to accompany the rejection or neglect of tradition. It is likely no accident that a growing sense that "goodness is no longer a good thing" accompanies a general loss of traditional ways.[61] And it is, I think, relevant that real life do-gooders tend to shun cultural enrichment – music, cuisine, art, and so forth – as wasteful luxuries. Finally, it is telling that, beginning with the French Revolution and through the radical political movements of the 20th century, moral fanatics have time and again taken it upon themselves to destroy books and culture, to erase history, smash tradition, and begin anew. We should not be surprised that non-traditionalism leads to such results. For, though he may not realize it, the non-traditionalist is alienated from the deepest and oldest sources of the self. He fails to appreciate the web of concerns and projects that connects him to myriad people of a distant past and an unknown future. He is closed to an infinite, mysterious reality that exists right before his eyes. This alienation and closedness may show up in moral life, but not only there. For if humans indeed have an "ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond life," the craving for transcendence is not just important for morality.[62]

In the previous section, I argued that the traditionalist will have a broader, deeper, and richer sense of moral life than a non-traditionalist.

Now we can see how she is less susceptible to some of the moral psychological dangers that face the latter. Since the meaning she derives from her engagement with tradition is akin to religious meaning, she is less susceptible to experiencing morality as a source of tension. Morality is not a dry duty that conflicts with the other things that give her life meaning, but rather one of the finest expressions of something she deeply loves. Consequently, she is less likely to feel torn between these goods. In her pursuit of moral ends, the traditionalist will be more likely to draw on the wisdom of her predecessors. This wisdom, far subtler than calculative techniques and more nuanced than ideology, will better equip her to face complex moral challenges. And while she will be strongly committed to moral values, she will also be more likely to resist extremist impulses because tradition is not a set of principles, but a whole that contains some mystery. Of course, the traditionalist is not immune to moral danger; I will consider some of these dangers in the next chapter. But she is inoculated against some of the moral dangers that are common in the modern, secular world.

7.

Thus, tradition provides a resolution to the spirituality problem. As a way of life that elevates the human animal into a bearer of humanity, tradition is a transcendent good that both encompasses morality and exceeds it. Because it is the source of ethical life, it is worthy of existential gratitude and, hence, a kind of spiritual devotion. This devotion can infuse moral life with a sense of breadth, depth, and urgency that is otherwise difficult to achieve. Tradition poses no challenge to the metaphysical commitments of the secularist, for it is decidedly non-supernatural and this-worldly. But because it is not a perfection, its normative demands are open-ended enough to allow for the note of infinitude and mystery. For these reasons, I propose that tradition approximates for secularists the moral significance that God has for the theist.

Of course, this solution is only effective if traditionalism is a sustainable possibility. And traditionalism is not especially popular among secularists in the modern West. Insofar as I aim to reach the latter, I need to acknowledge that the obstacles to traditionalism are considerable. In particular, I will be concerned to address two main categories of objections. Chapter 8 will consider various worries about the morality of traditionalism, and Chapter 9 will address skepticism about the possibility of authentic engagement with tradition in a globalized world.

Notes

1 See Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (Oxford University Press, 2023) and Matthew Rose, *A World after Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right* (Yale University Press, 2021).
2 Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 4.
3 That is not to deny that the myriad traditions that have come to be reflect a single, immanent reality. As I discuss at greater length in Chapter 8, Section 6, my view of tradition is loosely based on the Confucian conception of *dao*. But whatever that reality is, it is fundamentally ineffable. It is not something that people can grasp and directly enact, and it is certainly not the basis of a political or religious movement.
4 Alasdair MacIntyre makes a similar point with respect to the need for standing armies. "Is Patriotism a Virtue?" *The Lindley Lectures* (University of Kansas Press, 1984), 17–18.
5 Sarah Dees, "Native American Religions," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
6 "Religion as a Way of Life," *The Pluralism Project*, Harvard University, accessed June 22, 2025, https://pluralism.org/religion-as-a-way-of-life
7 Joel Martin, *Native American Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.
8 Dees, "Native American Religions."
9 Confucius, *Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Hackett, 2003), 7.1. All subsequent references to this text will be denoted as *A*.
10 *A* 3.14.
11 *A* 6.18. See also Xunzi, *Xunzi*, trans. Eric Hutton (Princeton University Press, 2014), 1.145–158. All subsequent references to this text will be denoted as *X*.
12 *A* 1.7.
13 *A* 6.18, 12.1.
14 *A* 2.4, 3.23.
15 Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 15.
16 Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 30.
17 Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 18.
18 Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 30.
19 Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 18.
20 Andrew Oldenquist uses this phrase to describe loyalty in general. "Loyalties," *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 4 (1982): 175.
21 Starting point is an Aristotelian trope, as, for instance, invoked in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.4.1095a30–b3.
22 Foundation is a Cartesian trope, as invoked in *Meditations*, 1.17–8.
23 Joshua Harris, "Introduction," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Existential Gratitude,* ed. Harris, Lougheed, DeRoo (Bloomsbury, 2023), 1, italics original.
24 Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 555.
25 David Stendl-Rast, "Gratitude as Thankfulness and as Gratefulness," in *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (Oxford University Press, 2004): 285.
26 Steindl-Rast, "Gratitude as Thankfulness," 287–8.
27 See Michael Lacewing, "Can Non-Theists Appropriately Feel Existential Gratitude?" *Religious Studies* 52, no. 2 (2016): 145–65.

28 Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 30.
29 Sherri Mitchell, *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change* (North Atlantic Books, 2018).
30 Stendl-Rast, "Gratitude as Thankfulness," 287–8.
31 See Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 42–44.
32 *X*. 5.113–121.
33 This is why white people, for instance, could become Delaware Indians: "Less based on blood than knowledge of the land and immersion in the language and oral tradition of the people, being Delaware was something that took years to achieve." Martin, *Native American Religion*, 49. This point is made especially emphatically in a speech by Russell Means, who insists that tradition is not a racial concept, but a "mental" one. "For the World to Live, Europe Must Die," Pine Ridge Reservation, July 1980.
34 Elisa Novic, *The Concept of Cultural Genocide: An International Law Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 2016). The term "cultural genocide" was originally introduced by Raphael Lemkin in 1933.
35 Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, (Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.
36 This is also MacIntyre's point in *After Virtue*, where he builds up to tradition from practices, institutions, and narratives as the context for intelligible action.
37 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 32
38 This is also what Samuel Scheffler refers to as the "afterlife" in *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford University Press, 2016). See also "The Normativity of Tradition," in *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
39 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 50.
40 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 42–44.
41 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 6–10.
42 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, 1984), 223.
43 *A* 5.28, 7.20, 6.18.
44 This point is adopted from Annette Baier, "The Rights of Past and Future Persons," in *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*, ed. Louis Pojman, Paul Pojman, and Katie McShane (Cengage, 2017).
45 Baier, "The Rights of Past and Future Persons," 62.
46 See, for instance, the "I Have a Dream" and "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speeches, as well as "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."
47 "I've Been to the Mountaintop," Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968.
48 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1952), 51.
49 Russell Means, "For the World to Live, Europe Must Die," Pine Ridge Reservation, July 1980.
50 See, most famously, Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1985), 140–55.
51 Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," in *Rationalism in Politics and other essays* (Liberty Fund, 1991), 41.
52 Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," 41.
53 See, for instance, Alex Zakaras, *The Roots of American Individualism: Political Myth in the Age of Jackson* (Princeton University Press, 2022).
54 For reasons I discussed in Chapter 6, Section 2, I would not say that any moral content is essential to a tradition, but its sense of morality is more entrenched than other parts.

55 Craig Calhoun, "The Radicalism of Tradition: Community Strength or Venerable Disguise and Borrowed Language?" *American Journal of Sociology* 88, no. 5 (1983): 886–914. He notes that the spirit of the revolutionary traditionalist is neatly expressed in the words of William Cobbett: "we want *great alteration*, but we want nothing new." *Political Register*, November 2, 1816. See also Simone Weil, who sought to defend trade-unionism with appeals to tradition in *The Need for Roots* (51).
56 Calhoun, "The Radicalism of Tradition," 910–11 (italics original).
57 William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," *International Journal of Ethics* 1, no. 3 (1891): 352.
58 See, for instance, Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): 419–39 and Todd May, *A Decent Life: Morality for the Rest of Us* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).
59 See Chapter 2, Section 2.
60 Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," 41.
61 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, tr. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Secker and Warburg, 1953–60), 183.
62 Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness,* ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 25.

8 The Morality of Traditionalism

1.

Over the last two chapters, I have proposed traditionalism, or the love of and devotion to tradition, as a resolution to the spirituality problem. This proposal is exemplified by traditionalists, who conceive of their values in light of ways of life that have been passed down from their predecessors. In a deep sense, their experience is better proof than any philosophical argument could be. But I also realize that not everyone shares these experiences. On the contrary, many people are skeptical of tradition and traditionalism. This chapter and the next tackle what I regard as the most important reasons to be concerned.

Here, I want to consider objections to the morality of traditionalism. For the most part, the objections stem from the fact that traditionalism seems to be a form of loyalty. That is to say, traditionalism disposes a person to act in ways to defend and protect her own tradition. Of course, loyalty is considered by many people to be a virtue. But unlike virtues such as kindness or honesty, loyalty's status as a virtue is contested. For one thing, loyalty can create blind spots that compromise judgment. It can also provide incentives to act immorally. A person who excuses her friend's cruelty or assists in covering up a crime out of loyalty may be a great friend, but she also does not deserve moral praise, at least not unequivocally. And while loyalty in personal relationships is often viewed as rather innocuous, loyalty to broader, less personal entities such as countries and nations is viewed by many as unfounded and pernicious. Though there are important differences between them, traditionalism can take the form of patriotism or nationalism.[1] Thus, the moral arguments against loyalty – and patriotism and nationalism, in particular – can be brought against traditionalism.[2]

In what follows, I will consider four objections, mostly adapted from objections to patriotism and nationalism, that concern the morality of traditionalism: traditionalism violates the universality of morality, prevents

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moral progress, requires bad faith, and represents a form of idolatry. Let me concede at the outset that any of these charges could be true of particular traditionalists. Like most, if not all, life-orienting commitments, traditionalism carries certain moral risks, and it would be foolish to deny that damage has ever been done in the name of tradition. Still, I believe that the dangers can be mitigated and that the benefits are worth the risks. Thus, by way of addressing these objections, I will also be attempting to distinguish between good and bad traditionalism – that is to say, to carve out a space for a respectable form of traditionalism, one that may elevate the quality of moral life in the ways described in the previous chapter without falling prey to common moral dangers.

2.

One objection to traditionalism is that it violates the universality of morality. Traditionalism involves giving special consideration to one particular tradition – and its customs, practices, members, and so forth – over others simply because it is one's own. Many will find this differential treatment unjust. Martha Nussbaum, who calls her view "cosmopolitanism," gives voice to a similar critique about patriotism, claiming that the identification with one's country is a "morally questionable move of self-definition by a morally irrelevant characteristic."[3] The cosmopolitan conceives of moral relevance in terms of universal capacities for reason and moral choice, which she takes to constitute the "humanity of all human beings."[4] In contrast, citizenship in a country is morally irrelevant because it is based on an accident of birth or circumstance. According to the cosmopolitan, patriotism is a form of tribalism that, like racism, arbitrarily favors one group of people over others.[5] It is not hard to see how this argument could apply to traditionalism, as one's membership in a tradition is no less accidental than citizenship. One inherits a tradition through no choice of one's own, and the difference between being in one tradition rather than another is arbitrary. Favoring tradition is thus a morally questionable move.

The crucial premise in this objection is that being a member of one tradition (rather than another) is a morally irrelevant characteristic. A brief summary of an earlier discussion of tradition will serve to explain why I reject this premise.[6] While I accept humanity as that in virtue of which humans participate in moral life, I maintain the view that humanity is necessarily mediated by tradition. No human being comes into the world in possession of humanity, but rather acquires it through initiation into a tradition that delimits concrete possibilities of thought and action. Possibilities of moral thought and action, in particular, are cast in terms of culturally specific concepts that reflect the interests and concerns of a historical community, realized through culturally specific customs, practices,

and institutions that regulate shared life, and embodied in a material culture comprised of culturally specific artifacts. Morality as it is lived – including reason as it is exercised and moral choice as it is deliberated – is always realized in culturally specific ways. It is not possible to be a moral agent outside a tradition. Thus, far from being morally irrelevant, tradition is morally indispensable. Special attention to and consideration for one's tradition is not only not morally questionable, but possibly even virtuous.

However, the gist of this objection does not concern the metaethical question of what constitutes one's moral identity, but the differential treatment of people. That is, the real problem is not that the traditionalist regards tradition as morally relevant *per se*, but rather that she takes this to justify giving special weight or value to her own tradition. In this way, traditionalism seems to justify treating other traditions, including their people, institutions, practices, rituals, and artifacts, as morally inferior, or even outside the scope of morality itself. This objection concerns the treatment and moral standing of outsiders. Indeed, one reason the cosmopolitan critique is so powerful is because patriotism, nationalism, and the like have, as a matter of fact, led to violence, hatred, and the dehumanization of other groups – the World Wars of last century and ongoing ethnic conflicts in Africa and the Middle East being obvious examples. At the very least, group loyalty is linked to a vicious indifference about the needs and interests of other peoples. Thus, the patriotic slogan "America First" is seen by many to justify the harsh treatment of immigrants and refugees from other countries. Since these movements are plausibly instances of or animated by traditionalism, it seems that the critique can be extended to traditionalists.

In response, I say that "outsider" is itself a moral category. Every tradition that is self-aware enough to see itself as one among others has some way of acknowledging the moral status of outsiders. This does not mean that the treatment of outsiders will be peaceful, benevolent, or beyond reproach. Outsiders can be a subjugated people, as many nations were to the ancient Romans, or they can be enemies, as the Sioux were to the Crow. While one might disapprove of their treatment, these people were still afforded some kind of moral standing and, perhaps, not an inferior sort. After all, "enemy" can be a title of respect.[7] It is also true that outsiders can be treated as friends and neighbors, competitors and collaborators, sources and recipients of assistance, and objects of respect and admiration. The issue is not that outsiders are always treated respectfully or that the conferral of moral status is, in itself, sufficient to escape the charge of chauvinism. Rather, the mere distinction between insiders and outsiders tells us nothing; different treatment need not be worse treatment. Thus, traditionalism does not logically require that its adherents treat or think of

other traditions as morally inferior or unworthy of respect and consideration. Every tradition must negotiate the question of how to treat outsiders, and it should do so, by its own lights, in as morally sound a way possible.

Of course, some societies – particularly, those with a cosmopolitan bent – reject the distinction between insider and outsider, claiming instead to embrace a moral framework based on universalist values. However, such values presuppose a distinctive kind of traditionalism. Thus, speaking to audiences in modern, liberal democracies, John Kleinig defends patriotism by noting that the moral aspirations of the patriot tend to be universalist: "[m]ost likely, these will map or reflect universalist moral values – such as the rule of law, democratic institutions, cultural vibrancy, and so on."[8] Even more likely, he thinks, is that these universal values will be represented with "distinctive specifications of such universalist moral values – democracy American style or an Australianized version of the rule of law."[9] So even Nussbaum observes that the "values on which Americans may most justly pride themselves are, in a deep sense, Stoic values: respect for human dignity and the opportunity for each person to pursue happiness."[10] These are all implicitly appeals to tradition. What they show is that the embrace and defense of cosmopolitan values can itself be a kind of traditionalism.

Indeed, it is critical that cosmopolitans see their commitments in that light. Without a consciousness of tradition, they are particularly susceptible to one of Nussbaum's criticisms of patriots, which is that they wrongly come to see the way they live as "neutral," "normal," and "natural."[11] A blend of ancient Greek, Christian, and Enlightenment thinking, the modern cosmopolitan perspective – at least, Nussbaum's version – is not neutral, normal, and natural, but rooted in a broadly Western tradition. And it is important to recognize that not all societies share this perspective. Some societies see moral significance in their historical and cultural particularities, as Confucians do with respect to the rituals they inherited from the ancient Zhou and certain Native Americans do with respect to their ancestors. A cosmopolitan might see no morally relevant distinction between herself and members of these traditions, but that does not mean that their self-conceptions are illegitimate. To this point, it is worth noting that the imposition of universalistic values on other cultures has not always gone well; cosmopolitanism can be chauvinistic as well.

Thus, societies have different attitudes toward tradition. Some societies are self-conscious of themselves as inheritors of particular traditions and deliberately cultivate traditionalism. While they distinguish between insiders and outsiders, members of these traditions need not fail to respect others. However, cosmopolitan societies do not conceive of themselves as inheritors of particular traditions. In these societies, tradition will be treated as a morally irrelevant feature, and it will be unacceptable to make

moral distinctions on the basis of tradition. Nevertheless, the cosmopolitan can still be eager to defend the values and to honor and protect the structures of a universalist conception of morality that is, in fact, the fruit of a robust tradition.[12] That is to say, she can still be a traditionalist, as some influential cosmopolitans are, even if she is not self-consciously so. In that case, traditionalism can support a culturally rich, fully realized vision of universal morality. Either way, the universalist objection to traditionalism does not succeed.

3.

A conclusion one might draw from the previous discussion is that traditionalism can be innocuous or even positive when it supports morally good traditions, such as the tradition that gives rise to cosmopolitan morality. But what about traditions whose specific practices and institutions fail to respect others or advocate brutality and oppression? Human sacrifice, say, was a central part of traditional Aztec religion, and ancient Roman punishments were horrifically cruel. Modern examples court controversy. Suffice to say that certain traditions are criticized today for being "uncivilized" due to their treatment of women, gays, racial or religious minorities, and the poor and uneducated. One might object that it is morally wrong, if not outright evil, to be devoted to those traditions. In that case, there are at least some cases in which traditionalism is wrong: it is wrong in the context of morally bad traditions.

It is not clear what it means to say that a tradition is itself morally bad or, for that matter, morally good. Spanning countless generations and comprehending the whole of life, traditions are complex entities – far too complex to be judged in such sweeping terms. Moreover, it does not make sense to say that any particular feature could be so awful as to render an entire tradition completely bad. Something like that might be said of an organization, in which it is possible to subordinate everything within it to a circumscribed end. An organization dedicated to the torture of animals is positively evil, and it would be wrong to support it. But, as a way of life, a tradition has no such coherence or structure. There are no overarching purposes, no final ends that could subsume everything else. A tradition is capacious enough to include any number of morally bad things, but it is not the sort of thing that can be morally bad in itself. So, it does not make sense to say that the tradition, as a whole, is morally bad.

I suspect that wholesale condemnations are actually responses to specific bad contents such as the ideology of national socialism, the institution of slavery, human sacrifice, or foot binding. This clarification sets up a more precise version of the objection: traditionalism is wrong insofar as it disposes a person to defend morally bad values, beliefs, customs, practices,

institutions, and so forth. For instance, slavery was considered a normal part of American life until the abolitionist movement started gaining traction, at which point it became possible to debate the merits or, as the case stands, the demerits of the practice. Many people defended slavery as part of their way of life and were even willing to die for the cause. Insofar as they saw themselves as defending a way of life (as opposed, say, to a cheap source of labor), their actions might be considered an expression of traditionalism. This expression of traditionalism deserves criticism.

In essence, this objection takes issue with what might be described as the conservative character of traditionalism. The traditionalist is conservative in that she seeks to maintain a way of life that has been passed down by her predecessors. She recognizes the wisdom and authority of precedence and cumulative experience. She does not seek change simply for the sake of novelty or variety, and there are certain sorts of change and certain ways of bringing it about that she will resist. It is not difficult to see how these features could lead a traditionalist to defend the indefensible or, at the very least, to stand in the way of moral progress. This revised version of the objection is further reaching than the original one, for every tradition contains some morally objectionable contents. Thus, some might conclude that, insofar as it stands in the way of moral progress, traditionalism is always bad. That is to say, it is always wrong to be devoted to tradition *qua* tradition.

This criticism presupposes the idea that traditions are fixed, and their bad contents beyond criticism or revision. That view is false. As I argued in a previous chapter, traditions have no essences.[13] That is to say, a tradition is not adequately conceived as an ideal form, but rather as a way of life. Its identity depends on a style or manner of living that is essentially undefinable, and its continued viability requires the continuous work of "creative rejuvenation."[14] Thus, a tradition – at least, a healthy tradition – is always changing in response to new contexts and circumstances, including new ways of thinking about the past and present. This means that there is nothing within a tradition that is immune to revision or even elimination, and nothing that cannot become the object of critical scrutiny and criticism. For this reason, those who seek to essentialize a tradition with respect to some feature or other – racism or slavery, say – make a mistake about what a tradition is. The fact that certain values, customs, practices, or institutions are or were previously part of a tradition does not mean they will be so in the future. Thus, in embracing her tradition, the traditionalist need not defend the perpetuation of bad contents.

Indeed, she should not. Of course, it is possible to be the kind of traditionalist that stubbornly clings to the old ways, blindly accepting what came before as the standard for what must come next. However, this attitude is ultimately self-undermining. Love and devotion to a tradition

entails, at least, the desire to protect and maintain it, to keep it alive, so to speak. Insofar as it contains a moral outlook, every tradition has resources with which to correct itself, and members of a tradition are able to criticize, as well as to improve, their tradition where it has fallen short. This criticism is paramount for the maintenance of the tradition. A tradition that does not change in response to ever-evolving circumstances and insights will not be long for this world, and the work of correction is part of this process. That is to say, moral progress is one way in which a tradition maintains itself.

The continuation of a tradition depends, in no small part, on the ability of its members to protect it from the forces of corruption. Those forces are diverse and manifold, though a particularly acute threat is posed by moral corruption. The perpetuation of bad values, customs, practices, institutions, and the like creates harmful divisions and weakens solidarity between people, both within and without a tradition. For example, it was the moral scourge of slavery that led to the American Civil War, and the United States's questionable involvement in the Vietnam War was the first of numerous ill-conceived entanglements that have tested the faith of American traditionalists. Perhaps more importantly, moral corruption undermines the faith and pride that must exist among members of a tradition in order for it to endure.[15] The continued existence of a tradition depends on its members believing in its goodness, since people who think that their tradition is worthless or evil will not want to contribute to its survival. On the other hand, no tradition will be destroyed by the removal of bad values, customs, practices, or institutions. Moral progress does not make tradition, on the whole, less viable. Thus, it is a necessary implication of being a traditionalist that one seeks to promote the good and eliminate the bad.

If this is correct, traditionalism requires the possession and exercise of certain virtues. The traditionalist needs the courage to face the truth about her tradition even when it is ugly and unfavorable. She needs powers of critical reasoning to evaluate her tradition in a fair and unprejudiced way, as well as practical wisdom to discern what changes, if any, might be needed. And since there is no way to know antecedently what kind of change any particular tradition can or cannot withstand, she must also be imaginative, open-minded, and experimental about what is possible. These features will likely sound surprising to those who associate tradition with conservatism. Nevertheless, it is telling that those thinkers who are most intellectually serious about traditionalism – even conservatives by their own thinking – tend to deny that tradition is rigid or static.[16] Clinging to old ways in the face of needed adaptations is not a way of supporting tradition, but of weakening it. Thus, traditionalism at its best can be a force for moral change.

In short, since traditionalists are committed to improving their traditions, and rejecting those contents that turn out to be irredeemably bad and evil, the objection of conservativism does not succeed.

4.

My answer to the previous objection asserted the possibility of a "good traditionalism" that is appropriately self-critical and open-minded. Another objection, which is adapted from Simon Keller's argument against patriotism, casts doubt on that possibility. According to Keller, the patriot believes that "there is something about her country that is distinctive, central, enduring, and good," and this assessment is at least partially motivated by her identification with the country or the sense that it is hers.[17] The problem, he says, is that this motivation cannot be admitted, for "[t]o admit to any such motivation would be to admit that the belief is not formed in response only to the evidence and, hence, to undermine the credibility of the belief and the integrity of the loyalty that depends upon it."[18] Instead, he claims, the patriot holds that her belief is based in "an unbiased set of opinions about the nature of her own country plus some neutrally endorsed criteria for what properties of countries count as valuable."[19] That is to say, she deceives herself about the nature of her commitment to and beliefs about her country. Keller describes this self-deception as bad faith. This same argument can be transposed to the traditionalist, who believes that her tradition is objectively worthy of love and devotion. She believes that there is something fundamentally good about her tradition, when this belief is primarily based on the fact that it is hers. She would not feel the same about any other tradition, no matter how good or, even, how much better it was. Accordingly, traditionalism necessarily manifests an intellectual vice. So, "good traditionalism," which requires the capacity to make good faith judgments about one's own tradition, is nearly impossible.

We must again acknowledge the kernel of truth in this objection. There are certainly traditionalists whose beliefs about their traditions manifest wishful thinking rather than truth and who resist any evidence that could undermine their view of things. This sort of failing may even be common among traditionalists, though, for my purposes, it had better not be necessary. To this point, it is worth noting that Keller acknowledges that patriots are not necessarily disposed to bad faith. His more careful claim is only that there is an "internal connection" between the two.[20] In order to meet the objection, I need to establish that there is no internal connection between bad faith and traditionalism.[21]

On Keller's account, the internal connection seems to be supplied by the premise that the traditionalist cannot admit that she is motivated by

personal reasons to think well of her tradition. This connection is broken once we allow that she can make such an admission of her motivations. Keller acknowledges what is essentially this same possibility in the case of the loving parent: a parent who admits that she is motivated to think well of her child can believe that her child has good qualities without bad faith.[22] The difference, he suggests, is that the parent does not feel the need to cover up her motivation, whereas the traditionalist does. That is, he thinks that the traditionalist needs to convince herself that her love is entirely based on merit.

But why must admitting that one has *any* motive to think well of something undermine the credibility of one's beliefs? Doubt is appropriate if one's beliefs are entirely or even mostly motivated by a desire to think well of something. However, an admission of some motivation to think well of something – more commonly couched as the desire to "see the best" in something – does not pose the same problem. Indeed, this admission can lend greater credibility to the beliefs because it signals a degree of self-awareness on the part of the believer. This is why the parent's assessment of her child gains rather than loses credence when she explicitly recognizes her bias. While the judgment of a complete stranger with no personal investment might, in some instances, be more credible, it is simply not true that the judgment of a partial party is automatically untrustworthy, especially when the partiality is appropriately acknowledged. Of course, there are reasons why the judgments of partial parties are not appropriate in certain public contexts, but the objection of bad faith is not a concern about public contexts. It is, rather, about the psychological state of the traditionalist *vis-a-vis* beliefs about her own tradition. If the traditionalist feels no need to disguise her motivations, she need not engage in bad faith.

Keller seems to think that the traditionalist cannot maintain her loyalty to tradition without disguising her motivations to think well of it. This is because he assumes that loyalty to tradition, as opposed to one's child, must be based on beliefs that are formed "in response only to the evidence," or based on "an unbiased set of opinions…plus some neutrally endorsed criteria for what…count as valuable."[23] A parent can love her child even if he has no objectively good qualities and all her beliefs about his goodness are undermined by the evidence.[24] Keller thinks that the same does not hold for a traditionalist, whose loyalty must be solely based on a "substantive evaluative endorsement" generated through a neutral deliberation if it is to be justified.[25] As an example of a correctly formed loyalty, he points to the responsible choice of a political party, in which a person learns about its platform and compares it against a set of neutrally established values before deciding to join. The recognition of personal motivations is a problem because they suggest that one's loyalty is not the product of a purely neutral deliberation.

There are two things to say about this position. First, developing neutrally endorsed criteria for loyalty is non-trivial. For instance, since political parties themselves embody values, it is unclear how it would be possible to establish criteria that do not already incline a person one way rather than another. One's decisions on "neutrally endorsed criteria" about the social safety net, say, or free markets are essentially already decisions about which political party to support. The challenge of arriving at neutrally endorsed criteria is even more acute for traditions (or countries), for there is no place of neutrality outside of tradition from which it is possible to develop such criteria.[26] Not only is every person necessarily a member of some tradition or other, but tradition is the ultimate ground of one's capacity to value. This does not mean that one must automatically endorse all values as they are inherited, since critical scrutiny is always possible. However, the process of scrutiny is necessarily Neurathian in that it proceeds from within tradition, holding some elements fixed while evaluating the credentials of others. In evaluating traditions, there are no neutrally endorsed criteria for what is valuable. Thus, the objection of bad faith depends on an inappropriate standard of epistemic hygiene. A more appropriate standard does not require neutrality, but rather recognizes the web of commitments and values in which we are inevitably enmeshed.

Second, this position assumes a certain conception of what it means to believe that one's tradition has distinctively good qualities that merit love and devotion. Keller assumes that it means asserting objective claims that are falsifiable by empirical facts. However, as others have pointed out, many of the beliefs about the fundamental goodness of tradition are aspirational in character.[27] Thus, Rorty's traditionalism reflects a striving to "achieve his country" through reforms that bolster social justice and democracy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. encouraged Americans to live up to the ideals enshrined in the Constitution. Such beliefs perhaps cannot be true *per se*. In order for them to not be illusions, they must endorse ideals that are truly worth aspiring to, and it must be possible to point to historical events, heroes, narratives, customs, and the like that support the idea that the ideals really belong to the tradition. However, the ideals need not have been fully realized for these beliefs to be appropriate. Indeed, a belief in the goodness of tradition is consistent with strong disagreement and dissent, and a traditionalist may appeal to these ideals and aspirations as "benchmarks against which the actual [tradition] can be measured."[28]

If belief in the goodness of tradition is aspirational, it need not be a product of bad faith. The reason is that we can see aspirational beliefs in the fundamental goodness of one's tradition as an expression of hope.[29] Hope, by definition, exceeds the hard evidence, but it is reasonable when it is supported by a context that makes its fulfillment realistic through human agency, however difficult or challenging that may be. More importantly,

it is essential for the good functioning of moral life. Though based in past achievements and virtues, hope is essentially oriented toward the future. And since the obstacles to morality are great and the aspirations of morality high, there is no possibility of improvement without it. Thus, as long as the traditionalist's belief in the fundamental goodness of her tradition is based in rational hope about its ideals, I submit that it is not only not evidence of bad faith, but critical for moral resilience. Indeed, I would say that hope is part of what makes traditionalism good.

5.

A final objection to the morality of traditionalism concerns the danger of idolatry. Idolatry is the worship of an image of god. Since it appears to assume the existence of god, one might think that this error cannot be of interest to a secularist. But the objection does not – at least, not ostensibly – depend on theism. For, in essence, idolatry is perverse worship or excessive devotion.[30] As many have observed, this error is commonly manifest in reverential devotion to one's country or nation – that is to say, in forms of patriotism or nationalism.[31] The same objection could be brought against traditionalism.

One way to unpack the badness of idolatry depends on the way in which it prevents the proper appreciation of other goods in the world. Robert Adams explains that "love for any finite object, or realm of objects, is idolatrous if it is so exclusive as to keep us from caring about other instances or types of good."[32] This type of error is more prevalent than may initially appear. The workaholic, whose passion for work renders him unable to care about anything else, is, on this reading, idolatrous; so is the activist, who subordinates everything in life to the cause of social justice. Adams identifies three forms idolatry may take – it can manifest in a passion that turns a person away from morality, in an excessive need for some finite object, or in exaggerated deference to some human authority. While this list is not meant to be exhaustive, it provides a useful platform from which to respond to the objection. Here, I consider how each form of idolatry might apply to traditionalism.

In the first instance, "a passion, love, or commitment to any finite good is idolatrous if it is so absorbing as to be *incompatible* with doing usually what one morally and religiously ought to do, or with living virtuously in one's various relationships."[33] Adams's example is a Gauguin-like character, who abandons his family in order to pursue a passion for painting. The idolatrous Gauguin does not just succumb to immorality, which is something that can happen even in the absence of idolatry, but elevates his art above moral considerations. He is either so consumed with passion for his work that it is impossible to meet moral obligations on a consistent

basis, or he is "freely resolved to let *nothing* stand in the way of his art."[34] For him, morality and virtue are possible only accidentally, when circumstances permit. This same kind of idolatry is possible with a range of finite goods, such as money, power, and status. Could traditionalism lead a person down the same path?

I believe the answer is "no." Tradition is not like art, money, power, or status: these are examples of goods that exist within life and that can compete with morality for precedence. Instead, tradition is a way of life that contains all goods, including morality. And thus, it cannot compete with morality as other goods do. On the contrary, living morally or virtuously is one way – and a prominent way at that – that a person can express her love of tradition. For morality is arguably tradition's most important flower. That is why the traditionalist is positively obligated to critical scrutiny and moral improvement. And it is why traditionalism is most often associated with the promotion and protection of moral values. Thus, traditionalism is not incompatible with acting morally or virtuously and, in this way, is not idolatrous.

The second form of idolatry consists in an "excessive or inappropriate *need* for a finite object."[35] A person might love something so much that she feels that life is meaningless and not worth living without it. Adams's example is Juliet, who kills herself because she has lost Romeo. On his view, Juliet acts idolatrously because she is unable to appreciate the "immeasurable ocean of actual and potential good" in the world.[36] While there is nothing wrong with loving another person or thing immensely and being devastated by its loss, it is a mistake to think that one could not live without it. Similarly, Adams thinks that Bernard Williams's concept of "ground projects," whose loss would lead to a state in which a person "might as well have died," is idolatrous.[37] Excessive need allows one finite thing or set of things to blot out all the other goods, lovable in their own ways, that exist.

In Chapter 7, I described the traditionalist as having existential gratitude for tradition.[38] The traditionalist believes, implicitly or explicitly, that she owes her life to tradition and could not live without it. This sounds a lot like it could be excessive or inappropriate need. The Crow chief Plenty Coup, who said that "nothing could happen" after his people were forced onto the reservation, might be accused of making this error.[39] And if we understand this quote to mean that his depression was so overwhelming as to dampen interest in life, then this accusation would be apt. But there is a difference between losing a loved one or a "ground project" and losing one's tradition. Tradition is not one good thing among others, but the very framework within which it is possible for anything to be good. Plenty Coup was facing the loss of the horizon of intelligibility and value, the background against which

anything could have meaning. He was not merely depressed, but quite literally in danger of losing the very basis of his ethical existence. Thus, traditionalists who feel the existential significance of tradition are not wrong to do so. That is to say, their need for tradition is not excessive or inappropriate. And for this reason, they do not exemplify the idolatry of excessive need.

Finally, Adams identifies a form of idolatry in an "exaggerated deference to human authority, opinion, or taste."[40] A person who errs in this way orients her life around gaining the approval of others or conforming to social expectations. This sort of idolatry may go undetected when the person has deeply internalized social expectations and values. That is to say, to be idolatrous, she does not necessarily have to think of herself as striving to please others; she simply needs to take on their expectations and values as her own without ever having exercised her own judgment on what is truly good and worth pursuing. Adams explains that this form of idolatry arises from a cognitive error, in which "the views and feelings of other people are allowed to define what is good, as only divine views and feelings could properly do."[41] Of course, a secularist will not agree that any problem consists in granting to others a power that properly belongs to the divine. But she can recognize the loss of autonomy in being unable to discern and appreciate real goods for herself; the idolatry of exaggerated deference might be understood as an implicit renunciation of autonomy. This form of idolatry seems particularly relevant to tradition, which embodies social norms that are not of any person's making.

However, there is an important difference between blindly accepting traditional values and beliefs and taking on a traditional perspective.[42] For one thing, the latter cannot be avoided. I have argued that no thinking on matters of practical import is possible outside of a tradition. Among other things, language, concepts, practices, and institutions are requisite for practical thought; processing situations, deliberating options, forming intentions, and acting are impossible without the rails of tradition. But that does not mean that a person must blindly accept traditional values and beliefs as they are, for the perspective of tradition is inherently rational. Acquired alongside the natural emergence of reason, a traditional perspective is not just a framework that dictates behavior, but a rational outlook that not only allows, but calls for assessment, evaluation, and criticism. Mindlessly abiding by the norms constituted by tradition is a defective way to occupy this outlook, and a person who did so can perhaps be charged with the idolatry of exaggerated deference. But this charge cannot be brought for simply taking on the perspective of tradition with all the values and beliefs that that entails. As long as a person is alive to the possibility of critique and reflective understanding, she does not treat tradition as an idol.

At the same time, it is important not to overstate the ambit of critique and reflective understanding. Tradition is a way of specifically human life. The human animal is subject to myriad natural impulses that are neither chosen nor eliminable, but which must be shaped in some way or other, and how they are shaped is undecidable by reason alone. Does it make more sense to eat three times a day or six, with cutlery or chopsticks, at a table or on the floor? Is it better to raise children in atomic families or communally? Are there some most rational conditions under which to have sex? On some questions, one might produce arguments for arranging human life in one way over others, but not on all of them. It is precisely in those areas that are undecidable by reason that the guidance of tradition is most needed. A critical and reflective stance on tradition must therefore include a healthy appreciation of the limits of reason. Some aspects of tradition are opaque to rational explanation, and acceptance, which can be more or less aware, is the only option. Thus, there is a legitimate way to accept the authority of tradition, one that does not commit a person to the idolatry of exaggerated deference.

So, insofar as idolatry consists in being unable to care about other instances or types of good, I do not think that traditionalism is inherently idolatrous. On the contrary, in her devotion to tradition, the traditionalist is alive to the value of innumerable goods – not just morality, but customs, institutions, arts, politics, technology, entertainment, cuisine, architecture, nature, and more. In loving tradition, she loves the source of life itself, both for herself and others. And her immersion in the rational perspective of tradition is the condition for the acceptance of legitimate authority. In these ways, one might even say that traditionalism positively encourages an appropriate care for many instances and types of good in the world.

6.

However, idolatry is not just defined negatively as preventing love of good things, but also positively as worshipping things that should not be worshipped. Paul Tillich's definition is viewed as typical:

> Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance.[43]

While it is appropriate to love conditional, partial, or finite goods, it is idolatrous to love them as an ultimate good or with a love that is absolute and total. Insofar as tradition fits the description of a "preliminary concern," the traditionalist seems to make the same error. Arising from

a combination of human endeavor and historical accident, a tradition is contingent and conditional. There is no necessity in any tradition, which could have been otherwise or not existed at all. There is also no tradition that is not partial or parochial. And since they come into being and can cease to exist, all traditions are finite. Insofar as I have defended tradition as an appropriate object of spiritual love, it seems that I am promoting the idea of treating something conditioned, partial, and finite as if it were unconditioned, universal, and infinite. Given this, how is it possible to deny that traditionalism is idolatry?

To answer this question, it is worth recalling that my account of traditionalism is an attempt to recast a Confucian insight about moral life. Drawing on Fingarette's views on the "sacredness of the secular," I presented this insight in Chapter 5, and over the last three chapters, I have tried to translate it into the language of contemporary philosophy. Some of this work has been relatively straightforward. It is relatively clear, for instance, how the Confucian concept of ritual (*li*) maps onto the concept of customs and how the Confucian understanding of moral education tracks Western views of the same. These aspects of Confucian thought are naturally brought together under the concept of tradition. But there is another part of the Confucian insight, arguably the most critical part, that is far more resistant to translation. This is *dao* or the Way. *Dao* is the flow that regulates all things immanently – not just as the guide of all reality, but as the standard of all goodness. It is also the animating force of Confucian thought, and without it, Confucius's concern for custom, moral education, social roles, and the rest can only appear, as it did to Hegel, as a flatfooted defense of social respectability. The spirituality of Confucianism ultimately depends on its relationship to *dao*.

In responding to the idolatry objection, I am tempted to say that the same – or something similar – can be said about traditionalism. Despite being non-supernatural, *dao* has been likened to God and Brahman as an "ultimate," or the "most fundamentally real, valuable or fulfilling among all that there is or could be."[44] Accordingly, if traditionalism could somehow be explained as a relationship to *dao*, we could plausibly see it as non-idolatrous. But I find myself at a loss for how to make that case. For one thing, *dao* is not only undefined, but undefinable, making it exceedingly difficult to construct an argument for it. More importantly, it is unclear that *dao* is appropriately naturalistic, and few Western secularists will be eager to embrace something that is thought to be decreed by Heaven (*tian*).[45] So, I will not attempt to argue that traditionalism is in fact a relationship to *dao*.

But perhaps there is enough in what I have said to think that tradition relates to something *dao*-like. I have argued that tradition is the ground of one's humanity. Humanity consists in the capacity to participate in a

broadly ethical community, in which a person is capable of responding to reasons and values, reflecting on what is worthwhile, cultivating virtues, fulfilling responsibilities, taking on projects, and living a meaningful life with and among others. Before being initiated into a particular tradition, we are human animals who are only capable of functioning biologically. In taking on a way of life, we are elevated into bearers of humanity. Thus, we could say that tradition provides access to practical reality as we know it.

On the face of it, this reality is limited to a particular tradition, since customs, practices, reasons, values, meanings, norms, and the like are culture-laden. But, in fact, a bearer of humanity gains access to something much broader. This is because tradition is not a fixed set of customs, practices, reasons, values, and so forth, but a way of human living that is saturated with reason. As a result of being initiated into a tradition, the bearer of humanity gains the capacity to freely contemplate and evaluate all possibilities of human action and thought, no matter how foreign or distant and how incompatible with one's own they may be.[46] So, even though Confucian customs of ancestor worship and American virtues of entrepreneurship, say, would not have constituted meaningful practical possibilities in ancient Greece, they would also not have been totally unintelligible to the people living in that culture. Having been brought into practical reality through their own tradition, ancient Greeks would have had a basis for understanding the importance another culture places upon the family, say, or the nature of work. Our experiences with practical reality provide a foothold from which to peek over the edges of our own traditions, so to speak. Insofar as we are bearers of humanity, we are able to make sense of human ways of life that are not our own, and no way of life is completely unintelligible. This is a remarkable capacity, and it is facilitated by tradition.

Admittedly, understanding the ways of other societies – especially historically and culturally distant ones – is hardly ever automatic, easy, or complete. Other traditions can be deeply foreign, discombobulating, and perplexing. Despite finding many areas of commonality, a person may be faced with values that she finds wrongheaded or repugnant, ends she finds meaningless, notions that she cannot fully comprehend. She may encounter concepts that resist translation, that defy what she takes to be the usual categories of thought, as a Chinese concept such as *qi* or, appropriately, *dao* "stops a [Western] translator cold."[47] She may get the sense that she is not only facing different concepts, but different rationalities altogether.[48] Although one's tradition provides enough conceptual resources to make sense of foreign cultures, there is no principle of intelligibility that exists beyond tradition that can be used to bridge certain gaps of understanding. Sensitive people realize that, while they can be narrowed, these gaps can never be entirely eliminated. This is why it is experts, those who know

most about other traditions, that inform us of the untranslatability of concepts and the incommensurability of ways of thinking.[49] Ironically, knowing more leads to knowing less: to appreciate another tradition is also to become aware of its mystery.

I propose that we see in this experience evidence that tradition connects us to a broader, *dao*-like reality. This reality escapes total comprehension. It appears to us as multiple, overlapping, and potentially conflicting visions of the world. Containing both sameness and difference, concordance and contradiction, it cannot be neatly articulated through common concepts or universal truths. We align ourselves with this reality through a specific way of life because that is the only way that we can function: as human beings, we are bound by particular languages and conceptual schemes. Nevertheless, in our encounters with other traditions, we have intimations that reality is fuller than we could ever know. Thus, I suggest that tradition is that through which we access a greater reality that defies comprehension. If this is true, then traditionalism can be a relationship to something *dao*-like. And so, traditionalism need not be idolatrous.

I say "need not be idolatrous" because traditionalism can obviously go astray. It is possible – and maybe all-too-easy – to fail to appreciate that one's tradition is only one among the many "corners" of reality. The Confucian Xunzi explains:

> People of twisted understanding observe one corner of the Way and are unable to recognize it as such. So, they think it sufficient and proceed to embellish it. On the inside, they use it to disorder their own lives. On the outside, they use it to confuse other people…This is the disaster of being fixated and blocked up in one's thinking.[50]

A person who believes that her tradition is the best or the one true tradition is fixated and blocked up in her thinking. So is a person who fails to appreciate other traditions as worthy of admiration and respect, who is closed to their beauty and their achievements, who sees them as uncivilized or their members as lacking in humanity. This is the kind of chauvinism described earlier that leads some to denigrate other cultures. Not only does this attitude lead to conflict, but more importantly for the present discussion, it embodies a fundamental error. The traditionalist who takes her tradition to be the exclusive totality of all that is real and good confuses a way with the Way. This sort of traditionalism is idolatry.

But it is equally possible to imagine a traditionalist who accepts her tradition as one corner of a greater reality. Her love of tradition enables her to appreciate the value of culture and the importance of history. She is particularly attuned to the distinguishing features of her own tradition, and insofar as she appreciates that these features belong to her tradition

and not others, she is acutely aware of the contingent, parochial nature of her way of life. This awareness need not lessen her love for tradition. Instead, it can be the basis of an openness to the legitimacy of other ways of life, even those that conflict with her own on fundamental issues. For the value of culture and the importance of history is not limited to her own tradition. In this way, she can avoid being fixed and blocked up, or idolatrous, in her thinking.

In other words, traditionalism can be non-idolatrous when it is infused with a mature, open-minded pluralism. The "spirit of pluralism" has been described as the view that "there are many incompatible and yet decent and worthwhile routes through life, and that they are as available to people in other civilizations, and were as available to people in other generations, as they are to us."[51] Thus, a good traditionalist, one who is not fixed and blocked up in her thinking, is open to recognizing the goodness of other traditions. One sign of this openness is an ability to appreciate the value and beauty of foreign cultures. This is illustrated, for instance, by Fielding's admiration of the civilization of "well-bred Indians" and, more generally, in the study of anthropology, archaeology, comparative literature, art history, and all other inquiries and practical endeavors that attempt to cross cultural barriers.[52] Another sign of this openness – one that is more challenging – is a preparedness to experience "moral ambivalence" rather than outright rejection in the face of conflict. Moral ambivalence is the "phenomenon of coming to understand and appreciate the other side's viewpoint to the extent that our sense of the unique rightness of our own judgments gets destabilized."[53] For instance, a secular Westerner who believes the core tenets of liberalism might experience moral ambivalence about codes of feminine modesty in orthodox Muslim traditions or the relative disregard of personal privacy in East Asian traditions. This experience does not cause her to relinquish her own views, but it is an implicit acknowledgment that reality contains contradictions and opposites and resists definitions and statements of principle. A pluralistic traditionalism that is open to the goodness of other traditions is, at bottom, open to a reality that is larger than any one person or group of people can know.

Thus, a traditionalist that is alive to the conditioned, partial, and finite nature of her own tradition can be open to a reality that is unconditional, universal, and infinite. In this way, it is possible for traditionalism to escape the charge of idolatry.

7.

In this chapter, I have considered objections concerning the morality of traditionalism. I concede that a person can be unjust, viciously conservative, self-deceived, and idolatrous out of love for tradition. But there are

better and worse ways of loving tradition. Good traditionalism requires a preparedness to respect the value of other traditions and their people. It requires a willingness to deploy critical scrutiny on the contents of one's own tradition, as well as an imagination for how to adapt to changing circumstances and insights. It requires an honest, but hopeful appreciation of the qualities of one's tradition. And it requires open-mindedness to the fullness of reality, which is expressed in a pluralistic acceptance of other ways of life. Like theism, traditionalism is a complex orientation toward the world, and it can be taken up in better and worse ways. However, there is no moral problem that is intrinsic to traditionalism itself.

Of course, good traditionalism is possible only if something worth the name of tradition still exists. Given the state of the world, one might doubt that to be the case, for traditions seem to require a degree of stability and isolation that no longer seems possible. Many people feel alienated from tradition; even more are simply indifferent to it. In short, social and cultural forces in modern, secularist societies present a serious practical challenge to traditionalism. To that objection I now turn.

Notes

1 Patriotism and nationalism are political in a way that traditionalism is not. The concept of tradition is neutral with respect to questions of territorial or political sovereignty, and though a tradition typically incorporates institutions of various sorts, it does not itself take form as an institution with, say, a governing body or a leader as a country or nation does. I would say a tradition is much more nebulous than either a country or a nation, and much more fundamental.
2 Some discussions of patriotism define countries in ways that nearly converge on traditions. For instance, Stephen Nathanson claims that people's conceptions of country "include[..] not just its politics but its language, culture, familiar history, natural beauties, customs, literature, folk heroes, and personal histories." "In Defense of "Moderate Patriotism" in *Patriotism*, ed. Primoratz (Humanity Books, 2002), 88.
3 Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," *Boston Review*, October 1, 1994. Here, I adopt Nussbaum's terminology. By "cosmopolitanism," I take it that she means a moral position, rather than a political advocacy for world government. Moreover, I take cosmopolitanism to refer to the same thing as what MacIntyre calls "liberal morality" in "Is Patriotism a Virtue?"
4 Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism."
5 Paul Gomberg, "Patriotism is like Racism," *Ethics* 101, no. 1 (1990): 144–50.
6 This view is also in line with "communitarian" thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer, who believe that moral identity is bound up with community.
7 As Nietzsche would have it.
8 John Kleinig, "The Virtue in Patriotism," in *The Ethics of Patriotism: A Debate,* ed. Kleineg, Keller, and Primoratz (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 38.
9 Kleinig, "The Virtue in Patriotism," 38.

10 Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism."
11 Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism."
12 In "Is Patriotism a Virtue?" Alasdair MacIntyre finds the cosmopolitan project fundamentally confused: "a morality of particularist ties and solidarities has been conflated with a morality of universal, impersonal and impartial principles in a way that can never be carried through without incoherence." *The Lindley Lectures* (University of Kansas Press, 1984), 19. I do not see this as a problem that cannot be fixed with self-awareness.
13 Chapter 6, Section 2.
14 Josef Pieper, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, trans. Christian Kopff (St. Augustine's Press, 2008), 15.
15 See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.
16 Pieper, *Tradition*, 15; Oakeshott, "Political Education," 59.
17 Simon Keller, "The Case Against Patriotism," in *The Ethics of Patriotism,* ed. Kleinig, Keller, and Primoratz (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 57; See also Keller, "Patriotism as Bad Faith," *Ethics* 115, no. 3 (2005), 574–6.
18 Keller, "Patriotism as Bad Faith," 581.
19 Keller, "Patriotism as Bad Faith," 581.
20 Keller, "Patriotism as Bad Faith," 583.
21 Keller, "Patriotism as Bad Faith," 582–3.
22 Keller, "Patriotism as Bad Faith," 589.
23 Keller, "Patriotism as Bad Faith," 581.
24 Keller, "Patriotism as Bad Faith," 589.
25 Keller, "Virtue for the Unpatriotic: Response to Kleineg and Primoratz," in *The Ethics of Patriotism,* ed. Kleinig, Keller, and Primoratz (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 136.
26 Here, my use of Keller is more strained, since he is speaking of one's country rather than one's tradition. It is arguably more possible to assess a country in this neutral way.
27 See Kleinig, "The Virtue in Patriotism," 38; Rorty, *Achieving Our Country,* 11.
28 Kleinig, "The Virtue in Patriotism," 38. Here, I have replaced "country" with "tradition."
29 See Eamonn Callon, who argues that the lack of hope is not consistent with patriotism. "Patriotism without Bad Faith," *Philosophy of Education* 67 (2011), 6.
30 Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 20–21.
31 Eamonn Callan, "Love, Idolatry, and Patriotism," *Social Theory and Practice* 32, no. 4 (2006): 525–46; Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 200; Johnston, *Saving God*, 24.
32 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 200.
33 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 205. This seems to be the position of Callan's "Love, Idolatry, and Patriotism" as well.
34 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 204.
35 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 205.
36 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 207.
37 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 207; Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 12–14.
38 Chapter 7, Sections 3–4.

39 See Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope* (Harvard University Press, 2006), Chapter 1 and my discussion in the previous chapter.
40 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 209. This charge is actually placed under the broader category of "misidentification," which includes other kinds of exaggerations. However, exaggerated deference is the one that most applies to traditionalism.
41 Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 210.
42 This is a difference that Adams acknowledges in *Finite and Infinite Goods* (209).
43 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1951), 13. Quoted by Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 200.
44 Jeanine Diller, "God and Other Ultimates," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Spring 2025 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/god-ultimates/>.
45 See discussion of this difficulty in Chapter 5, Section 4.
46 As John McDowell claims, "immersion in a tradition might be a respectable mode of access to *the* real." *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 98. Italics mine.
47 Judith Farquhar, *A Way of Life: Things, Thought, and Action in Chinese Medicine* (Yale University Press, 2020), 21.
48 Farquhar, *A Way of Life*, 2.
49 See Farquhar, *A Way of Life, Chapter 1*; Robert Ames and Henry Rosemont, "Philosophic and Linguistic Background" in *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (Ballantine Books, 1998); Geoffrey Lloyd and Nathan Sivin, *The Way and the Word: Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece* (Yale University Press, 2002), Chapter 1.
50 *Xunzi*, trans. Eric Hutton (Princeton University Press, 2014), 21.123–29.
51 Joseph Raz, *The Practice of Value* (Clarendon Press, 2005), 43.
52 See Chapter 6, section 5.
53 David Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 5. See also Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 147 and Irene Liu, "Ethical Pluralism and the Appeal to Human Nature," *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (2018): 1103–19.

9 Finding Tradition

1.

Because the spirituality problem concerns lived experience, any proposed resolution must meet the test of life. On this standard, it might be thought that I have proposed an especially inappropriate solution, for many of the same forces that eroded religious faith over the last few centuries have also undermined tradition. Some of these forces are the legacy of Enlightenment thinking. A distrust of authority and a belief in the "sovereignty" of individual reason have made tradition, no less than religion, a target of suspicion.[1] And the triumph of scientific and rationalistic outlooks on the world has seemingly dispensed with the need for traditional wisdom.[2] Moreover, traditions around the world have been weakened by political, demographic, and economic changes attributed to modern globalization. As societies have become more interdependent, cultural differences have been sanded down, and traditions that remain unintegrated into the global economy are at increased risk of extinction. Given these forces, it is unclear that it is any longer possible for modern people to have a meaningful relationship to tradition. So it may seem that traditionalism, in any robust sense of the word, is not a practicable solution to the spirituality problem.

The problem for my position is not merely the impossibility of traditionalism. It is also the appeal of an alternative orientation that is positively non- or, even, anti-traditionalist. In many modern societies, one is more likely to find a "cosmopolitan" than a traditionalist:

> [The cosmopolitan] refuses to think of himself as defined by his location or his ancestry or his citizenship or his language. Though he may live in San Francisco and be of Irish ancestry, he does not take his identity to be compromised when he learns Spanish, eats Chinese, wears clothes made in Korea, listens to arias by Verdi sung by

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> a Maori princess on Japanese equipment, follows Ukrainian politics, and practices Buddhist meditation techniques. He is a creature of modernity, conscious of living in a mixed-up world and having a mixed-up self.[3]

The cosmopolitan identifies with a global or international community rather than a traditional one. He does not follow a set way of life, but rather takes it upon himself to make individual decisions about how to live. These decisions need not conform to any pattern; they can draw from any number of traditions and be combined in any number of ways. Perhaps most importantly, this situation does not leave him feeling lost or aimless. On the contrary, he enjoys his freedom and relishes the opportunity to realize his most authentic self: the cosmopolitan "celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs;" he is proud of his "mongrelization."[4] So, not only is it the case that traditionalism seems increasingly impossible in the modern world, but, in the minds of many, there is a more appealing option on the table.

With his embrace of freedom and choice, the modern cosmopolitan is akin to the existentialist. I have already discussed the spiritual attractions and pitfalls of existentialist humanism, and I suggest that much of what I said before applies also to cosmopolitanism. However, the existentialist, now in the guise of the cosmopolitan, is worth renewed consideration because he embodies a significant practical challenge to the traditionalist. Whereas existentialist humanism – at least, as advanced by Sartre – is a response to a godless world, modern cosmopolitanism might be understood as a response to a traditionless world. Given these conditions, it may seem that the only authentic response to the current situation is to relinquish tradition and become a cosmopolitan. The goal of this chapter is to answer this challenge.

More specifically, I will consider two objections to traditionalism that arise from the cosmopolitan perspective: tradition, in any robust sense of the word, no longer exists as an authentic option for a way of life, and modern people are too detached from tradition to become traditionalists. In answering these objections, it is not my aim to discredit cosmopolitanism, but rather to bolster traditionalism. Indeed, I see cosmopolitanism as a possibility within a certain tradition. I will have succeeded if I am able to establish traditionalism as a practicable possibility for resolving the spirituality problem in the modern world. I conclude the chapter with some suggestions for how this possibility might begin to be realized.

2.

The first objection to traditionalism concerns authenticity. One might say that it is no longer possible for people in modern societies to live fully traditional lives in any authentic way. The truth is that each one of us is economically and politically interconnected with people from all over the world, and "no honest account of our being will be complete without an account of our dependence on larger social and political structures that goes far beyond the particular."[5] Whether we like it or not, we are, in fact, members of a global community. In light of this context, a person who holds firm to her tradition seems stubbornly resistant to reality. Jeremy Waldron explains:

> We live in a world formed by technology and trade; by economic, religious, and political imperialism and their offspring; by mass migration and the dispersion of cultural influences. In this context, to immerse oneself in the traditional practices of, say, an aboriginal culture might be a fascinating anthropological experiment, but it involves an artificial dislocation from what actually is going on in the world. That it is an artifice is evidenced by the fact that such immersion often requires special subsidization and extraordinary provision by those who live in the real world, where cultures and practices are not so sealed off from one another. The charge, in other words, is one of inauthenticity.[6]

Here, Waldron has in mind people, such as Native American tribes, who might receive special protection from international bodies, but the point applies more generally to anyone who insists on identifying with a particular, culturally and historically based tradition. The charge of inauthenticity is not that the traditionalist is insincere or phony, but that she is deluded. By donning traditional costumes and enacting traditional rites, she confuses the appearance of traditional life for its substance: "immersion in the traditions of a particular community in the modern world is like living in Disneyland and thinking that one's surroundings epitomize what it is for a culture really to exist."[7] In a globalized world, culturally distinct traditions no longer exist in any meaningful or robust way. Accordingly, traditionalism can only be cosplay.

This objection does not recognize how tricky the concept of authenticity is. It is worth remembering that traditions are constantly undergoing processes of self-renewal in response to new circumstances. Because ways of life have no forms or essences, this means that questions of authenticity are never far from view. Such questions are particularly acute for the

sorts of societies singled out by Waldron. Living under the threat of cultural extinction, people in these societies confront difficult choices about how to maintain their ways of life. Some might insist on keeping certain contents of tradition fixed despite shifting realities, and it is true that this might result in an "artificial dislocation from what actually is going on in the world."[8] A Crow who kept planting coup-sticks after coup-planting had become unintelligible would be inauthentic. But it is also possible to take up traditional practices in novel, imaginative, and courageous ways, as Plenty Coup did when he paved the way for a new sort of Crow warrior by laying down his coup-stick at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington D.C.[9] Authentic participation in tradition does not mean doing the same exact things as one's ancestors, but rather extending a way of life through imaginative adaptations, necessary revisions, and adjustments to changing realities. These processes inevitably raise questions with no obvious answers: Is the Native American Church – a syncretist religion that emerged in the late 19th century that combines elements of traditional Indian rituals and Christianity – authentic? What about the revival and reinterpretation of the Sun Dance?[10] Such questions must be adjudicated on a case-by-case basis by people living within a tradition. They are also not limited to societies under imminent cultural threat. While they may not present with the same level of urgency, questions of authenticity arise in robust societies, as well. Indeed, grappling with such questions is itself a form of authentic participation in tradition. So, worries about the authenticity of traditionalism are exaggerated.

Moreover, Waldron wrongly assumes that our participation in the international community means that authentic participation in local traditions is no longer possible. It is true that modern people are interconnected with and interdependent upon people from all over the world. However, these relationships need not cancel or supersede more parochial attachments. Since they have distinct characteristics and functions, one can be a member of both international and local communities at one and the same time. The international community, which is necessary for addressing large-scale concerns such as trade, migration, wars, and climate change, depends on collaborations and cooperative ventures that are codified in international law, treaties, and business contracts, whereas traditional communities are based in a shared social life that is organized around historically based values, understandings, and beliefs. Of course, the demands of one community may sometimes conflict with those of the other. Famously, the demands of globalized commerce have threatened the viability of traditional industries and the ways of life they are part of. But there is no reason why the international community must always win out over the local. Like questions of authenticity, the relationship between international and local is something that members of traditions need to work out among

themselves. This negotiation inevitably changes a tradition, but that does not mean that authentic participation in a tradition becomes impossible.

Finally, Waldron's objection implies that, by identifying with the international community, it is somehow possible to live a life beyond tradition. If, as I have argued, tradition is the ground of one's humanity, this is not a possible condition of life. One's humanity depends on a background of culturally specific concepts, values, customs, practices, institutions, and material conditions that are given by a tradition. This background is so vast and comprehensive that it often escapes notice, but it is not itself escapable. Without it, it is not possible to act as a subject, and one's actions cannot be intelligible as expressions of human agency.[11] Tradition is implicated in every choice one makes, including choices that one does not realize one is making, such as how one sleeps, moves, and relates to time. It shapes even the choice to reject tradition, though it would be more appropriate to say that one rejects particular aspects of a tradition. It is not possible to reject tradition in its entirety because outside of a tradition there is nowhere for a bearer of humanity to stand.

Indeed, I suggest that it is the cosmopolitan, who thinks that he lives beyond tradition, that is mistaken.[12] The sociologist Edward Shils, who authored a classic study on tradition, observes a prejudice against tradition that is commonly found in Western societies:

> The scientific, the rational, the empirical, secular, progressive features of these societies, which seemed destined for certain victory in the battle with the archaic, were thus remitted from any trace of traditionality. The way in which the proponents of the forward movement understood themselves rendered them unwilling to acknowledge or tolerate any presence of traditionality in their own ranks.[13]

However, Shils points out, these modern societies have a "tradition of reason" that has its own distinctive values and commitments, such as beliefs in the power of reason, the primacy of the individual, the universality of morality, and the authority of science.[14] Perhaps most distinctively, the tradition of reason conceives of itself as anti-traditional. So, Waldron's San Francisco native who "learns Spanish, eats Chinese, wears clothes made in Korea, listens to arias by Verdi sung by a Maori princess on Japanese equipment, follows Ukrainian politics, and practices Buddhist meditation techniques" proudly rejects the trappings of tradition.[15] But that does not mean that he does not belong to a very particular tradition. He must speak some language, after all; his thinking must take some shape or other through determinate concepts and beliefs. As it stands, the pick-and-choose approach to life exemplified by the San Franciscan is a possibility

that exists within a certain Western, capitalist tradition. It happens to be an especially self-effacing tradition in that it disappears behind the guise of neutrality and universality. However, it is not any less traditional than a self-consciously traditional life. Neither is it more authentic. Thus, the cosmopolitan nature of modern societies is not evidence of the demise of tradition, but rather an evolution of one specific variety of tradition that is alive and well today. The cosmopolitan is, in fact, authentically traditional.

That said, it is worth noting that people in modern, globalized societies are likely to have a more complex relationship to tradition than their forebears. Exposed to a variety of cultures, a person living in these societies is likely to incorporate elements from different traditions into his life. And faced with the fundamental arbitrariness of cultural differences, he might become more ambivalent toward or less identified with his own tradition. Moreover, it is possible – indeed, now more than ever – to have an authentic relationship to multiple traditions. Globalization means that there is more freedom of movement and association than previously imaginable. Since we are never done being formed, people who move to new countries or who find themselves in new cultural situations can become assimilated to new traditions. Children of immigrants can be also raised in multiple traditions more or less simultaneously. However, the possibility of being bi- or tri-cultural is importantly different from being cosmopolitan. A cosmopolitan is a member of a particular tradition that seeks to live beyond tradition. The person who belongs to multiple traditions lives both in and between different traditional frameworks. This juggling act is rarely seamless. Tensions inevitably arise at points on which traditions diverge, and sometimes sacrifices of certain traditional values or goods need to be made. These difficulties make traditionalism more complicated, as they present certain hardships for individuals caught between cultures. But they do not eliminate the possibility of authentic traditionalism altogether.

Further, as people from different cultures continue to come into contact, interact, and influence each other, traditions can merge into each other. Globalization increases the likelihood of this happening. If or when this happens, the total number of traditions in the world may diminish. Hypothetically, there may even come a point in human history when all cultures will have merged into one. Since each tradition has intrinsic value, a lot will have been lost in that case, and the world will have become a poorer place.[16] But what will not have been lost is tradition. The monoculture scenario would represent the total domination of one tradition, not the disappearance of tradition altogether. Because human beings must live life in one way or another, tradition will exist as long as humans do. So, while globalization poses a danger to particular traditions, it does not threaten

the existence of tradition altogether. And as long as tradition exists, some kind of authentic traditionalism will be possible.

Thus, the authenticity objection does not go through. What it means to be a traditionalist will change as traditions change, and it may become more complicated in an increasingly globalized world. But traditionalism will continue to be a practicable possibility for cosmopolitans and non-cosmopolitans alike.

3.

But traditionalism depends on more than the bare possibility of having an authentic relationship to tradition. Insofar as it entails love and devotion, this orientation toward tradition is principally affective. A second objection concerns the difficulty of acquiring such an orientation in the modern world. If Waldron's example of the cosmopolitan shows anything, it shows that the affective orientation of the traditionalist may not be a viable option for many people today. For even if this individual is inextricably part of some tradition, he does not feel especially identified with it, and he certainly does not love it. For him, spiritual devotion seems to be out of the question. Thus, the worry is that most people are now so affectively disengaged from their traditions that traditionalism is effectively impossible.

In addressing this objection, it is worth distinguishing the reasons that people can fail to be moved by tradition. Some are positively hostile to tradition based on certain ideas. This group includes those who view traditionalism as inherently tribalistic and immoral, retrograde and oppressive, or inauthentic or unsophisticated. I have already provided arguments against these charges, and while arguments alone may not work to defuse the hostility, there is not much more I can say to this group. The challenge I want to consider here is not based on ideas and, hence, more resistant to argument: as society becomes more globalized and traditional ways of life come under threat, it is increasingly difficult to be emotionally engaged with tradition. In these circumstances, the default attitude toward tradition is indifference, which is just as much an obstacle to traditionalism as hostility.

However, I do not think that the affective orientation of traditionalism is as distant as it may at first seem. This is because, beyond being inextricably part of some tradition, each person has also already formed some emotional attachment to it. Technological advances and globalization have not changed the way that a person is initiated into a tradition. No matter which society into which one is born, there is only one way to come into tradition, and that is through the guidance of parents and caretakers. This work is necessarily emotional, as the introduction of traditional contents is unavoidably tied up with the cultivation of emotional dispositions.

For instance, each person has a mother tongue, which shapes how she thinks and feels. So too each person was raised being delighted by stories and myths, entertained through art, songs, and dance. Each person learned to take pleasure in certain kinds of rituals, to feel comfortable in certain kinds of institutions, to desire certain kinds of relationships, to take pride in certain kinds of accomplishment. Each person learned to enjoy a tradition before she ever knew what it was.[17] This kind of enjoyment is tightly bound up with being the recipient of love and care, as parents and caretakers use pleasure to guide our cognitive and emotional development, and it shapes our capacity to be providers of love and care – not just to other humans, but to customs, practices, institutions, arts, and so forth – in turn. I venture to say that, in some inarticulate way, an emotional relationship to tradition, un-conceptualized and rudimentary, is bound up with one's attachment to life itself. Perhaps one might even see it as a primitive form of existential gratitude.[18] Thus, in virtue of having already been initiated into a tradition, each person – even the most hardened cosmopolitan – has already acquired a place for tradition in her heart. Part of my answer to the objection, then, is that some attachment to tradition already exists in each of us, even if it does not rise to the level of consciousness.

Of course, traditionalism requires more than unconscious attachment. The traditionalist is self-consciously devoted to tradition, which she positively affirms as good. Her attachment to tradition is not latent, but explicitly embraced and cultivated. At its strongest, it is a reflectively endorsed spiritual orientation. So, for our purposes, it is not good enough to point to the existence of primitive, unconscious attachments to tradition. Insofar as we are interested in establishing the viability of traditionalism, we need to explain how such attachments can be awakened and affirmed in those who do not feel it.

To this point, it should be observed that indifference to tradition is not just a product of globalization and technology. While the latter are contributing causes, it is human nature that most accounts for indifference to tradition. This is because, as one's entire way of life, tradition tends to fade into the background. It is entirely possible to go about life without giving it much thought, especially in societies that are robust and safe from cultural threat. For this reason, indifference to tradition is the default position among most people – not just those in globalized, modern societies. As long as tradition can be taken for granted, people will not be inclined to treat it with special care, love, or devotion. So, we should never expect the love of tradition to arise spontaneously. Whenever it takes root, traditionalism will be the result of a concerted effort to overcome a natural state of indifference.

This work takes the form of what might be called *traditional education*, or an education that is dedicated to instilling understanding and

appreciation of one's own tradition. Unlike initiation into a tradition, traditional education is not automatic or natural. It must be pursued with diligence over years or, even, the course of a lifetime. And because tradition is always evolving, it can never really be complete. Since societies have a strong existential interest in their own perpetuation, some form of traditional education can be found in every society that has ever existed. So, Homer and Hesiod sang about heroes and gods, the origins of the universe, the human condition, and techniques of farming, and tribal elders in Native American cultures passed down origin myths, tales of great deeds, and skills in hunting and warring.[19] Chinese traditional education focused on the study of classical texts such as the *Book of Odes, Book of Rites,* and *Spring and Autumn Annals* and the practice of ritual, calligraphy, and music.[20] Classical education in the West was based in Greek and Latin sources, such as Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripides, Herodotus, Thucydides, Vergil, Livy, Tacitus, Cicero, Seneca, Augustine, Aquinas, and more. Differences notwithstanding, these various forms of education and courses of study have a common goal: they all aim at instilling an understanding and appreciation of tradition. And in so doing, they nurture a kind of emotional investment in its ways.

Traditional education, as I am using the term, works like the pedagogy of art appreciation, which operates on the assumption that those who can truly see or understand a thing of beauty are naturally moved to love it. Since love cannot be forced, one must be brought to see that which is worth loving. One standard part of art appreciation involves gaining factual knowledge about history, context, medium, genre, technique, and so on. To the untrained eye, a masterful brushstroke might look like nothing but a smudge of ink. But knowledge of when, where, and how it was made can alter how the mark is perceived, and an altered perception, now alive to nuances of significance right before the eyes, can kindle appreciation and awaken love. Similarly, traditional education seeks to acquaint people with myriad details of historical events, personages, documents, laws and institutions, customs and practices, proprieties and prohibitions, values, myths, beliefs, arguments, skills, arts, and so forth. The ultimate goal of mastering such information is not a theoretical ability to explain or even knowledge for knowledge's sake, but something more emotional – namely, admiration of human wisdom as it is embodied in a particular way of life. The customs, practices, institutions, and artifacts that structure how a people live are not the inevitable results of nature, and the values and principles that pattern how a people think did not simply appear out of the blue. Rather, life as one knows it is the product of ingenuity, care, and experience, as well as sacrifice and dedication. Altogether, tradition embodies the astonishing ways in which those who came before gave shape to human life. In coming to understand a tradition, one gains an appreciation

of what I have called its "humaneness" – the way in which it elevates the human being into something better than nature. Humaneness is a form of beauty, and the natural response to it is admiration and love.

Of course, my claims for traditionalism go beyond mere appreciation or, even, simple admiration and love. I claim that the love of tradition can be spiritual in character. While I will not rule out the idea that one's relationship to art can be spiritual, I think the spirituality of traditionalism is, at least, different in kind. The difference consists in the fact that, unlike art appreciation, traditional education is always self-referential. Insofar as it instills an understanding and appreciation of one's own tradition, traditional education is necessarily a kind of self-discovery. In coming to appreciate the humaneness of her own tradition, a person comes to appreciate how tradition formed her. She becomes attuned to the physiognomy of her own existence and realizes the limits of her own agency. She sees her projects and purposes rooted in something larger, patterns of thought and feeling established by her predecessors echoed in her own. Her sense of self is situated in a world of meaning that connects her with others, both past and future. At bottom, the appreciation of the humaneness of her own tradition is an appreciation of what makes her human and, ultimately, what it means to be alive. The appropriate attitude toward this realization is not just admiration and love, but profound, existential gratitude. And this, I argued, is the basis of a spiritual devotion. In that case, we can see traditional education as a kind of spiritual practice, which aims at the development of traditionalism as a spiritual orientation.

Thus, the fact that traditionalism is increasingly rare these days is no objection to my view. Love and devotion to tradition is the fruit of a tremendous amount of deliberate effort on the part of an individual to overcome a natural inertia toward viewing one's own tradition indifferently. This indifference can be counteracted through an education that is as much emotional and spiritual as it is cognitive. While features of the modern world introduce new complications to traditional education, the activity is as old as humanity itself. Because of its connection with both individual development and the perpetuation of society, it is natural for human beings to both give and receive traditional education. Indeed, this is a reason to think that modern obstacles to traditionalism are not as great as they might seem. For, even if it is not consciously delivered as such, traditional education will continue to be delivered at home and in communities, through parents, family members, neighbors, and elders, in religious organizations, social clubs, cultural societies, neighborhood associations, museums, parks, and more. Sources of traditional education are everywhere. As long as this continues to be the case, the possibility of traditionalism is not lost, though deliberate effort and attention will be required for its full revival. Given the current state of modern, globalized society, the difficulty of this task should not be underestimated. But there is enough to keep hope alive.

4.

In this book, I have argued that modern secularists face a spirituality problem that threatens to weaken moral life. The so-called death of God did not mean the end of morality. But detached from a transcendent good, secular morality became narrower, shallower, and coarser than its religious counterpart. Over the last few chapters, I have proposed that this threat can be addressed by traditionalism, and in the course of considering worries about the practical feasibility of my view, I have now arrived at a rather concrete recommendation. If the argument of the previous section is correct, the lack of spirituality in secular moral life can be addressed through traditional education. This would be a considerable step toward resolving the spirituality problem. By way of conclusion, I offer some remarks on how this recommendation might be put into practice in secular, Western societies today.

In particular, I want to focus on traditional education in the schools. And within schools, I want to focus on the humanities. On a standard conception, the humanities include subjects such as history, language, literature, philosophy, and the arts. Excluded from this domain of study are physical and social sciences, technology, engineering, and math, which are popularly known as the STEM fields. STEM fields take as their objects of study the objective nature of reality, both human and non-human. They are, of course, immensely important, and they have a place in traditional courses of study: the medieval quadrivium was comprised of mathematics, geometry, harmonics, and astronomy; the modern conception of the liberal arts includes the natural and social sciences. But the STEM fields are not what I am referring to as "traditional education," which is dedicated to instilling knowledge and appreciation of tradition as such. I propose that the humanities, on the other hand, do have a claim to be a form of traditional education.

On a standard conception, what links humanistic studies is that they are aimed at understanding ourselves as what I have called "bearers of humanity." One is a bearer of humanity in virtue of belonging to a broadly ethical community, capable of responding to reasons and values, reflecting on what is worthwhile, cultivating virtues, fulfilling responsibilities, taking on projects, and living meaningful lives. In studying the humanities, one seeks to understand what it means to be a bearer of humanity at both a personal and collective level. While facts and information about objective reality are not foreign to this aim, they can only be preliminary. What matters most of all is how these facts and pieces of information are interpreted, which is an activity that is essentially infinite, open-ended, and subject to constant revision. Thus, humanities fields tend to work with language and other modes of expression that people use to converse about

and reflect on their lives together. They do not make "progress" in the way that the STEM fields do, but that is no flaw. For the goal is not to reach some end that is antecedently deemed good for human beings, but to understand what it means to be human and what is worth aiming for in the first place.[21]

One might notice that this account makes no reference to any particular tradition. Defenders of humanistic education may say that this is because the humanities are not tied to any particular tradition. On this view, a humanities education has a universalistic aim. Questions about what it means to be human and what is worth aiming for in the first place are not tied to individual traditions, but rather refer to a "common humanity" shared by all humans. It is true, of course, that particular works and figures come from particular traditions. Homer and Shakespeare belong to European tradition. But, it is said, their insights transcend their historical and cultural contexts. In essence, they speak to the same human concerns as Native American elders, West African Griots, Cao Xueqin, Matsuo Basho, and Nāgārjuna. On this view, experiences of human vulnerabilities, limits, needs, and aspirations are perennial and shared by people everywhere. Despite surface differences, there is a common core to what it means for a human being to flourish. The point of humanities education, then, is to "learn enough about the different to recognize common aims, aspirations, and values, and enough about these common ends to see how variously they are instantiated in the many cultures and many histories."[22] This vision of the humanities – we could call it a "cosmopolitan" vision – downplays cultural difference. It seeks to "illuminate our common humanity and inspire reflection about fundamental human concerns."[23] An education in the humanities is thus a way to transcend the particular culture and tradition of one's birth in order to arrive at an understanding of common humanity. If this is true, it is inappropriate to associate the humanities with traditional education.

By now, it should be clear why I disagree with this assessment. In Chapter 6, I argued that the concept of common humanity is insufficient to account for our lives as bearers of humanity. While human nature, a biological concept, is truly universal to all human beings, humanity, an ethical concept, is not. I argued, instead, that every tradition has its own conception of humanity that undergirds a set of particular, concrete possibilities for human life. One can, of course, discern certain abstract commonalities among different conceptions of humanity. However, these commonalities do not derive from a more fundamental or shared essence, and, more importantly, they do not carry more weight than the differences. For the purposes of both truth and respectful engagement, it is just as important to understand how cultures differ as to understand how they are similar. Humanity is a

pluralistic concept. Insofar as the humanities seek to elucidate what it means to be a bearer of humanity, they need to be culturally specific and fine-grained in their approach.

It is also worth reiterating a conclusion from this chapter: the cosmopolitan conception of common humanity is not universal, but rather part of what we have discussed as the "tradition of reason."[24] This view is historically grounded in ancient Greek philosophers, who have a foundational role in shaping the history of the West. Also relevant to the development of this perspective is Christian universalism, and the subsequent evolution of Greco-Christian thought in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinking. Common humanity emphasizes the significance of that which is common across human beings – rationality, say, or human nature – and minimizes the significance of contingencies, such as history, geography, and chance, that differentiate us. Insofar as it aspires to universality and neutrality, this conception is also distinctively self-effacing. But it is just as much based on contestable assumptions and values – about the nature and status of the individual, say, or the relative importance of reason – as any other conception. That is to say, the cosmopolitan conception of common humanity reflects a particular interpretation of what constitutes humanity. It is itself a product of one particular tradition.

For these reasons, it does not make sense to think of humanities education as the study of humanity *simpliciter*. Instead, the humanities must be aimed at elucidating particular, culturally embedded conceptions of humanity. More specifically, there is an important function in each society for a humanities education that aims at elucidating its own conception of humanity. This education would pay attention to the particular contents of its own tradition – narratives, myths, literatures, art works, architectures, musical forms, sports, and more – with a view to understanding what is distinctive about its own perspective. This is a difficult task since people tend to take their own traditions for granted. Thus, the humanities must work to overcome the presumptions of the familiar, facilitating articulacy about concepts, values, beliefs, and attitudes that are obvious to those within a society, but not obvious to those outside of it. Certain traditions, perhaps because they are embattled or small, may be more alive to the distinctiveness of their points of view. Other traditions, perhaps because they are culturally dominant, are less so. This applies especially to traditions that hold cosmopolitan conceptions of common humanity, which aspire to universality. For people who belong to such traditions, it is the job of the humanities to not only bring the distinctive features of this conception of humanity into view, but also to foster appreciation for the "tradition of reason" that supports it. Thus, without denying that the humanities have other aims, I propose that they are a form of what I have called traditional education.

Some might object to this claim by pointing out that the humanities are essentially, if not exclusively, critical. The point of studying the humanities is not indoctrination into a particular cultural outlook, but rather to think critically about one's values and beliefs. This activity includes shedding light on the way that one's tradition reflects power structures or perpetuates injustices, and it may just as easily lead to the rejection of tradition as to its appreciation. Insofar as traditional education promotes the appreciation of and, ultimately, devotion to tradition, the humanities do not seem to fit the bill.

Not all forms of traditional education emphasize criticism to the degree that the modern humanities do. At the same time, traditional education is not without critical possibilities, and criticism is not incompatible with appreciation. To learn a tradition is not to learn one point of view, but a whole framework of multiple, divergent, sometimes inconsistent and contradictory, points of view, which are perpetually in conversation with each other. Insofar as they force the student to take up a critical stance, the humanities enable her to participate in these conversations and explore their implications. And insofar as critical scrutiny is necessary to maintaining the viability of tradition, they could be viewed as essential for the survival of tradition. This form of traditional education may yield harsh criticism, but, at bottom, I do not think it is simply neutral. Insofar as our conception of humanity is the basis of our ethical lives, our approach to these topics cannot be purely disinterested. We criticize in order to correct, and we correct because we care.

Others might object that my vision of the humanities is too parochial for today's world. Globalization and technology put us into contact with people from all over the world, and we need to understand people outside of our own traditions in order to interact with them in meaningful and respectful ways. Therefore, a modern humanities education must emphasize learning about other traditions as much as one's own.

It is true that, at certain times in history, traditional education may not have required knowing very much about others. But that is no longer the case. These days, almost no tradition is entirely self-contained. Societies are constantly interacting with each other, and they are irrevocably shaped in the process. Without knowledge of the history and processes of mutual influence, one's appreciation of any particular tradition is necessarily incomplete and impoverished. Moreover, acquaintance with other societies brings to light aspects of one's own tradition that would otherwise remain hidden. This phenomenon is well-known to students of foreign languages, who often end up learning as much about their own language as they do about the other. Without the contrast of a foreign tongue, the idiosyncrasies of one's own vocabulary and grammatical structures never fully come to light. The same point applies more broadly to understanding the values,

beliefs, and concepts that are so easily taken for granted as parts of one's tradition.[25] For both of these reasons, "to know only one's own tradition is not to know even that."[26] Insofar as humanities is a form of traditional education, it must include the study of other traditions.

I realize that not everyone will agree with the claim that the humanities is a form of traditional education. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, practically speaking, my view is not all that different from how humanities are currently taught. I support humanities as a critical endeavor. I believe in the need to teach diverse traditions, and I think highlighting commonalities between different peoples can be a powerful way to build bridges between cultures. I also do not deny that humanities have other aims besides traditional education – for instance, the cultivation of critical reasoning skills, a commitment to justice, and self-actualization. In the end, I am not proposing a change to how humanities are taught, so much as advocating for an awareness of what the humanities can do. As I see it, the humanities can be a place where we collectively reflect on tradition, increase our knowledge of it, and cultivate appreciation for the way in which it supports our humanity.

If what I have argued over Part 3 is correct, the humanities can thus speak directly to the spirituality problem. By cultivating appreciation of how our traditions formed us, the humanities lay the foundation for existential gratitude and the sort of love and devotion to a transcendent good that can support moral life. Indeed, anyone who is serious about addressing the spirituality problem today should commit to strengthening the humanities. As society grows increasingly fragmented and individualistic, formal education – at least through primary and secondary school – is one area of experience that remains, to some degree, common. Insofar as it is part of formal education, the humanities ensure that some traditional content is available to most, if not all, members of society. This presentation may not lead to traditionalism, but it provides foundations that can be subsequently developed. Humanities education is thus one of the most direct ways we have to shore up the spiritual foundations of moral life. While there are many reasons to support the humanities, this one strikes me as especially crucial.

5.

This recommendation may appear to some as oblivious or pollyannaish. For present educational trends are rather inhospitable to the humanities, as STEM fields dominate, humanities programs are shuttered, and humanities disciplines become ever more closed in on themselves. The humanities are not, of course, limited to higher education, and there is a distinction between humanities education and humanities scholarship. But what is happening to the humanities in higher education – and here I am speaking

most specifically about the American system because that is the system I know best – is a reflection of broader societal beliefs and priorities. What is happening there speaks to struggles and conflicts found in the rest of society.

Defenders of humanities education nobly try to stem the tide. Some of their arguments – humanities cultivate skills that prepare students for the work force by providing training in critical thinking, argumentation, interpretation, and writing – probably concede too much to the opposition. Because they are predicated on ends that are external or, at best, tangential to the humanities, these arguments risk corrupting the defenders. Those who seek to be "useful" or "relevant" run the risk of becoming the handmaidens of business, industry, or other special interests. Other arguments – the humanities develop autonomous, free-thinking, open-minded individuals who can think for themselves, contribute to civic formation and social justice, enrich our lives and promote human flourishing, help us understand each other, and instill an appreciation of tradition – are less liable to corruption because they are based on ends that are internal to the humanities. Unfortunately, such arguments tend to be convincing only to those who have already been deeply formed by the humanities. In the world we live in today, those with the most power and influence over the future of education are often those who are least capable of waging – or willing to wage – the needed defenses. And so the cycle is vicious. As the humanities weaken, they are less able to produce thinkers who can defend them, and without defenders, humanities will continue to weaken. The future of humanities education looks bleak. While traditions will exist as long as humans are around, the same cannot be said of humanities departments, scholars, and institutions.

I want to end, however, on a less pessimistic note. Current fears for the survival of the humanities concern questions of policies and resources; they are matters of politics and economics, as well as cultural attitudes and influences. We can say that they are about the institutional and social contexts of the humanities. But they are ultimately not about the most essential activities of the humanities themselves – namely, learning and reflection on what it means to be bearers of humanity. The institutional and social contexts cannot be ignored because humanistic learning and reflection takes place in a material world with competing interests and finite resources. They need support in the form of structures, libraries, collections, performance spaces, instructors, scholars, audiences, and so on, all of which require resources and social capital. But it is worth keeping in mind that institutional and social contexts change. They have not always taken the forms they presently do: Homer and Hesiod, the teachers of the Greeks, could not have anticipated the

Academy of Plato, who had no notion of the structure and pedagogy of the medieval university; Aquinas worked in a system that is only faintly echoed in higher education today. And because nothing stays the same forever, it is inevitable that humanistic learning and reflection as we know them today will look different in the future. When that happens, humanities departments may no longer exist and scholarship as we know it may cease to be produced. But that does not mean that the activity of understanding ourselves as bearers of humanity will end. New ways will emerge.

But while no institutional or social context is essential to learning and reflection, there is one *sine qua non* without which they cannot exist. Citing canonical contents of Confucian tradition, Xunzi explains the importance of teachers:

> In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person. Rituals and music provide proper models but give no precepts. The *Odes* and *Documents* contain ancient stories but no explanation of their present application. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is terse and cannot be quickly understood. However, if you imitate the right person in his practice of the precepts of the gentleman, then you will come to honor these things for their comprehensiveness, and see them as encompassing the whole world. Thus, in learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person.[27]

The contents of tradition are not self-explanatory. Anyone can learn the contents of a tradition by rote – memorizing lines of text, collecting facts, mastering techniques of scansion, and so forth. But this sort of knowledge is only the tip of the iceberg. Learning – real learning – requires teachers who are able to bring the contents of tradition to life: "He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge of the New is indeed fit to be called a teacher."[28] Teachers do not treat tradition as a collection of dead facts to be acquired or rote procedures to be mastered, but a vibrant, dynamic source of life that calls for creative engagement. They show how ancient wisdom illuminates modern issues, and teach us how to tap into the wellsprings of everything that we love and value. Without their guidance, tradition does not speak to us.

It is, thus, paramount that we find the right teachers. The teachers we seek do not belong to any particular institutional or social context. They are not necessarily those who are certified to instruct in schools or holders of advanced degrees. They do not necessarily produce scholarship or give lectures. They are just as likely to be artists or poets as they are to be professors or instructors.[29] They can be parents or grandparents, rulers,

chiefs, or leaders. They can also be found in hinterlands, far from the halls of power and influence.[30] They will, of course, need to know a substantial amount of traditional content. But they are not merely well informed or knowledgeable. Indeed, that is not even their most distinguishing feature. Because "teaching the old is harder than teaching the new," they must be especially imaginative and flexible in their thinking, and non-dogmatic and open-minded in their approach to learning.[31] They must love learning to an exceptional degree.[32] They are attuned to the goodness of tradition and, thus, alive to the sacred sources of our humanity. Despite being on the surface of everything we see, hear, and touch, this goodness is most difficult to see. Teachers are those who are capable of bringing it to view, and for this reason, they are key to nurturing the spirituality that is needed for moral life.

Notes

1 John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 98–99.
2 Edward Shils, *Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 21.
3 Jeremy Waldron, "Minority Cultures and the Cosmopolitan Alternative," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 25, no. 3 & 4 (1992): 754.
4 Salman Rushdie, "In Good Faith," in *Imaginary Homelands* (Penguin, 1991), 393–4. Cited in Waldron, "Minority Cultures," 751–2.
5 Waldron, "Minority Cultures," 780.
6 Waldron, "Minority Cultures," 763.
7 Waldron, "Minority Cultures," 763.
8 Waldron, "Minority Cultures," 763. This sort of inauthentic relationship to tradition is not unrelated to idolatry, which I discuss in Chapter 8. Trading in images rather than substance, it treats tradition as a dead authority, one that is fixed and unchanging.
9 See Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 153–4.
10 These are questions Lear raises in *Radical Hope* (151–2).
11 See Chapter 7, Section 4. See also Alasdair MacIntyre: "I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition." *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 221.
12 In the previous chapter, I made a related argument about cosmopolitan, universalist morality in particular.
13 Shils, *Tradition*, 21.
14 Shils,, *Tradition*, 22–23.
15 Waldron, "Minority Cultures," 754.
16 I argued in Chapter 6, Sections 5–6 that all traditions have intrinsic value. Those values are lost once the traditions cease to exist.
17 See Michael Oakeshott, "Political Education," in *Rationalism in Politics* (Liberty Fund, 1991), 62.
18 See Chapter 7, Sections 3–4.
19 For a discussion of Native American education, see Raymond Cross, "American Indian Education: The Terror of History and the Nation's Debt to the Indian Peoples, " *University of Arkansas at Little Rock Law Review* 21, no. 4, (Summer 1999), 941–77.

20 For a discussion of the Confucian background, see Karyn Lai, "Learning from the Confucians: Learning from the Past," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2008), 97–119.
21 As Iris Murdoch points out, this includes understanding the place of science in our lives. "The Idea of Perfection," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 2001), 33.
22 Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," *The Boston Review* (Oct. 1, 1994).
23 Roosevelt Montas, "What Should Students Learn?" *The Point* (Aug. 15, 2021).
24 Shils, *Tradition*, 22–23. See Section 2 above.
25 See, for example, François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things* (Zone Books, 1995), 18.
26 Oakeshott, "Political Education," 64.
27 *Xunzi* 1.159–67, trans. Eric Hutton (Princeton University Press, 2014).
28 *A* 2.11, trans. Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Waveland Press, 1972), 68.
29 See Goethe, Letter to Zelter, March 18, 1811.
30 Confucius was unable to keep an official position during his lifetime. See *A* 3.24.
31 This is a Hebrew proverb cited by Josef Pieper in *Tradition* (15; see, especially, note 12). Confucians are especially opposed to rigidity in thinking; see, for instance, *A* 1.12.
32 *A* 5.28, 7.20.

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