WHAT THOSE REPEATED ACTIONS TELL US:
REFLECTIONS TOWARD A COMPARATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS
OF RELIGIOUS RITUALS

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Abstract

This research addresses an intersection of philosophy of religion and aesthetics via a theory of religious ritual hermeneutics and aesthetics. Primary attention is paid to a daily religious ritual in Vedic Hinduism (agnihotra, twice daily oblations to Agni) and in Islam (ṣalāt, five daily prayers). Philosophers of religion have long debated the nature of religious experience, yet ritual is rarely discussed. Philosophers of aesthetics have recently developed medium-specific approaches to performative art theory, but religious ritual remains undertreated. Negotiating tensions between five hermeneutic themes influential in contemporary theories of ritual action (rule-following, instrumentalism, self-transformation, morality, and aesthetics), this theory aims to avoid two extremes: “domestication of religious ritual,” attributing meaning to unfamiliar religious rituals by reducing them to familiar categories of action, and “alienation of religious ritual,” regarding such rituals as only meaningful within that religion, rendering outside interpretation fruitless.

Three sets of philosophical sources are brought into dialogue: critics denying any positive significance of religious rituals, religious affiliates interpreting such significance, and recent non-affiliates interpreting such significance. Key critics include James Frazer, viewing religious rituals as erroneous attempts at scientific efficacy, Sigmund Freud, regarding them as obsessional-neurotic action, and Frits Staal, theorizing them as non-meaningful rule-following. Primary affiliate sources include theory about ritual injunctions in Prābhākara and Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā schools of Vedic hermeneutics, the Bhagavadgītā on ritual action as indicating exemplary morality, philosophy of Islamic ritual in al-Ghazālī and Ibn Ṭufayl, and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s philosophy of religious imagination. Central non-affiliate sources are Wittgenstein on rule-following and the role of instrumental thinking in ritual, Kant on connections between ritual
morality and aesthetics, Bourdieu’s theory of ritual as socially constitutive action, and Heidegger’s phenomenology of art. A thorough investigation of these theories shows that the complex inter-relation of the five hermeneutic themes produces religious ritual meaning that becomes most substantial when united in religious ritual performance to create an intensely aesthetic experience of what the author refers to as a “ritual world,” a bodily re-envisioning of the ordinary world both shaped by and re-shaping of the values, symbols, and narratives of a religious tradition.
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Preface: 
Introduction to the Problem of Religious Ritual Hermeneutics

Introduction to the General Problem

Philosophy of religion has long focused upon the semantics of key religious terms, and the importance of religious language in conveying religious imperatives, creeds and tenets. Still, philosophers of religion frequently announce the insufficiency of words to convey the depths of religious experience. Once you are faced with this paradox of using words to speak of an ineffable range of experiences, one possible way out of this conundrum is to look at another important element aside from private experiences and public language: the element of performance of actions. Now, speech-act theories of all sorts have drawn enough attention to the once-ignored fact that we do things by words. But the converse has not been so widely and systematically noticed: that we say things (unsayable with words) through doings, or performances. A phenomenological analysis of religious ritual actions may aid in breaking through the knot of speaking of the unspeakable with which most philosophies of religion struggle. Religious ritual, as a familiar (yet nonetheless difficult to define) category, surely cannot be understood adequately by only employing epistemological, metaphysical or psychological categories, and yet they take up an undoubtedly familiar place in most religious lives. Ritual fits into the consideration of the nature of religion somewhere, but its centrality has largely gone unrecognized in most philosophy of religion.

I first encountered challenges associated with study of ritual in my prior graduate work in religious studies. While my initial concern was anthropological fieldwork (into the role of Vedic ritual, in India and in diaspora), the theoretical paradigms that I encountered in ritual studies led me beyond empirical questions about specific rituals to a more general set of conceptual
difficulties. This dissertation aims to investigate ritual as a lens through which to consider the nature of religion, especially in its relationship to societies and social actions. It aims to provide an open-minded investigation into the nature and powers attributable to rituals as they play a role in religious traditions. Ritual, considered as a distinct religious phenomenon, surely has played some role in most religions, but its contributions to religion are easily overlooked due to the tendency in many modern religious groups to focus more heavily upon worldviews and beliefs rather than practices and actions. Since the late 1960s a growing literature, in the humanities and the social sciences, has exhibited a diverse set of interpretive approaches for investigating religious rituals, but the tensions and relations between these approaches have not yet been sufficiently addressed. It is hoped that by delving philosophically into five running conceptual themes in this literature a perspective will emerge for evaluating the relationships between these approaches and for disclosing further the depths of religious ritual experience. These five approaches, as I will differentiate them in their corresponding chapters, are:

1. The ‘Religious Ritual as Rule-Following Action’ Approach
2. The ‘Religious Ritual as Instrumental Action’ Approach
3. The ‘Religious Ritual as Self-Transformative Action’ Approach
4. The ‘Religious Ritual as Moral Action’ Approach
5. The ‘Religious Ritual as Aesthetic Performance’ Approach

When a religious delegate performs a ritual on behalf of a religious community, competing yet divided approaches may produce a critical understanding of such a performance. In the tension between these approaches lies a philosophical puzzle that revolves around the interpretation of religious rituals. *The first approach* argues that a religious ritual is in essence meaningless, in the sense that there would be no real answer to the question, “Why is specifically this done?” Such an understanding leads to the conclusion that ritual is primarily a rule-bound activity performed because it is determined by tradition as “what simply ought to be done,” often
in a quite arbitrary way and without distinguishing why one set of activities is required rather than others. Surely rule following fits somewhere, but is this aspect of ritual behavior sufficient to account for the significance often attributed to religious ritual? The second approach, largely incompatible with the prior approach, regards such rituals as instrumental acts that may nonetheless be disguised behind a set of seemingly arbitrary activities, such as when a ritual, say one to provide food for otherworldly deities, who nevertheless do not literally “eat,” is understood as an indirect way of leaving a supply of food for dogs or birds. These first two options seem incompatible because each answers the question “Why is specifically this done?” in incongruous ways. The rule-following approach would likely argue that there is no direct answer to the question, whereas the instrumentality approach would reject that response in favor of an at least indirect relation between means and ends. The third approach argues that these actions are neither meaninglessly repetitive nor fundamentally instrumental, promoting instead that religious rituals are essentially social actions that transform selves through participation in social structures. Such an approach would reject understanding religious rituals as mere rule-following action or simple enactments of instrumental thinking, as this approach regards religious rituals as socially-influential symbolic actions that may make use of a wide array of linguistic expressions, practices, and resemblances within a community, which all result in influence upon social identities. This approach contends that what is essential to a ritual lies in the power of ritual to transform societies by changing or maintaining a society’s symbolic distinctions. The fourth approach argues that religious rituals are undertaken for reasons that are deeply based on a vision of morality, arguing that one performs them because some ethical standpoint requires such actions, for religious rituals are “what a good person does.” This option also seems to be in tension with the other approaches. For example, those who understand a
religious ritual performance to be morally obligatory may be likely to resist using instrumental and social-identity construction approaches to help make sense of religious rituals, for these approaches, under some systems of ethics, would diminish what they say is the central characteristic of rituals. Certainly, this view would also reject the idea that religious rituals are reducible to mere rule following, for their sense would lie precisely in the fact that they are regarded as moral action. Lastly, the fifth approach argues that religious rituals are neither essentially instrumental nor essentially arbitrary rule-based behavior, neither are they fundamentally social actions or ethical actions, but instead this approach views religious rituals as primarily artistic performances designed to evoke a diverse array of aesthetic experiences, such as beauty, entertainment, fearfulness, appropriate style, or even ugliness.

One major problem with this set of approaches is that each seems to capture something of the truth of ritual performance. A pre-defined, everyday religious ritual, such as the Hindu agnihotra (oblation to Agni) or Islamic ṣalāt (ritual prayer), could be performed in a variety of ways, and, whether changes to the ritual would be minute or major, its make-up may be regarded as simple rule following due to the lack of a direct, verifiable regularity between particular ritual actions and traditional understandings of those actions. Still, such a ritual could be accounted for in terms of a pursuit of ends; this involves seeing that religious rituals frequently do indirectly or even directly accomplish instrumental goals, and this is often a major reason for continuing them. A daily ritual offering of incense at a family shrine, for example, may accomplish distinct goals, such as covering other smells or creating a required atmosphere. Religious rituals could also be regarded as a social act performed upon a religious community, for this is how many religious practitioners have explained their rituals: the rituals are said to establish participants as newly distinguished individuals within a group. And, because religious rituals are actions that
require repetition (perhaps because tradition or divinity commands them), the performance of such acts could be understood as an ethical regulation of one’s own behavior, the serving of a law higher than oneself. Moreover, ritualized religious actions are often traditionally said to be ethically transformative of individual character and social norms. Lastly, rituals could also be reasonably characterized as a form of artistic presentation, a sphere that is classically understood to be divorced, at least to a large extent, from the instrumental; such an approach might paint ritual as embodying common artistic themes. While the tension between these accounts needs to be acknowledged, and perhaps to some degree accepted, it should also be acknowledged that this set of characterizations taken as a total picture yields a multifaceted picture of ritual that is at least compelling. I thereby explore these tensions to determine what underlies each of these intuitions about the nature of traditionally prescribed religious rituals. This will require significant and robust examples from traditions that have developed distinct hermeneutic strategies for identifying and interpreting rituals. For this purpose, I will focus on a small selection of commonly practiced Vedic and Islamic rituals, as these two traditions each include a self-consciously hermeneutic corpus about ritual in their religious and philosophical traditions. These traditions provide revealing examples and interpretations by which to determine if an appropriate theoretical approach for understanding religious rituals must simply accept these tensions. Or, do we need a theory that resolves them by way of another understanding?

Major focus will thus be directed toward questions of interpreting religious rituals as they play out within different contexts and toward determining what kind of theory of meaning is best applied to religious ritual performances in general. Vedic Hinduism and Islam offer importantly different approaches to understanding rituals. Vedic Hinduism has long been intensely involved with the performance of elaborate rituals, with particular emphasis placed on precise rule
following and related hermeneutic problems. On the other hand, though frequently characterized according to orthodoxy as a minimally ritualistic religion, Islam does in actual practice involve a wide variety of perhaps less complex but nonetheless pervasive ritual practices and reflections on those practices. It is also hoped that the diversity of these two traditions will provide appropriate breadth for theoretical consideration of how philosophers of religion or aesthetics could develop concepts of ritual. The hermeneutic strategies devised by these two traditions will not only facilitate academic understanding, they will also provide clear indication that the interpretation of religious ritual has long been a topic of intellectual inquiry in religious traditions, and it has spawned a great deal of philosophical reflection. That is, one may not only walk away from a religious ritual with a better understanding by considering the efforts of religious traditions to interpret their own rituals, one may also realize that the effort to interpret and to perform religious rituals appropriately itself has served and can still serve as an occasion to develop philosophical insights into religious worlds.

It is crucial to recognize first that this dissertation does not aim to identify religious rituals with religion. Metaphysics and ritual, for instance, are two major elements found in most religions, and each cannot be underestimated in their importance for understanding religious phenomena. They are not both found to the same degree in each religion, and perhaps it is even possible to find one without the other. But in most religions there is a tension between these two spheres. Metaphysics and ritual, theology and religious practice, belief and action, mind and body: each of these dyads represents a tension for the religious sphere, involving practitioners as well as scholarly on-lookers. Metaphysics in religion often leads to regarding views about the nature of reality as a basis for or feature of religion. Ritual in religion, on the other hand, is frequently a form of practice made sacred, with “sacred” referring to a form of ultimacy that may
be distinct from the ultimacy aimed for in metaphysics, in that ritual primarily aims to unify actions rather than ideas. This inquiry into ritual action thus aims to disclose further the nature of religion in terms of an arguably central aspect of religion.

Additionally, as a matter of course, something should be said about how the term “ritual” will initially be understood in this project. Most speakers of English are generally familiar with this word, but it is by no means self-evident what range of meanings the word is used to pick out and to not pick out, although it is hoped that this project will assist in this regard. For instance, it does not seem obvious whether brushing one’s teeth at a certain time each morning should count as a ritual or not, although the word has been used in that way. But, before delving further into an investigation of the meaning of ‘ritual’, briefly consider the history of the term. The term ‘ritual’ can be traced through its association with the Latin ‘ritus’ (from which we get ‘rite’) and the closely related Middle English term ‘ryte’, terms that were primarily used in a religious sense, namely to refer to religious forms of conventional or solemn actions, particularly procedural actions. Although these usages should by no means determine contemporary understandings of ‘ritual,’ it is should be noticed that the history of the term invokes an association with religion, specifically a kind of religious action. As a starting point, then, this basic insight must be taken seriously for any attempt to clarify the term ‘ritual.’ Ritualistic actions bear an important relation to some religious actions. ‘Ritual’ has inherited part of its modern sense from its association with a particular class of actions distinguished during the history of Western religions. Yet, it will be argued that the common Western usage of this term has not reached to the heart of the phenomenon, and so the understanding of religious ritual developed in this project will begin at the level of simple rule following, and it will intensify in complexity as the inquiry into the relations between the approaches unfolds. A more adequate
concept of religious ritual will thus emerge as one of the primary conclusions of the final chapter.

Finally, it is also hoped that the conclusions reached in each chapter will provide a perspective from which to enrich further contemporary philosophy of religion, which has frequently disregarded the social dimension of religion. It will be argued that a philosophical inquiry into the nature of religious ritual not only cultivates a deeper appreciation of religions as vital social groups, it also yields insights that may help address traditional questions within philosophy of religion, such as those associated with concepts of deity or those concerning the nature of religious experience.

The Central Hermeneutic Problem

It should be noted I am deliberately distancing the five approaches outlined above from each other, while at the same time attempting to establish a theory that integrates them while also rejecting certain elements. Many thinkers have regarded religious rituals, particularly those of other cultures, as mere ‘mumbo-jumbo’ (a phrase likely derived from early English anthropologists observing forms of ritual worship in Africa). Yet, it must be acknowledged that religious rituals have played a vast role in the worlds of perhaps most people, a role that has yet somehow eluded many inquiring minds. Such thinkers have frequently sought to explain these collective acts as the result of a lack of rational or scientific development in the cultures that encourage such acts. In other words, the tendency to regard religious rituals as traditionally meaningful has been argued to be the result of an inferior understanding of the world. A culture’s implicit notion of “the world,” however, is difficult to separate from the ways of living that underlie that culture’s understanding of “the world.” Instead of regarding rituals as errors or
irrational behavior, this project aims to provide an alternate understanding of why religious rituals are so frequently regarded by practitioners as meaningful parts of their lives. This project does not, however, claim to understand those rituals in precisely the same way as the members of a ritual’s home world, but it does aim to regard religious rituals in a way that avoids the extremes of many traditional modes of ritual interpretation.

When addressing this problem there are two extremes I argue must be avoided when interpreting religious rituals. First, some would seek to explain religious rituals in terms of an “outsider” set of standards, regarding these rituals as inferior attempts to achieve certain goals, goals more appropriately achieved in the commentator’s own society. This approach amounts to a domestication of religious ritual, because this extreme interprets the religious rituals of other traditions in terms of one’s own domestic categories for evaluating action. Second, there is another extreme that insists that religious rituals cannot be understood without occupying an “insider” perspective, without directly experiencing the practice of religious rituals as a member of a religious community. This amounts to an alienation of religious ritual, because this extreme alienates religious rituals from any possibility of outside interpretation. Rather than adopting either of these extremes, I instead aim to establish a theoretical vantage point from which to interpret religious rituals as social acts that express meanings that could not otherwise be said with words or sentences.

It is important to emphasize that this project not only seeks to develop a basis for “interpreting” or “understanding” specific religious rituals. The effort to understand or to interpret religious rituals, and the sense that they may achieve within a community, simultaneously provides critical insight into the nature of social “worlds” in general, particularly regarding the ways that religious ritual acts both derive from and also influence the world within
which they are performed. At the philosophical level, the project thus not only aims to develop a hermeneutics of religious ritual acts. This dissertation also develops a philosophical encounter with concepts of social worlds in general and their relations to religious lives. By investigating how religious rituals achieve sense where many have found nonsense, the philosopher can hope to attain a deeper insight into both these collective religious acts as well as the complex relations between religion, a religious society, and its world.

Organization of Chapters

Each chapter focuses upon a major hermeneutic approach associated with religious ritual, and each provides a brief conclusion concerning the implications of that chapter and its relation to the other approaches. The first chapter takes up what is perhaps the trait most frequently associated with rituals, its repetitive character, best exemplified by interpreting ritual as a form of rule following. The rule-based, recurrent nature of ritual action has led some to regard ritual as a meaningless or erroneous endeavor. The chapter, however, begins by investigating what may be implied by a concept of rule following, particularly by gathering the insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michael Polanyi on this philosophical question. This leads to a critique of those regarding ritual behavior as “mere” repetition, particularly Freud, whose account of ritual behavior is particularly dismissive. Freud’s view that ritual action displays a kind of psychological illness led to many criticisms, especially by many “post-Freudians.” Exploring these limits of Freud’s insights into ritual provides an opportunity to comprehend more fully the strengths of a ritual hermeneutics developed by religious thinkers within a religious context. With this in mind, the core of the initial chapter examines how concepts of rule following were theorized by Vedic Hindu traditions of ritual hermeneutics, with attention focused on
disagreements between the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā and Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā schools of philosophy. These considerations lead to my conclusion that concepts of repetition and rule following, when applied to religious ritual, must be redeveloped to account for the depths of experience and reflection conveyed by these Vedic reflections. The Mīmāṃsā debates provide an excellent starting point for developing a more robust understanding of religious ritual action, and they also highlight how consideration of ritual hermeneutics has traditionally served as an occasion to develop further philosophical reflections.

*The second chapter* addresses the approach that regards religious ritual as a form of instrumental, or goal-oriented, action. It has been argued, most notably by the anthropologist James Frazer in his famous text on religious practices *The Golden Bough* (1922), that rituals are imprecise or primitive approximations aiming to achieve science-like instrumental results. Ludwig Wittgenstein in the middle period of his philosophical inquiries produced an extended series of remarks in critical response to Frazer's understanding of ritual, while not explicitly developing his own theory of ritual. His remarks do, however, allow for a reconsideration of how meaning may be attributed to ritual, as well as the role that instrumental thinking might play in ritual. Using these remarks and some of Wittgenstein's other writings, this chapter reconstructs, in light of Wittgenstein's broader philosophy, a “Wittgenstein-inspired” perspective on ritual based primarily on his criticisms of Frazer. This chapter thus provides insights both for further explicating the kind of meaning and instrumentality that may be attributed to religious ritual and also for beginning to see how such rituals depend upon social communities for their success.

*The third chapter* considers the approach that conceives of religious rituals as acts of self-transformation, understood as a kind of social-identity construction by which rituals operate
within the structures of a society to negotiate creatively relations between selves, society, and the sacred. Focusing on Islam, consideration is given to debates in classical Islamic philosophy about the relationship between society and religion. Particular attention is given to the nearly diametrically opposed views of Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Ṭufayl, as the former views religious rituals as essential to religion, and the latter is critical of the role that any social acts may play in religion. These concerns are addressed within the context of an investigation into the role of ritual in the thinking of Muslim philosophers, particularly highlighting the development of ṣalāt (ritual prayer) and its relation to niyyah (intention), facilitating a comprehension of early and classical Islamic precedents regarding appropriate ritual prayer performances and the ways such performances are said to transform the self. This philosophical and religious reflection on Islamic ritual prayer then provides excellent cultural context from which to consider certain feminist critiques of Kant’s theory of selfhood and their relation to recent studies of the ways that Muslims, particularly women in Islam, have utilized domestic religious rituals as a way to negotiate and create personal identities, emphasizing specifically the importance of such studies for clarifying the role that gender may play in social-identity transformation within a religion.

Finally, I conclude this chapter by examining and evaluating Pierre Bourdieu’s philosophy of the social body and ritual action, a theoretical perspective that I argue proves to be most promising for conceptually framing the kind of self-transformation attributable to religious ritual.

Those within a religious tradition often see the performance of religious ritual as an ethical duty. The fourth chapter accordingly analyses the possibility that religious rituals have some moral or ethical worth. In this regard, I begin this chapter interpreting the philosophy of ritual morality presented in a Hindu religious classic, the Bhagavadgītā, which I argue uses the example of traditionally-appropriate religious ritual action as a basis for its philosophy of moral
duty, as presented in the story of Krishna’s multi-faceted ethical teaching to the warrior Arjuna. Further clarifying the perspective of the *Bhagavadgītā* by way of comparison, I subsequently develop an argument motivated by Kant's writings on ethics and aesthetics, which provide additional plausibility to the claim that religious ritual performance can meaningfully be said to have moral value. Put briefly, I argue that Kant’s ethics and aesthetics, taken together, suggest an understanding from which to argue that, under very specific conditions, *some* religious ritual action would be need to be regarded as moral action. This consideration of Kant also assists in the transition to the last chapter focusing on aesthetics as lying at the basis of ritual's power to create meaning and transform individuals and social groups.

The *fifth and final approach*, the aesthetic performance approach, is argued to provide the best possibility for a disentanglement and unification of the approaches to religious ritual hermeneutics discussed in the previous chapters. This chapter begins by considering detailed examples of ritual aesthetics, both from my prior field studies of a common Vedic ritual (the *rudrābhiṣeka*) and from aesthetic reflections on the significance of ritual prayer by classical Muslim philosophers. The next section then addresses one of the greatest challenges for those attributing any form of significance to ritual praxis, namely the famous and highly critical theory of ritual offered by Fritz Staal, who argues that religious rituals are *fundamentally* meaningless. Contra Staal, I demonstrate key parallels between these prior reflections on ritual aesthetics and some contemporary philosophies of art, with special attention given to various performance arts. These additional perspectives highlight tensions in art theory regarding any meaning that may be attributed to particular art forms, tensions that occur most notably between formalist approaches and those approaches that look beyond form to account for the value or significance of art.

Developing the concept of ritual aesthetic significance further, the concept of “world” used by
Martin Heidegger in relation to art is presented as a way to negotiate the tensions between the other four approaches to interpreting religious ritual. Taking clues from Heidegger and other phenomenological accounts of the social world, I develop a concluding concept of “ritual world,” arguing that the seriousness and significance of religious ritual experience is best captured in terms of “virtual” worlds grounded in the largely pre-reflective social nature of religious communities. These worlds provide religious practitioners with opportunities for self and social transformation, and meaningful action, which would otherwise be unavailable without ritual. This last chapter closes with major conclusions about how this concept of ritual world connects with the conclusions of the other chapters and a brief discussion of some implications of this conception of religious ritual for future philosophy of religion, including the role that ritual theory might play in producing a more socially-sensitive philosophy of religion, how a concept of ritual might inform some traditional questions in philosophy of religion, and the specific value of ritual aesthetics in philosophy of religion.

In this project religious rituals are thereby argued to be meaningful, yet not necessarily instrumental, acts that may serve to transform the identities of persons or groups. The performance of a religious ritual is also argued to have a unique and distinct moral status. Perhaps more profound, religious ritual may even influence broader worlds by operating upon and within a community, specifically by constructing aesthetic virtual worlds that may simultaneously influence the broader world as well. Most importantly for philosophy of religion, religious ritual must be recognized as one of the fundamental forms of religious experience, perhaps even serving as the social basis of religion in general.
Chapter 1: 
Religious Ritual as Rule-Following Action

1.1 The Question of Religious Ritual as Rule-Following Action

To facilitate appreciation of some complexities encountered in ritual hermeneutics, and to indicate their relation to the philosophical problem of rule-following, consider some preliminary examples of everyday religious ritual that straightforwardly lend themselves to interpretation as actions becoming ‘meaningful’ in terms of successful rule-following. One of the most frequently performed rituals in traditional Vedic Hinduism is the domestic sacrifice known as the *agnihotra*¹, performed twice daily at morning and evening. It entails ritualized offerings of a milk libation into the āhavanīya fire, a home fireplace specially consecrated for inviting the presence of divinities for worship. Such performances require a ritualist to develop familiarity with a wide variety of rules for religious action, arranged according to a traditional structure. For instance, the precise time of offering, whether just before or a little after the setting and rising of the sun, is a carefully debated among Vedic ritualists, and various schools of opinion aim to adhere to their own rules regarding how to legislate the temporal ambiguity of dawn and dusk. In Islam there is a remarkably similar relationship expressed in the performance of *ṣalāt*, daily prayer. Differing schools of Islamic praxis deliberate over the ideal time before sunrise to enact the morning prayer, and most schools argue that one should perform it significantly before sunrise to ensure rigorous adherence to the rules regarding prayer. Another deliberation among

¹ To contextualize the *agnihotra* it is key to recognize the Vedic distinction between *nitya* (‘obligatory’ or ‘invariable’), *kāmya* (‘optional’), and *naimittika* (‘occasional’ or ‘incidental’) rituals. The *agnihotra* is considered *nitya* for those considered traditionally eligible to perform sacrifices, and the regularity of such ‘invariable’ performances establishes a corresponding eligibility to perform *kāmya* or *naimittika* rituals. In other words, *nitya* rites maintain the ritualist’s social eligibility to perform most other rituals within the tradition. (‘obligatory’ or ‘invariable’), *kāmya* (‘optional’), and *naimittika* (‘occasional’ or ‘incidental’) rituals. The *agnihotra* is considered *nitya* for those considered traditionally eligible to perform sacrifices, and the regularity of such ‘invariable’ performances establishes a corresponding eligibility to perform *kāmya* or *naimittika* rituals. In other words, *nitya* rites maintain the ritualist’s social eligibility to perform most other rituals within the tradition.
Vedic ritualists concern the precise rules for setting up sacrificial fires as a preparatory phase for each particular *agnihotra*; rules are also established regarding the means of acquiring and even storing the milk libation. Adhering to these traditional approaches to ritual requires that Vedic ritualists, at a minimum, learn how to identify and act repeatedly in accord with accepted rules.

Take a look at the example of the *agnihotra* a bit more closely. The central phase of the *agnihotra* requires that a portion of the prepared milk libation be offered by the *adhvaryu*, the acting priest (traditionally male), by way of a ritual-specific ladle poured over the embers of the āhavanīya. In the morning the first libation must be offered, by way of a deity-specific ritual, to Sūrya, the divinity of the sun that lights up the day, and the second to Prajāpati, the supreme Vedic divinity. Then, in the evening, the first is offered to Agni, the divinity of fire that guides through the night, and the second again to Prajāpati. After these offerings, the *adhvaryu* must carefully wipe the remaining milk on the edge of the ladle with his hand and a *darbha*, a prepared tuft of *kuśa* grass; he then should drink any milk left from the use of the ladle, in a manner akin to the way that a Catholic priest (also traditionally male) consumes any portions of bread and wine that remain after the consecrated sacrament is distributed among the faithful.

After the libations, a set of ritual prayers is also required. The traditional Vedic injunction to perform the *agnihotra* requires the domestic priest to coordinate his actions with a demanding rule-based system, and this system of actions must be performed every single day during the same two time periods of time. A set of rules, for the Vedic ritualist, becomes something more than just a set of abstractions; the ritualist and his actions, by way of the ritual performance, becomes continually more synchronized with and transformed by that set of rules. The process of ritualization, in the *agnihotra* and in most rituals, is a distinctively intensive manner of
repetitive rule-following, which many theorists of ritual have argued is what makes rituals distinguishable from other forms of human action.

When interpreting systematized rituals like the *agnihotra*, the concept of rule-following is immediately appealing because it captures one of the most impressive elements displayed in the ritual, the ability of the performer to persist in regular performance of actions precisely guided by a set of rules. The *resolute performance of rigorously attentive action on a regular basis* indicates a profound strength of will and devotion in an individual; even a non-religious person would likely find themselves amazed to witness such stamina and dedication over time. It is thereby tempting to view ritualism and ritual performance as a kind of social program for transforming intellect, body, and character by means of a set of rules. This makes ritual look like something designed to train the performer in a generally desired social role. This temptation led the well-known structuralist and linguistic anthropologist Levi-Strauss, scholar of ritual and many other social phenomena, to explain rituals as actions that enact socially-recognized meaning on the basis of situational rule systems, which he referred to as “operational structures.” Ritual injunctions typically demand the performance of a collection of actions arranged according to an accepted theme or a set of principles in a given society. These operational structures, thereby, serve as a basis for communicating within a culture at a variety of levels of significance, ranging from broadly known mythologies and celebrations to eccentric micromanners.

Although I agree that his view captures something crucial about the nature of ritual, Levi-Strauss' structuralism led many critics to a common and sensible objection, perhaps expressed most directly by theorist of anthropology Terence Turner in his article, “Structure, Process,
Turner recognizes that one of Levi-Strauss' central weaknesses as an interpreter of social practices appears “in his definition of the 'structure' of myth in terms of synchronic, paradigmatic elements among sign-elements abstracted from their places in the narrative, which he dismisses as 'diachronic' and not part of the 'structure’” (TR, 218). Dismissing the non-paradigmatic elements of myth or ritual exposes a danger, particularly that undue emphasis on interpreting individual acts in terms of previously established, thus traditional, principles of interpretation will obscure the distinctiveness of those actions as individual actions. At least part of the significance of an action is derived from its unique variance from overarching paradigms. For instance, in the *agnihotra* the precise actions of a Vedic ritualist are sure to vary to some degree, especially within obligatory twice-daily performances. Should those deviations be regarded as mere errors, mistakes without any discoverable, however small, significance? Radical emphasis on the essentiality of rule-following in ritual praxis clearly raises the danger that knowledge of the guiding principles of an action would blind an observer to any individually-distinctive significance involved.

In response to this difficulty, the guiding question that should be asked is surely not the simplified false dilemma, “Are rituals fundamentally determined by rules or by individual actions?” Instead, interpreters of ritual should ask, “How do rules and individual actions uniquely conjoin in ritual performances?” The first section of this chapter will begin responding to this question by introducing the widely discussed philosophical question, “Exactly what is rule-following?” Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michael Polanyi offer important and well-known theories in response to this question, and those theories serve to frame the subsequent and more specific inquiry into the distinctiveness of ritual rule-following. The second section will

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highlight a widely applied approach to interpreting specific rituals, one that understands the following of rules for religious ritual as ultimately an erroneous, even unhealthy, kind of behavior. Freud, a primary representative of this approach, viewed religious ritual rule-following as what I refer to as “an inversion of the trivial.” After introducing this disparaging view, it will become clear that, despite Freud’s views on religious ritual, other philosophers influenced by Freud sought to correct those views while simultaneously developing Freud’s more reliable insights. Aspects of the philosophy of Julia Kristeva will serve well for representing this post-Freudian reaction. The third section of this chapter will turn to a more specific consideration, of the philosophy of Vedic ritual hermeneutics, which aims to disclose precisely how traditional Vedic philosophers should understand the ritual rules followed by their religion and the general reasons that lead them to follow such rules. In that section, by considering two disagreeing and paradigmatic Vedic schools of ritual hermeneutics, I will defend and develop a frequently criticized view among Vedic ritualists about why and how ritual rules are followed. The fourth section will further examine Vedic ritual hermeneutics by shifting to the question of precisely what kinds of ritualized actions may traditionally qualify as rule-following religious actions, and to what extent distinct and particular actions may yet somehow serve as “equivalent substitutes” for the required ritual actions. The fifth section will then utilize the observations made in the prior sections to reconsider and revise the concept of ritual as “mere” repetition, as raised by Freud and others, specifically by reconsidering the general nature of repetition in light of recent ethological approaches to the interpretation of ritual and also in light of Gilles Deleuze's reformulation of the traditional Western ontology of repetition as involving a central logic of “model” and “copy.” This chapter will conclude with reflections on
the frequently challenged “rationality” of religious ritual rule-following, on the nature of the rules that rituals follow, and on what it takes to follow them.

1.2 Wittgenstein and Polanyi on the Social Nature of Rule-Following

The rule-following framework for regarding rituals can be clarified when viewed through the lens of a debate widely discussed in 20th century philosophy. Questions regarding the nature of rule-following have attracted a wide range of philosophical reflection, especially in reaction to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michael Polanyi regarding understanding rules, rule-following, and the relationship of rules to meaning. While a large portion of this debate surrounds exegesis, especially regarding controversies about the precise implications of Wittgenstein’s seemingly skeptical statements about rule-following, it is at least clear that Wittgenstein and Polanyi understand the ability to follow a rule to be best clarified in terms of socially-situated enactments taken up in some recognizable accordance with the rule. Although it is not essential for this project to enter directly into the exegetical battles surrounding Wittgenstein and Polanyi, a careful consideration of their contributions aid in framing the distinctiveness of religious ritual praxis as a form of rule-following. This consideration will also facilitate an argument that consideration of the case of ritual praxis, and its relation to socially situated ritual interpretation, can directly inform the broader philosophical debates about rule-following.

Wittgenstein’s understanding of rule-following particularly became a matter of major dispute after the publication of Saul Kripke’s *Wittgenstein: On Rules and Private Language* (1982). Kripke, while perhaps not being primarily concerned with exegesis, argued that Wittgenstein’s remarks were, at least implicitly, attempts to address a central question: “How do
I know when I understand a rule?” Consider what may seem to be a simple example: we often use simple rules about basic symbols, such as when signing documents. The symbol “✍” is often placed pointing to a line on an official document. Based on a likely construal, this symbol can be used to provide its reader with a rule: “On top of this line you may place a signature.” If I understand this symbol in this way, how is it that I came to understand this rule? Must I possess knowledge of an explicit meaning for the symbol if I somehow always sign on the line? Let’s assume, however, that my past encounters with this symbol were always regarding documents that I signed on behalf of myself. What is to stop me from interpreting this symbol differently when someone else asks me to sign on their behalf? Perhaps absurdly, or perhaps not, I might assume that when I sign for another I should interpret the symbol according to the rule: “Below this line you may place a signature.” Perhaps I even then take the symbol to be pointing in a different direction. This understanding at least seems plausible given a lack of experience with the new context of signing for another. If this is plausible, then from what basis can someone else tell me that my perhaps absurd readings of “✍” are incorrect? What does it really mean to understand this symbol?

For starters, it seems clear that Wittgenstein is attempting to problematize one common approach to answering this question, namely that someone who truly ‘understands’ the rules regarding “✍” must have some explicit proposition stored away as a thought in their mind, which is then called upon to show true understanding of how to accord with the rules regarding “✍.” Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, is determined to show that this approach is fraught with insurmountable difficulties. He states a “paradox” causing these difficulties in the following way. “[N]o course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of

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action can be made out to accord with the rule. [And,] if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it” (PI, 201). In this way it becomes clear that “obeying a rule” cannot be a matter of a propositional interpretation that one thinks prior to following a rule. Instead, according to Wittgenstein, “…‘obeying a rule’ is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately,’ otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it” (PI, 202). Knowing oneself to be obeying a rule is said to be more like knowing that we have obeyed a direct command from another. “We are trained to do so; we react to an order in a particular way” (PI, 206). We know that we have followed the order because the social situation lets us know after we react. If the command-giver has not objected to the reaction (or if he is pleased, praising, etc.), we then know we have succeeded in following the given rule.

Kripke’s well-known reaction to these claims focuses heavily on the fact that Wittgenstein frames the confusion about rule-following as a “paradox.” According to Kripke, Wittgenstein attempted to point out this paradox in order to make an epistemologically “skeptical” point, namely to show the impossibility of there being any kind of “factual correctness” to a claim to understand the meaning of a rule. Understood in this way, Wittgenstein would be rejecting the very possibility of rule-following as a kind of thinking.

Some, however, have disagreed with Kripke’s analysis. Colin McGinn, in his 1984 Wittgenstein on Meaning4, gives a careful comparison of Kripke’s way of reading Wittgenstein (which McGinn argues is weak on exegesis) and his own reading. McGinn argues that Wittgenstein is not actually advancing a skeptical theory at all, but is instead pointing out a common mistake in understanding how we follow rules. The “paradox” Wittgenstein presents, understood in this

way, is designed to shed light on a misunderstanding. “Wittgenstein is putting forward the paradox as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the interpretational conception; it is the inevitable result of that particular misunderstanding about the nature of grasp of a rule” (WM, 68). From this reading, Wittgenstein is actually arguing that interpretations are simply not what determines one’s grasp of a rule. Instead, “What Wittgenstein is saying is that *certain sorts* of facts fail to determine meaning, *viz.* substituting one sign for another, not that *no* facts do” (WM, 69). But what kind of facts would then apply to the correct claim to understand a rule?

McGinn convincingly argues that Wittgenstein’s positive (yet largely implicit) theory of rule-following can be found by carefully tracing remarks made in the same vein as the remark that rule-following is like following a command; “We are trained to do so” (PI, 206). “Wittgenstein has denied that understanding is an inner state or process of any kind” (WM, 128). Instead, according to McGinn’s interpretation, Wittgenstein says that to grasp a rule, “rules have to be followed *more than once*” (WM, 129). This partially explains the emphasis on training, but it raises difficult questions. First of all, how can someone be ‘following a rule’ more than once *before* becoming capable of grasping ‘rule-following’? And, exactly how does repetitive training give rise to the ability to understand and follow a rule? McGinn, recognizing these perplexities, admits, “It can therefore seem that we are driven to adopt a quasi-behaviorist view of understanding in the absence of any other way of conceiving what understanding is: when we subtract behavior from conscious experiences we have a conception of what is left over, but subtracting rule-following behavior from rule-grasping appears to leave us with nothing” (WM, 128).

However, after working through a variety of exegetical reconstructions, McGinn settles, although cautiously, on a plausible interpretation, which he locates in terms of a relationship
between two seemingly opposed theoretical positions: “the multiple-application thesis” (which, as outlined above, argues that rule-grasping requires that rules must be followed “more than once”) and “the creative thesis.” The creative thesis argues,

Wittgenstein is committing himself to the idea that ‘meaning is created by use’: that is, the meaning of a word is progressively constituted or created by its use over time – determinate meaning is the final result of temporally extended use…. [Thereby,] my rule-following behavior is automatic and natural; it therefore does not require a decision in the sense of a deliberate exercise of will unconstrained by anything either antecedent or concomitant. (WM, 134-6)

These two theses do seem to be in direct tension because the multiple-application thesis requires ongoing cognizant decisions to follow rules, whereas the creative thesis requires no cognizant decisions.

Nevertheless, McGinn’s reconstructive efforts, carefully balanced by meticulous evaluation of Wittgenstein, leads to one way to resolve this tension. At one point, he explains via a revealing analogy.

Although solubility is a property substances have in advance of particular manifestations of that disposition, there is (it might be thought) something suspect about the idea that there could be soluble substances which never manifested solubility: solubility is not of course created by its manifestations, but its manifestations are so integral to the language-game of ascribing the disposition that we cannot conceive of what it would be for that disposition to exist in a totally ‘idle’ form. (WM, 137)

Understood according to this analogy, the capacity to make cognizant decisions about rule-following, while that capacity is not yet manifesting in our natural dispositions toward rule-following, can be said to exist in some latent, but potent, form during the initial stages of repeated use, while meaningful understanding and the corresponding capacity to follow knowingly is created via use. McGinn thereby concludes, “Wittgenstein’s fundamental thesis, as
I have interpreted him… [is] that meaning rests ultimately upon the bedrock of our natural propensities” (WM, 138).

Wittgenstein’s view argues that we gradually become conscious of the meaning of rules as natural use creates that same consciousness. “The general picture Wittgenstein is advocating here is a sort of anti-intellectualism about the activity of using signs in a rule-governed way: he wishes to emphasize the habitual character of rule-following and to discourage an overly rationalistic conception of the nature of this form of behavior” (WM, 24). This “habitual” character, however, is not emphasized by Wittgenstein to the extent that “understanding” is said to be impossible; he simply does not want to import as insuperable a gulf between ‘action’ and ‘understanding’ as is implied in the traditional Cartesian divide between ‘inner’ and ‘outer.’ By grounding the understanding of a rule in the capacity to act, Wittgenstein’s remarks aim to avoid unpalatable associations with radical Cartesian dualisms, and in this way we begin to see why a consideration of rule-following is necessary for an inquiry into ritual praxis and its relation to meaning. In this chapter, and in other chapters, I will be arguing that, to avoid common errors made by interpreters of religious ritual, consideration of the meaning of religious rituals requires thinking in what might be called a ‘post-Cartesian’ or ‘trans-Cartesian’ mindset.

McGinn’s interpretation clarifies Wittgenstein’s key insights for addressing the distinctness of religious ritual praxis, which has been regarded by many ritual theorists as based on pedestrian mental activity. To dig deeper into the philosophy of rule-following, and its application in ritual, it will also serve this inquiry well to consider Michael Polanyi’s theory of “tacit knowing” and “tacit inference” as a way to develop further the concept of a ‘bedrock of natural propensities’ suggested by Wittgenstein’s remarks. Polanyi distinguishes “tacit knowledge” from propositional knowledge, that knowledge achieved via rational thinking
governed by a system of discrete rules. In his 1958 book *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi describes tacit knowledge as a knowledge that is not easily captured in language, knowledge that a person has, yet cannot explicitly state. Such knowledge is closely linked with habit-based skills or techniques, and with a distinct sense of implicit rules for praxis, making his thinking closely related to Wittgenstein’s thinking on rule-following. According to Polanyi, tacit knowing is “achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them” (PK, 49). “These hidden rules can be assimilated only by a person who surrenders himself to that extent uncritically to the imitation of another” (PK, 53). These implicit rules are said to be thoroughly grounded in a person as a socially mimetic animal; tacit rules are thus regarded as natural to pre-critical human existence.

Polanyi developed his epistemology and metaphysics for many years after publishing *Personal Knowledge*, and applied his theory of tacitness to many philosophical problems. Importantly, in 1966 he published the article “The Logic of Tacit Inference” in the journal *Philosophy*. There he develops the concept of tacit inference in terms of his broader philosophical system.

My definition of reality, as that which may yet inexhaustibly manifest itself, implies the presence of an indeterminate range of anticipations in any knowledge bearing on reality. But besides this indeterminacy of its prospects, tacit knowing contains also an actual knowledge that is indeterminate, in the sense that its content cannot be explicitly stated. (TI, 4)

Within this outline, he then develops his concept of tacit inference, “a mechanism which can produce discoveries by steps we cannot specify,” on the basis of his own prior thinking and then-

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recent studies, particularly studies in psychology and biology about perception and learning taking place without explicit awareness (TI, 6).

To clarify “tacit inference” Polanyi first considers basic capacities of human perception, such as the ability to integrate a set of sounds into a distinct object. Regarding basic perceptions, and eventually complex skills, he argues that an implicit organizing occurs on the basis of which explicit reasoning could later develop. Polyani also emphasizes the serious value of tacit inferences of this sort. “The speed and complexity of tacit integration far exceeds in its own domain the operations of explicit inference. This is how intuitive insight may arrive at unaccountable conclusions in a flash” (TI, 7). Without making any attempt to devalue the explicit rationality that is key to most science and philosophical thinking, he stresses that explicit inference and knowledge must understand their own importance to be situated within a wider world of tacitly integrating knowledge and skills.

We cannot learn to keep our balance on a bicycle by taking to heart that in order to compensate for a given angle of imbalance \(\alpha\), we must take a curve on the side of the imbalance, of which the radius \(r\) should be proportionate to the square of the velocity \(v\) over the imbalance: \(r \sim v^2/\alpha\). Such knowledge is ineffectual, unless known tacitly. (TI, 6-7)

Tacit inference is regarded as a form of *uncritical yet discovering* awareness by which perception and prior tacit knowledge are made to bear upon active experience.

Tacit inference, explained in terms of “tacit integration,” is also said to function most dynamically by *constituting* our social nature. Tacit inference is described as a foundational mechanism that guides an epistemology of social interaction between animals.

A lion swooping down on the back of a fleeing antelope coordinates its impressions and actions in a highly complex and accurate way within a second. The naturalist watching the lion mentally integrates these coordinated elements into the observation of the lion hunting its prey. Some vital coordinations, like embryonic development, are much slower than this, but no less rich in co-
ordinated details; the study of physiological functions fills many volumes; the coordinations performed by human intelligence are unlimited. There are no mathematical expressions covering the shape of a lion and the way he pounces on an antelope; nor any that cover a million characteristic shapes and coordinated actions of numberless other living beings. None of these shapes and swiftly moving correlations are precisely definable... To this extent our knowledge of life is a sharing of life—a re-living, a very intimate kind of in-dwelling. (TI, 12)

This concept of life as in-dwelling, within a world of others whom we “re-live,” will throughout this project be argued to be of crucial importance for understanding religious ritual. Similar concepts of in-dwelling are developed by other philosophers to clarify philosophical problems connected to religious ritual, as will be shown in other chapters, but it is particularly important to recognize first how the seemingly simple act of following a rule brings the attentive philosopher eventually to concepts of implicit practicality and social situatedness. Wittgenstein and Polanyi, in this regard, insightfully clarify the far-reaching social implications of basic epistemological issues.

In fact, their epistemologies led both Wittgenstein and Polanyi to give attention to the topic of ritual. While Wittgenstein’s views on ritual will be discussed in depth in the next chapter, it should be mentioned that Polanyi’s later works increasingly bring his philosophical system to bear on ritual, religion, and myth. In his 1975 Meaning Polanyi emphasizes religious ritual as an activity that engages ritualists in a type of rule-following that brings about distinctive effects, as compared to other types of rule-following. Most importantly, religious rituals are said to produce a unique way to experience time. Influenced by Mircea Eliade’s thinking on myth and religion, particularly his notion of “sacred Time,” Polanyi, in a chapter specifically concentrating on religion, just after interpreting the Christian rite of Holy Communion, concludes,

Rites and ceremonies break into our normal routines and introduce an action into our lives (a celebration) that is not an action in the ordinary sense of the word. Our ordinary actions are all located within the temporal frame and are directed at specifics... But the action of a ritual has meaning only in terms of Great Time – the time before all time – which has and needs no date. It is not, except in the case of magic and superstition, aimed at giving effect to specific objectives. (M, 154)

The “Great Time” referred to here is the Eliadian notion of a time that is framed within a sacred mythology. Polayni’s statement bears striking resemblance to topics that I will address in other chapters, particularly his way of distinguishing between “magic and superstition” and genuine religious ritual action. For the time being, however, the above passage suffices to illustrate that Polayni’s thinking on tacit knowledge and tacit inference recognizes that philosophical reflection on the implicit foundations of rule-following can lead to consideration of topics that might be considered beyond the scope of traditional epistemology.

### 1.3 An Inversion of the Trivial? Ritual Viewed as 'Mere' Repetition

Even though for Wittgenstein and Polanyi implicit forms of rule-based behavior are not regarded as lacking in value, there is a common tendency to approach ritual as what might be called an ‘animalistic’ form of rule-following, due partly to the widespread influence of studies of animal rituals that tend to emphasize their radical distinctness from more complex human forms of living. Ethological theories of ritualization blossomed in the early 20th century, particularly due to earlier studies of ritualization in exotic birds. The concept of ritualization has since then played an important role in explaining many forms of animal behavior. Dorothea Baudy, for example, whose recent work focuses on the intersection of ethology and religion, explains the biological concept of “ritualization” as denoting “the evolution of behavioral patterns and accompanying features which do not serve any immediate purpose but exist for the
sake of communication.” This combination of features, not serving an immediate purpose and existing for non-purposive communication, implies a kind of behavior that is somehow meaningful (because it communicates), but the meaning communicated is frequently regarded as less than valuable, because it does not seem to serve a clear or rational purpose.

Many other theorists of ritual and religion have regarded ritual as a kind of irrational – or even problematic – form of rule-following. Freud's psychoanalytic approach is perhaps the most paradigmatic, if not the most striking, example of this tendency. Freud aims to disclose the nature of the religious ritualist’s *thinking* by diagnosing ritual actions in terms of the neurotic patient. Neurotic actions are said to generally appear to the regular observer as meaningless or pointless actions, yet any interruption of these actions will generally cause the neurotic considerable stress; an internal conflict of guilt within the neurotic erupts due to any inability to perform such actions. Freud thus directly associates ritualists with those who regard a cessation of rule-following as a tremendously disturbing kind of culpability, thus painting the ritualist as a person driven by an intense fear to avoid such blame. Freud also regards religious ritual as an act of displacement, one in which the original significance of the action has become repressed, such that apparently trivial actions, originally having significance due to being associated with an original meaning, eventually become paradoxically the most important or even profound actions. This assumption of an *inversion of the trivial and the significant* is at the heart of a mode of thinking that has led many scholars of religion to trivialize ritual as ‘mere’ rule-following.

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9 Freud develops this understanding of religion and ritual in a variety of articles, and primarily in two books: *Totem and Taboo* and *The Future of an Illusion*. 16
In the 1923 "A Short Account of Psycho-Analysis,"¹⁰ Freud reflects on the parallel between his clinical category “obsessional neurosis” and religious observances in general.

It is impossible to escape the impression of the perfect correspondence which can be discovered between the obsessive actions of certain obsessional patients and the religious observances of believers all over the world. Some cases of obsessional neurosis actually behave like a caricature of a private religion, so that it is tempting to liken the official religions to an obsessional neurosis that has been mitigated by becoming universalized. This comparison, which is no doubt highly objectionable to all believers, has nevertheless proved most fruitful psychologically. For psychoanalysis soon discovered in the case of obsessional neurosis what the forces are that struggle with one another in it till their conflicts find a remarkable expression in the ceremonial of obsessive actions. (SA, 205-6)

Freud frequently associates “ceremonial”¹¹ with obsessional neurosis. The term is generally used to refer to a patient who makes eccentric adjustments to everyday actions that, from the patient’s point of view, must be carried out in the same, often meticulous, manner. The activities of “ceremonial neurotics,” according to Freud, appear to others as mere formalities, mere rule-following without any distinguishable import, although the actions actually refer back, via repression, to an original, now lost, yet still indirectly significant set of actions and events. Often such patients even describe themselves as seeing no clear meaning or purpose in their own ceremonial actions; however, the ceremonial neurotic is somehow rendered incapable of ceasing the performance due to the neurotic anxiety caused by resisting the obsession.

It is important to notice that Freud's understanding of obsessional neurosis is defined so broadly that he sees fit to apply the concept to a surprisingly wide variety of human action. In “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices”¹² Freud argues, “Any activities whatever may

¹¹ For the purposes of this investigation into Freud, it will suffice to regard the terms “ritual” and “ceremonial” as synonymous. In many other contexts, however, recognizing their differences is clearly significant.
become obsessive actions in the wider sense of the term if they are elaborated by small additions or given a rhythmic character by means of pauses and repetitions. We shall not expect to find a sharp distinction between 'ceremonials' and 'obsessive actions.' As a rule obsessive actions have grown out of ceremonials” (OA, 18). Freud frequently emphasizes a significant similitude between repetition-obsessed neurosis and religious ritual. “It is easy to see where the resemblances lie between neurotic ceremonials and the sacred acts of religious ritual: in the qualms of conscience brought on by their neglect, in their complete isolation from all other actions (shown in the prohibition against interruption) and in the conscientiousness with which they are carried out in every detail” (OA, 19). Of course, Freud does yet acknowledge that there are some differences: neurotic ceremonials are generally private not public, neurotic ceremonials generally vary more than religious rituals, and religious rituals tend to be more readily associated with meaning, however vaguely. Yet, these differences seem unimportant to Freud when, “with the help of the psychoanalytic technique of investigation, one penetrates to the true meaning of obsessive actions” (OA, 19).

For Freud, the “true meaning” behind ceremonial actions is lost to the performer; from the performer's perspective the action is performed out of necessity, namely to avoid the anxiety that results from repression of the action's original significance. Psychoanalysis, however, makes it possible for an obsessional neurotic to discover the causes and motives behind this drive toward unceasing repetition.

[T]he obsessive action serves to express unconscious motives and ideas....We may say that the sufferer [my emphasis]... behaves as if he were dominated by a sense of guilt, of which, however, he knows nothing... This sense of guilt has its source in certain early mental events, but it is constantly being revived by renewed temptations which arise whenever there is a contemporary provocation. Moreover, it occasions a lurking sense of expectant anxiety, an expectation of misfortune, which is linked, through the idea of punishment, with the internal
perception of the temptation. When the ceremonial is first being constructed, the patient is still conscious that he must do this or that lest some ill should befall... Thus a ceremonial starts as an action for defense or insurance, a protective measure. (OA, 21-2)

Freud here takes his claim that ritual ‘inverts the trivial by repressing the significant’ one step further; the ritualist on this understanding progresses toward becoming defensively deluded about his own nature while also being prone to paranoia and anxiety. Evidently Freud understands the ritualist as a person who establishes within himself a thoroughly problematic, if not psychologically diseased, relationship to rule-following.

Philosopher and post-Freudian psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva offers a crucial distinction for making use of Freud's insights into the motivations and means of ritualism while remaining critical of his insistence that ritual be regarded as an illness or error. Donald Capps, a Professor of Theology at Princeton specialized in the intersection of psychology and religious studies, in his edited anthology Freud and Freudians on Religion, succinctly defines Kristeva's widely-used distinction between 'the symbolic' and 'the semiotic' as it has been used in the study of religious praxis..

The symbolic is the signifying property of language, of the effects of meaning that appear when linguistic signs are articulated into grammar and assume a syntactic structure. She identifies the symbolic with Law and Word. The semiotic are the effects of meaning that are not reducible to language or that may operate outside language, even if language is necessary as an immediate context or as a final referent.

Understood in this way, “symbolic” meanings are explicitly stated in systematic language. “Semiotic” meanings, however, though they may require association with systematic language,
are meanings that are inexplicit or tacit. Ritual rule-following actions, according to this distinction, begin as a form of symbolic action, because they are taught and actualized by way of explicit linguistic structures and repetitive training, but, due to the nature of its praxis, ritualized actions gradually progress toward a form of semiotic action, due to the non-linguistic associations and meaningful yet tacit dispositions cultivated by the repetitive performance of the initially symbolic act. Rituals, in this way, can be understood in a less 'clinical' sense than Freud would recommend, and without implying that such behavior is necessarily abnormal or problematic. Kristeva's distinction provides a post-Freudian way to clarify religious rituals as rule-following repetitive actions that cultivate tacit tendencies to perform the self-same ritual without assuming that the semiotic associations that motivate ritual performance are the symptom of a damaging repression.

Scholars of ritual have also utilized Kristeva’s concept of “jouissance,” a word that is usually left untranslated in her writings due to its variety of associations, ranging from play and joy to trauma and pain. Jouissance is a concept, used by many theorists influenced by Freud, associated with libido and irrational release of subconscious drives. Additionally, for Kristeva, the concept signifies something natural to humanity that nonetheless resists being confined within the representational structures of language. In her article “Might Not Universality Be... Our Own Foreignness?”15 she agrees with Freud that religion relies upon a kind of “illusion.” However, for Kristeva that illusion simply turns out to reveal the non-linguistic aspects of human expressions. Implying her debt to Freud, she explains,

> With the Freudian notion of the unconscious the involution of the strange in the psyche loses its pathological aspect and integrates with the assumed unity of

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human beings in an *otherness* that is both biological and symbolic and becomes an integral part of the same. (UF, 327)

Freud, especially in his early writings on religion, generally assumed that the “strange” neurotic associations brought about by the repression of original formative experiences should ultimately be brought to light, explained to the “patient” in terms of those original and non-fictitious experiences, and, finally, become abolished due to its fictitiousness. Kristeva, however, sees in Freud's concept of the unconscious a more fundamental lesson, namely that the strangeness of our representations of ourselves is an integral part of what makes humans human.

Clarifying this understanding, she explicates the theme of “otherness as part of the same” in terms of the obsessional neurotic's tendency to repeat.

Obsessional neuroses... have the distinctive feature of “reifying” signs – of slipping from the domain of “speaking” to the domain of “doing.” Such a particularity also evinces the fragility of repression and, without actually explaining it, allows the return of the repressed to be inscribed in the reification under the guise of the uncanny effect... [O]ur fleeting or more or less threatening encounter with the uncanny strangeness would be a clue to our psychotic latencies and the fragility of our repression – at the same time as it is an indication of the weakness of language as a symbolic barrier, that, in the final analysis, structures the repressed. (UF, 331)

The uncanniness of “reified” signs indicates latent capacities of human nature, and the inevitability of repressions that nonetheless reveal their fragility. That we can arrive at a form of self-consciousness that “fictionalizes” and represses original associations and actions indicates precisely how “weak” language is as a “symbolic barrier” holding back our innate capacity to become engrossed in fantasies.

This realization, brought about in the experience of *jouissance*, indicates the fragility of language by its tendency to invoke semiotic meanings that reach beyond language into unconscious associations. For Kristeva, “obsessional” acts of religious ritual are not reductively
regarded as illness to be dispelled and abolished by psychoanalysis. Kristeva promotes accepting such strangeness as the basis of a new, and politically charged, worldview.

By recognizing our uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside... the ethics of psychoanalysis implies a politics: it would involve a cosmopolitanism of a new sort that, cutting across governments, economies, and markets, might work for a mankind whose solidarity is founded upon the consciousness of its unconscious. (UF, 333)

Kristeva would have us regard ritualism as revealing something latent within ourselves, something that, rather than separating us from the ritualist, requires us to recognize that we routinely engage in semiotic “reification” of symbols. Rather than calling humanity to “brotherhood” on the basis of shared sameness, Kristeva seeks to regard the semiotic strangeness of expressive actions as “an integral part of the same.”

Freud's understanding of religion as illusion leads to his diagnosis of religious ritual as an inversion of the trivial and the significant, due to the apparently meaningless repetitive rule-following involved. Kristeva, on the other hand, leads us beyond Freud by acknowledging that the “illusion” of religious ritual praxis achieves significance as a response to a fundamental aspect of the human situation, namely the need to discover the extent of our dependency upon the structure of discrete language, Kristeva's “symbolic” sphere. The “fictional” quality of semiotic meaning is regarded as potentially beneficial, and thus Kristeva would not likely refer to the ceremonialist, in line with Freud, as a mere “sufferer” or “patient.”

The widely acknowledged repetitional aspect of ritual rule-following has caused many interpreters of religion to regard rituals as a lesser aspect of human culture and communication. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I aim to develop understanding of the ‘semiotic-meaning-building’ character of ritual rule-following further by emphasizing how certain general aspects of ritual rule-following, when regarded from within a specific traditional context, show
that ritual actions should not be regarded as insignificant or defective rule-following actions. To begin this development, in the next section I will return to considering the Vedic Hindu tradition, within which the *agnihotra* developed, to examine how the Vedic tradition of ritual hermeneutics theorizes the kind of rule-following said to guide religious ritual.

**1.4 Ritual Rules and Religious Imperatives in Vedic Ritual Hermeneutics**

Those broadly familiar with Indian religions know that Vedic Hinduism describes the duties of its devotees in terms of the concept of *dharma*. In fact, many other religions founded in India describe the duties of practitioners by way of this term. *Dharma*, in most instances, including that of Vedic Hinduism, involves consciousness of rules of moral obligation. Dharmic duties are sometimes individually expressed in the Veda in terms of a *niyoga*, a “mandate” or “injunction,” to perform action according to specific obligatory principles, and these injunctions are traditionally classified by different shades of obligation. This facet is of course familiar to many, if not all, cultural moral systems. In Islam, for example, religious obligations can be classified as *farḍ* (“required by divine decree”), as is the case with the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*), or as *wājib* (“required by court decree”), as is the case with many marriage customs.

Traditional obligations come in many forms, some more demanding than others. Vedic dharmic duties can be described or categorized by strictness in terms of the kind of action, or *karma*, that they require of the devotee. *Kāmya-karma* (“desire-propelled action”), for instance, is action required only based upon the “end-in-view” of the actor. A Vedic devotee may be required to perform certain forms of action only under the circumstances in which the devotee

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16 The etymology of “dharma” is revealing here. The word derives from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, meaning ‘to sustain, maintain, or support’, making *dharma* literally mean “that which sustains, maintains, or supports”. The ethical guidelines associated with *dharma* thereby should be understood generally in relation to maintaining and upholding individuals, society, and their relation.
has in mind a certain goal, such as when one desires to obtain the blessings of a divinity representing a certain form of perfection, such as music or agriculture, before undertaking related activities. *Nitya-karma* (“obligatory action”), on the other hand, is not based on the requirement of an explicit “end-in-view” within the devotee. There is an implicit end associated with such duties, ordinarily stated negatively; such an end requires the regular, or “un-ceasing” (thus, negative), performance of a specific duty at predetermined time periods, such as “every morning at sunrise” or “prior to any sleeping.” This is a form of obligation frequently expressed by the Vedic *niyogas* associated with ritual duties.

Two elements are crucial in distinguishing the rule-following required by a Vedic *niyoga*: the kind of person or group of persons addressed by the injunction (known as the *niyajya*), and the content of the injunction (the *viṣaya*). Vedic ritual injunctions require actions of a specific class of people, for example “all adult male Brahmins” or “each priest.”\(^{17}\) The particular actions required are seen as appropriate to a specific social role within the tradition, not simply to particular individuals. Deciding how to follow these mandates, however, is not self-evident. Disagreements frequently arise among interpreters of these traditional commands, and this gave rise to an entire tradition of hermeneutic philosophy focused on explicating the precise nature of Vedic ritual rules and how to follow them.

The Mīmāṃsā tradition of philosophy, a set of texts spanning many centuries, is a movement generated largely by tension between two sub-schools of Vedic hermeneutics, known as Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā and Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā. The Prābhākara school, founded by Prabhākara sometime in the seventh century C.E., and the Bhāṭṭa school, founded by Kumārila Bhaṭṭa

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\(^{17}\) It is important to note that in Vedic Hinduism there are many kinds of priests, ranging from those holding formal offices at temples to those enacting informally the role of priest in domestic ritual. Thus, not all priests in Vedic Hinduism are necessarily priests by formal profession, as would generally be the case in Catholicism.
around the same time, disagreed about the philosophical understanding of rule-following underlying the ritual injunctions in the Vedic scriptures. Mīmāṃsā is also philosophically significant because both schools develop a philosophy of religion explicitly unconcerned with īśvara or “deity.” The school promotes no arguments about the existence of any “author” of the Veda; in fact, both sub-schools regard the Veda as apauruṣeya or “authorless,” and they both deny the existence of any form of creator deity. Additionally, the world, according to Mīmāṃsā, is regarded as eternal, primarily due to the fact that the Veda (lit. ‘knowledge’) is regarded as authorless and eternal. Thus the only effective means of understanding the truth of this eternity is through a lifelong path of ritual praxis according to the Vedic tradition.

These two schools, however, generally disagree about the correct understanding of Vedic ritual dharma. For the Bhāṭṭa school, such dharma is regarded as the tangible acts required by the Veda; for the Prābhākara school, on the other hand, dharma is something objective that is also described as “apūrva” (lit. “unprecedented” or “extraordinary”). Importantly, for both schools ritual rule-following is not regarded as something subjective or mental; it is not an inner kind of thinking. Most commentaries on the history of Indian philosophy recognize this, but few address the issue with such attention to detail as the early 20th century Indian philosopher Sushil Kumar Maitra, who wrote in his The Ethics of the Hindus18, “dharma… is essentially of the nature of an artha or good… a thing worthy of being aimed at or desired…. But it is not a mere artha but an artha which is sanctioned by codanā or vidhivākya, i.e., by scriptural prescription” (EH, 92). Maitra’s explanation captures a distinctive aspect of most Vedic understandings of ritual obligation, namely that they are prescriptive obligations to perform acts for their own intrinsic value while somehow simultaneously implying that they are to be regarded as desirable.

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18 Sushil Kumar Maitra, The Ethics of the Hindus (University of Calcutta Press, 1925), (hereafter cited in the text as EH).
In Islam, by contrast, few, aside from some forms of Şüfism, place such emphasis on the desirability of performing duty while nonetheless saying that the duty should be done for the sake of accomplishing the duty itself.

Both schools of Mīmāṃśā generally share this understanding but disagree about the reasons for following the niyogas. For the Bhāṭṭa school dharma is constituted by the acts themselves, which are thus regarded as morally valuable in themselves. But why? The Bhāṭṭas regard Vedic rituals as obligations because such rituals combine two required elements for moral worth: they produce a higher state of pleasure or lack of pain, and they are promoted in the Veda. Clarifying this sense of obligation, as Maitra explains, according to the Bhāṭṭa school dharma is “conducive to good” in the sense that such acts work toward the “highest good” (EH, 96).

In fact, there is no difference in this respect between kāmyakarmas or conditional duties with reference to something desired for empirical pleasure and the nityanaimittika karmas or unconditional duties. The latter conduce to good quite as much as the duties prompted by empirical motives and are dharma only as thus conducive to good. (EH, 96)

They therefore follow the niyogas because they lead to an empirically preferable life understood according to established tradition. The Prābhākara school’s understanding of dharma as apūrva, however, can seem confusing, and this may have something to do with the fact that less scholarly attention is paid to it. For example, K. Satchidananda Murty dismissively noted, “The Prābhākara school of Mīmāṃśā admits Apūrva, but does not agree with the view that it is a power produced in the agent. Its conception is complex and not very intelligible” (RB, n.104). While I understand his response, I disagree in favor of the analyses of scholars like Maitra, which have revealed sophistication worth considering in the Prābhākara position.

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The difficult feature of the Prābhākara account lies in the fact that dharma is performed according to a purportedly objective basis that is nonetheless also “extraordinary” in the sense that it defies ordinary explanation. This has led some to translate the term “apūrva” as “transcendent,” but, as I will explain, I prefer to interpret the term according to its more common usage, which refers to “non-ordinary experience.” The apūrva quality of Vedic injunctions, according to the Prābhākaras, produces a self-evident call to perform ritual dharma for its own sake, without regard for individual interest as a mediator, as if comprehension of the Vedic command alone would, in and of itself, produce the prompting to act (preraṇa) within a trained ritualist. Prābhākaras thus rejects the Bhāṭṭa account because such ritualists perform their rites primarily on the basis of individual interests, which are prone to corruption. On the Prābhākara account rituals are properly performed solely because of the call to obedience generated directly by Vedic injunctions.

Commentators on the Prābhākara school, however, frequently overlook the term “prerāṇa.” The word in Sanskrit literature invokes a range of common meanings. It literally means “driving out,” and has been inferentially used to refer to ‘setting in motion,’ ‘urging,’ or ‘inciting.’ It has even been used to refer, much more generally, to simply “activity” or “action.” In my understanding, the Prābhākara school knowingly calls upon this broader range of usage to clarify how a Vedic injunction can impel someone to perform a ritual without the mediation of explicit interest in the performer. It is important to notice that the Prābhākara school emphasizes that prerāṇa is experienced as a feeling (and thus not an explicit interest), and yet this feeling somehow “urges” a socially-cultivated class of performers toward a specific form of performative action. Prerāṇa in this way is seen to enhance the status of the injunction.
Maitra’s commentary on Mīmāṃsā offers the most sympathetic interpretation of the concept I have seen.

For the Prābhākaras … the motive is not consciousness of a good, but simply the cognition of something to be done as produced by the representation of it as specifying the self. It is the act to be done as self-appropriated and self-referred, which is the real motive and this need not present itself as a good in order to move the will…. [The motive is] the Self itself as identified with the act to be done…., the Imperative presenting itself as Law to the agent (EH, 129).

This is what confused the Bhāṭṭa commentators and many other schools of Indian philosophy. In fact, many Indian historians of philosophy express a common objection in their commentaries on the school. The concept of dharma as “niyoga that is also apūrva” leads to confusion about why one would obey Vedic injunctions. Such critics ask, “What is the proper motivation for performing religious rituals?” But they find the Prābhākara response to be incomprehensible because the objection is based on the view that motivation to perform any activity must involve some explicit interest of the performer. Yet this assumption is precisely what the Prābhākara school will deny regarding religious rituals. This is because the Prābhākara school aims to give a theoretical account of the personally transformative aspect of ritual, because by becoming identified with the “act to be done” the agent is simultaneously identified as having internalized the religious “Law” as part of the self.

My interpretation of the Prābhākara school finds significance in the seemingly paradoxical claim that religious rituals are properly performed without interest in the result of the action, primarily because I am not convinced that all meaningful human actions are undertaken according to a consciously explicit “means-end” mode of thinking. Ritualized action, especially when performed in a traditional religious context, can become tacit “semiotic” action, such that the action may achieve profound significance despite a distancing of the performer’s cognitive
interests from the performance precisely because of the relationship of identity traditionally cultivated between the performers' embodied roles and traditional religious narratives.

It is crucial to consider the role of socially practiced narrative (a particularly intense variety of the “training” described by Wittgenstein and Polanyi) in ritual rule-following. The article “Vratā Divine and Human in the Early Veda,” by Timothy Lubin, clarifies the close connection in Vedic Hinduism between the Vedic cosmological worldview and ritual injunctions. He investigates the Vedic term “vratā,” a fundamental early Vedic term generally used to refer to the “law” or “command” given by a particular deity. The term, however, is used in two distinct, yet closely related, senses. At one level, the level of “divine vratā,” the Veda associates a deity’s law with a cosmological force; these laws, in other words, are regarded as nomological laws, laws that operate constantly throughout nature. At the second level, however, the level of laws for regulating human action, a deity’s law becomes transformed into a worldly command, a rule for guiding human action, and almost invariably the actions required are rituals. Each deity expresses its laws in each of these two corresponding senses. Varuṇa, for example, one of the principal Vedic deities, is regarded as having, through his divine vratā, established the basic cosmological order (Ṛta), the law that creates the cosmic properties of space, measure, and time. Rituals laws associated with Varuṇa are understood to parallel his divine laws. Rituals performed for Varuṇa are typically associated with establishing the significance of social space and handling violations of the rules associated with such space.

Not all Vedic deities, of course, are associated with the same principles. Lubin thus concludes, “The vratās of the gods constitute a manifestation of divine will in the ‘natural’ patterns and processes of phenomena (such as the flow of water) in the observable world. The

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'way the world is' then is seen as confirmation of divine agency” (VV, 574). Each deity exhibits its own characteristic *vratā*.

Hence, Varuṇa's *vratā* makes him protector of what is right and true, and punisher of wrong-doers; Savitṛ's *vratā* is perceived in his instigation of activity and in all things in the world, as well as its suspension at set times. Agni's *vratā* is to serve as a link between men and gods, between earth and heaven; Indra's *vratā* is to display manly strength and power; Soma's is to fill the earth and the worshipper with Indra-like bodily vigor and quasi-immortality by flowing in the ritual.... Collectively, they define a cosmic and social order that calls for a human response; for righteousness and ritual piety, in general. (VV, 574)

Ritual rules, and the deities setting those rules, are conceived such that they encourage the worshipper to embody the divine *vratās*. The created are said to be driven, explicitly and by way of the cosmological forces acting through them, to manifest ritually the cosmological principles of the creators, to honor and praise the worthiness of those principles, and, to an important extent, to “become” and “be” them, since the deities each always already govern the activities of ritual by cosmic “impelling.” As the instigator of activity and suspension of activity, the solar deity Savitṛ (whose name literally means “impeller” and who is also traditionally known as váhni or “the Driver”) is regarded as the cosmic force that impels Vedic ritualists to act in accord with divine *vratā*. This unifying accord between the ritualist's will and the divine *vratā* is said to be what guarantees a ritual’s authenticity. It could then be said that Savitṛ is the mythological representation of the Prābhākara concept of *preraṇa*. Thus, in terms of the Vedic worldview, Vedic ritualists aim to willfully do what one is already impelled to do, thereby rendering the question of conceiving of an act wholly unconnected to the actor’s interests unproblematic for the Prābhākara position.

Lubin's understanding of the Vedic concept of “vratā” markedly clarifies the nature of the Prābhākara theme of *preraṇa* and its relationship to the traditional religious representations.
that frame the significance of ritual action. Lubin's explanation of divine vratá highlights their “semi-nomological” character\(^{21}\), in that they are taken to be the laws of the natural world.

Lubin's explanation, however, should be developed a step further to connect vratá and prerāṇa. Lubin unfortunately consistently regards ritual behavior as something that is exclusively “consciously adopted and maintained as an act of allegiance and obedience to the deity” (VV, 578). He misses that ritual involves a sedimentation of habitual behavior and its closely related tendency to “naturalize” (a process that will be developed further in other chapters) ritualized action and significance. It is not insignificant that ritually “following” divine laws, via Vedic ritual praxis understood to harmonize worldly commands with cosmological principles, is accomplished by means of a form of action that aims to produce a parallel semi-nomological disposition in the ritualists themselves. In other words, when interpreting prerāṇa, it is important to notice that each of the 'worldly' vratás for regulating ritual aims to produce actions that imitate the cosmic pattern of determination associated with the corresponding deity. It is in this sense that rituals, when performed properly according to the Prābhākara school of ritual hermeneutics, become performed out of a sense of duty that is best represented by the theme of immanent impulsion implied by prerāṇa.

The themes of prerāṇa and vratá in Vedic ritual hermeneutics do a great deal to elucidate how rules may be said to govern ritualized religious behavior. The next section investigates how Vedic ritual hermeneutics addresses another formal aspect of ritual rule-following, namely the means of determining to what extent particular actions may be said to accord with a rule of ritual.

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\(^{21}\) I use the term “semi-nomological” here to emphasize that it is not necessary to determine whether or not these “divine” principles truly are natural laws. What is key for this argument is that these laws are experienced by the ritualist as natural laws. In a later chapter I focus more directly on the question of how these laws become “naturalized” by ritual and other traditions.
1.5 The Versatility of Substitution and Equivalence in Vedic Ritual Hermeneutics

Exactly what kinds of actions may qualify to follow a ritual rule? Surely knowing what must be done is not enough. A general problem related to action-based rule following can be raised, a problem that stems from noticing that a rule for action cannot be followed by language or understanding alone. A rule for action sets apart a required form of action. But how can a particular action, which is never purely formal, fulfill such form? Action cannot become generalized form; it must be substituted for form in order for a rule of action to be followed. And, complicating matters, no two actions are ever exactly the same action. Thus, rules for ritual action can only be regarded as ‘fulfillable via repetition’ provided that two distinctly separate actions may yet somehow be taken as equivalent substitutes, despite their differences.

Brian Smith, a scholar of Indian philosophy and religion, reconstructs Vedic ritual hermeneutics as a theory addressing how distinct particular actions may nonetheless be regarded as equivalent fulfillments of the same Vedic ritual injunction. Smith's study focuses on one of the most central Vedic modes of ritual, namely yajña or “sacrifice.” In Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion he addresses the problem of equivalent fulfillments of a ritual rule in terms of the concept of “sacrificial substitution.” According to his understanding of Vedic ritual, “Substitution, the placing of a stand-in for an original which then represents it, is at the very heart of sacrifice” (RR, 172).

Vedic ritualism in its entirety, like sacrifice as a category within religion, is based on substitution. The theology, metaphysics, and ontology created by Vedic ritualists presume the inaccessibility of transcendent prototypes and the necessity, therefore, of ritual action using counterparts or “symbols” for the “real thing” (RR, 176).

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Smith is not only concerned about how rituals use symbolic representations; he also investigates traditional principles of ritual hermeneutics that guide how equivalence among actions may be understood. In this way he provides useful insights into clarifying the kinds of actions that may qualify as fulfilling a ritual injunction.

Within Vedic ritualism there is a common principle that domestic (and thus generally less elaborate) rituals may somehow substitute for more complicated, socially larger Vedic rituals, which has critical implications for many Vedic rituals, including the domestic agnihotra. Smith illustrates this principle by showing how many Vedic traditions of animal sacrifice rank the value of various allowable paśus (“animals to be sacrificed”), which frequently ranks man (sacrificing himself) as the highest paśu and the goat as the lowest.

[However,] in yet another narrative concerning the types and relative ranking of the sacrificial victims, this same order... is enumerated. The enumeration appears in the course of relating how the quality that constitutes all of these animals worthy of sacrifice (their medha) entered into and then left them, creating in its wake new but defective forms of each... For although it is clear that the paśus are ranked..., the lowest on the hierarchical ladder is also said to be the victim most often used and, in some ways, the best victim. (RR, 178)

According to Vedic mythology, the goat, by virtue of being sacrificed frequently, may substitute as an equivalent of the primary sacrifice, namely the performer of the sacrifice. The frequency of its sacrifice allows the goat to be regarded as highly “saturated” with medha (“sacrificial value” or “sacrificial power”), thus it becomes seen not as a low-ranked sacrifice, but rather as a literal substitutional equivalent of the ideal sacrifice.

This reveals why ritual rule-following relies often upon a logic of expression that is not explicitly rational, because, as Smith rightly notes, “[I]t is not critical to the efficacy of the sacrificial process itself who or what is selected to act as the symbol.... This is not to say, however, that within particular cultures and particular religious traditions the choice of the
appropriate victim is left to the whims of individuals. Far from it” (RR, 176). The non-critical nature of the symbol should not be taken to imply that the symbol chosen is unimportant, because tradition will set limits on what can become a symbol. Instead, the non-criticality of the symbol to the nature of ritual power illustrates the versatility and applicability of ritual's power within traditional contexts. The ability to produce an equivalent substitute for a symbol allows ritual traditions to achieve consistency and coherence of praxis despite various possible, and often inevitable, obstructions of ritual performance.

Ritual rule-following and its use of symbolic substitution thus enable the completion of otherwise impossible tasks, such as when the necessary elements of a ritual are unavailable. “One of the chief reasons for substitution in sacrifice, according to the Śūtras, is to enable the 'accomplishment' or 'completion' of an obligatory (nitya) ritual which otherwise would not be performed” (RR, 181). Smith argues that the concept of equivalence that allows for this malleability is best clarified in terms of “the 'purpose' or 'end' (artha) of the ritual as a whole” (RR, 181). The artha (which importantly can also mean “meaning” or “significance”) of obligatory (nitya) rituals is thereby not an ordinary purpose; it is not the individual ritualist's purpose, but that of the “ritual as a whole”, which leads Smith to the conclusion that for Vedic ritualists “the very performance is the ritual's purpose” (RR, 181). Put differently, the meaning of obligatory rituals is found in the fact that the ritual itself is actually performed. The meaning is the required action; so, for a ritualist, often, if only because of obstacles, it becomes necessary to think of substitutable actions in terms of an equivalence defined according to this distinctive sense of “purpose.” Smith thereby writes, “Indeed, the laws of dharma and the laws of ritual are
both extremely complex, detailed, and demanding; perhaps for this very reason the lawmakers provided various escape hatches to allow for their human frailty and the vagaries of life” (RR, 182).

A question still remains, however, about precisely what should be sought as a substitute, especially in the absence of required elements. Smith emphasizes, akin to Kristeva and others, that a central kind of meaning in religious ritual is “semiotic”, and thereby based upon a loose logic of resemblance, and not a strict logic of non-contradictory identity. For Vedic ritualists sāmānya (resemblance) is the guiding principle for judging instances of substitution. “No substitute may 'conflict' with the original... [Thereby] it is the 'resemblance of purpose' [arthaśāmānyā] that is supreme and overruling when it comes to otherwise equally resembling options” (RR, 184). In this way the same notion of ‘purpose as the performance itself’ is applied when determining the best substitute for an originally required ritual element. The substitute that most resembles the significance of what is required in the performance should be used, even if the best possible substitute is of meager value compared to the original.

The resemblance-based logic of equivalence in Vedic ritualism is the basis for another major conclusion in Smith's study. He argues that Vedic ritualism is largely governed by an insightful concept that Smith calls “ritual condensation,” a process that allows for a kind of “synecdochic reductionism (whereby a part of the whole represents the whole)” (RR, 188). Smith argues that Vedic ritual hermeneutics uses the concept in two primary ways.

Vedic resemblance thus allows for two different kinds of ritual condensations.... The first type is [strict] synecdoche, which... is the encompassment (or claim of encompassment) of the condensed essences of lesser rituals within greater ones – a condensation upward, so to speak.... The second form of condensation within Vedic resemblance is less obviously in harmony with hierarchical presuppositions. This is... a condensation downward of the essences of superior victims or superior sacrifices which are reprised within inferior “equivalents”...
The inferior is not here regarded as an equivalent replacement for but rather only as a condensed representation of its superior relative within a class. (RR, 188-9)

The perhaps more common upward ritual condensation allows for the duties of simple, everyday rituals to be fulfilled by those that are more complex and elaborate. In other cases downward ritual condensation establishes that even the most minimalistic rituals may be allowed as “condensed” substitutes for nonetheless greater rituals.

Smith also clarifies how the concept of ritual condensation is employed in our initial example of ritual rule-following, the practice of the agnihotra. The agnihotra is viewed as an adaptation and condensation of the considerably more complex śrauta (non-domestic, lit. “of the śruti [i.e., Veda]”) rituals.

The domestic replicas, condensed substitutes at a lower level, are but bleached-out simplifications of their prototypical models. As integral components of a unified and comprehensive Vedic ritual system, the domestic rites were resembling “equivalents” or “substitutes” for those who could do no better; for those who, because of lack of wealth, education, experience, or interest and desire, were unqualified for participation in the śrauta cult. (RR, 193)

The agnihotra, understood in terms of downward ritual condensation, must be regarded as a “bleached out” simplification. However, for the same reasons that the goat may be said to be paradoxically “also” the highest sacrificial offering, the agnihotra may simultaneously be interpreted as an instance of upward condensation. This logic of paradoxical association leads Smith to also claim that “With the daily agnihotra, the ritualist nurtures the continuity of fire, of sacrifice, and, in the minds of the ritualists, of life itself” (RR, 190). Despite its lower level of significance in the ranking of rituals, the frequency of agnihotra performance nonetheless allows it be understood as encompassing the full significance of the higher level rituals.

Smith’s interpretation of the mechanisms of equivalence and substitution in Vedic ritualism also suggests a way to defend and develop the Mīmāṃsā theories of the previous
section. The logic by which ritual actions invoke equivalence and sameness paradoxically rests upon a tacit association based on loose resemblance and “condensations” of a wide range of contrary and possibly even contradictory elements. Nonetheless, as Smith has pointed out, there are good reasons why ritual traditions employ such practical logics. One reason is direct and practical, and it aligns closely with the Bhāṭṭa Mīṃsā view that dharma is constituted by the acts themselves and that the primary reason for an individual to enact Vedic rituals is the explicit intent of achieving an empirically preferable life. Smith recognizes that the Vedic principle of arthasāmānyā facilitates a ritual system that is more easily adaptable to unpredictable and less-than-desirable conditions for ritual performance.

However, further clarifying the Prābhākara school, Smith also recognizes that the range of association facilitated by ritual traditions is thereby an enormous map of possible presentations that nonetheless is not “left to the whims of individuals.” Logical 'fields' of allowable resemblance determine an arena within which tacit tendencies to act can be cultivated both at the explicitly rational level and also at the level of habitual bodily praxis. The direct intentions of individual actions can thereby utilize this range of allowability as a basis for instinctively and implicitly developing tendencies to act. This clarifies further why the Prābhākaras insist that sincere acts of dharma somehow defy the ability of the ritualist to reduce his motivation for appropriate ritual action to explicit and rational ends-in-view. Even from the ritualist's individual viewpoint, there is thereby an understandable sense in which the impulsion to act (preraṇa) may be described as apūrva, thus defying ordinary explanation.

Smith's clarification of the logic of resemblance utilized by Vedic tradition provides yet another important clue to understanding the implicit sense of rule-following exhibited by religious rituals, particularly with regard to how actions qualify as fulfilling ritual rules.
However, it will be the business of the next section to clarify the (at this point) largely unexamined role of repetition as a central and controversial feature of interpreting ritual as a distinct form of rule-following.

1.6 Rethinking the Concept of ‘Mere’ Repetition in Ritual Rule-Following

Some recent approaches to the study of ritual behavior have taken the ethological approach to ritual studies a step further, by trying to bridge the gap between biology and human cognition. Aiming to disclose the dynamic of repetition involved in human ritual behavior, this now widely-influential approach primarily stems from Lawson and McCauley's 1990 *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*, which generally regards ritual as one of many natural forms of human action. Ritual, regarded as a unique form of action, is said to rely centrally upon a principle addressed by Lawson and McCauley as the “frequency hypothesis.” This hypothesis maintains that the memory required for acting according to ritual knowledge is determined by the repetitive frequency of the action, such that the more frequently a ritual is performed the less dependent is the memory on sensory entertainment. Therefore, ritual traditions, to prevent the tedium of repetition, wisely clothe the rules of ritual in a parade of sensory experiences. In other words, the *adhvaryu* performing the *agnihotra* would learn to internalize more accurately the rules that govern his repetitions if those rules are clothed in a 'memorable' costume. In this way, this theory of ritual meaning asserts that ritual rule-following operates in terms of an implicit assumption that frequent enactment of a ritual rule, for the sake of producing ritual memory, is more fundamental to the nature of ritual than the specific requirements of the rule itself, provided that such rules provide an ample amount of sensory stimulation within cultural symbolic contexts. This theory also emphasizes the more basic claim
that ritual rules are the kind of rules that aim to produce sustainable memory, a kind of memory which is in turn cultivated to facilitate further following of those same rules.

However, the frequency hypothesis only captures part of the picture, namely the relation in ritual rule-following between repetitive frequency of performance and sensory entertainment. While Lawson and McCauley would make no claim to having discovered exhaustive principles for understanding rituals, as they rightly acknowledge that ritual theory is a still-developing field, this picture of ritual behavior certainly bears a strong resemblance to Freud's dismissive claim that ritual behavior involves an inversion of the trivial, particularly due to the emphasis upon sensory “entertainment.” However, this theory is framed without the tendency to regard such repetition as a form of illness or error. Cognitive ritual theory, as it has developed, continues to offer important new theoretical tools for the study of ritual while acknowledging ritual behavior as a fundamental form of human activity. As an interdisciplinary science, cognitive ritual theory manages to bring together explicitly stated principles of ritual interpretation that are often used implicitly in many fields of study, and the frequency hypothesis is perhaps one of the most widespread, but least frequently articulated, axiomatic assumptions used in the study of ritual.

The cognitive approach to ritual, however, is not entirely unproblematic. McCauley, in the 2004 article “Philosophical Naturalism and the Cognitive Approach to Ritual”23, summarized some of the philosophical assumptions underlying the approach as follows.

Tom Lawson and I have argued that participants' representations and knowledge of their religious rituals rely on garden variety cognitive capacities concerning the representation of agents and their actions, which develop quite naturally in every normal human being.... The representations of religious rituals are no different [my emphasis] from the representations of normal actions. (PN, 161-163)

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Due to its emphasis upon naturalism, there is a tendency in the cognitive approach to rely upon an unnecessarily simplified concept of human nature. Religious ritual, while it is common throughout most human societies, does however call upon cognitive capacities in a way that is distinguishable from the most common human actions. McCauley does believe that religious rituals can be distinguished clearly from other human actions; however, as the previous sections have argued, it is not best to regard the processes of thought involved in religious rituals as “no different” from what is widely assumed to be our ordinary mode of actions, those based on explicit rationality. Ritual action is distinguished, at least partly, by its ‘distance’ from the personal interests of the actor, such that the “ritual as a whole”, as Smith argues, becomes the foreground of the action’s significance.

The frequency hypothesis distinguishes the peculiarity of ritual in terms of ritual's tendency to require rules for behavior that, by an insistence upon frequent repetition, produce further memory of those same rules. In one passage in the 2004 article McCauley uses this insight to nevertheless identify that, at least in one major way, this pattern is not typical of ordinary human actions. “Most participants' knowledge of their ritual systems is overwhelmingly implicit... To call such knowledge ‘implicit’ is to highlight the fact that under most circumstances, it is knowledge to which people have little, if any, direct, conscious access” (PN, 163). While there may be other forms of human action that resemble this feature, the “overwhelmingly implicit” quality of the knowledge involved in ritual action should not lead one to regard ritualized behavior as something that develops “naturally” in all humans. Religious rituals in fact bring about changes in human behavior that allow individuals to develop realms of human significance, thinking, and behavior that may not be typical in everyday situations of individual behavior.
While the frequency hypothesis does highlight how principles of repetition are able to disclose the role of memory in ritual rule-following, there is another problem with the hypothesis, specifically regarding the concept of repetition assumed by the hypothesis. It assumes that rituals require a kind of repetition that is understood in the mathematical sense; but rituals are not simple attempts to reproduce an original with a copy. The philosophy of repetition developed by another post-Freudian philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition*\(^\text{24}\), provides an option for rethinking the concept of repetition, particularly as applied to symbolic actions. Deleuze's concept of repetition is part of his broader philosophical critique of traditional Western metaphysical concepts of identity in general. As he reconfigures the concept of repetition, “Repetition can always be 'represented' as extreme resemblance or perfect equivalence, but the fact that one can pass by degrees from one thing to another does not prevent their being different in kind” (DR, 2). Deleuze, somewhat resembling Smith’s claims about logics of resemblance, regards the strict concept of equivalent actions as something only “represented.” Equivalence as sameness of action, repetition: the application of these concepts to actual events is regarded as a *necessary form of nonetheless virtual understanding*.

Deleuze thematizes this virtual understanding in terms of a logic of “masks,” designed to emphasize the process of representation involved in repetition.

The masks do not hide anything except other masks. There is no first term which is repeated... There is no bare repetition which may be abstracted or inferred from the disguise itself... In short, repetition is in its essence symbolic; symbols or simulacra are the letter of the repetition itself. Difference is included in repetition by way of disguise and by the order of the symbol. This is why the variations do not come from without... The variations express, rather, the differential mechanisms which belong to the essence and origin of that which is repeated. (DR, 17)

Deleuze sees no reason to regard the symbolic aspect of reality as in any way secondary to some original state. He rejects any attempts to represent the sameness of repetition in terms of a logic of “copy” and “original.” Instead, “masks” are worn, and they can only be worn by other masks. For Deleuze the inevitable variations in ritual repetition should not be regarded as something deviant; they are not unavoidable errors. Deleuze is partly reacting to Freud's view that emphasis upon 'mere' repetition inverts the trivial, ultimately due to neurotic repression of some original concern. Deleuze summarizes Freud's motivation to view ritual as obsessional neurosis as being based on the belief that “we repeat because we repress” (DR, 16). But Deleuze parts ways with this early Freudian concept, preferring instead to understand the masks and disguises associated with repression “from the perspective of a simple opposition of forces” (DR, 17), with neither side portrayed as the primary or essential force for determining the identity of the process itself.25

Regarding the concept of repetition as applied in ritual rule-following, Deleuze offers a picture of repetition that does not regard ritualized mythology as something that merely superimposes upon a more fundamental reality. Such virtualization is typical of all representations, thereby making it unfounded to regard ritual praxis as somehow defective on that basis. Interpreters of religious ritual who utilize the frequency hypothesis often implicitly assume the logic of model and copy, and thereby Deleuze's reconfiguration of the concept of repetition provides a way of rethinking how ritualized rule-following may be regarded both as a virtually formal repetition of the same and yet also as a novel or creative action. Because “difference is always included in repetition by way of disguise,” the virtual repetition of the same

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25 The view that representation, repetition, and, therefore, identity can be understood in terms of a process of opposing forces is at least partly due to the influence of Nietzsche's metaphysics upon his philosophy, as Deleuze's many writings clearly indicate. Perhaps the best indication of Deleuze's understanding of Nietzsche is found in his excellent and widely praised earlier book Nietzsche and Philosophy (1962).
in no way regards deviations from the same as uncontroversial errors. The range of deviation that occurs in ritualized rule-following would be regarded by Deleuze as an implicit part of its logic of the same. Virtual formality, in other words, brings the significance of the same even into formally deviant actions. Thus, in the performance of the *agnihotra*, if a traditional ritualist were to at some point to alter the course of the required actions, say by pouring the milk in the ladle somewhere else, such as on an inappropriate fire, those divergent actions would still attain a level of ritual significance (although likely a less respected significance) because the action was performed *as if* it were an equivalent substitute for the application of the rule. Based on Deleuze's rethinking of the concept of repetition, even the deviant actions can be interpreted and evaluated in terms of the expectations that give significance to rituals. Critical revision of the common hermeneutic principle of repetition for interpreting religious rituals, as rethought by Lawson, McCauley, and Deleuze, can now serve as a basis for some concluding reflections on interpreting religious ritual as an act of rule-following.

1.7 Concluding Reflections on Religious Ritual as Rule-Following Action

The concept of rule-following alone raises many philosophical questions. How do we learn rules? How do we follow them? How to decide if a rule is followed correctly? Must rules be held constantly in the mind in order to follow them? And, how do we move from understanding them to their application? Each of these philosophical questions is born out dramatically in a ritualist’s relationship to the rules that define ritual actions. Regularly performed ritual encourages a peculiarly strict relationship between a rule-follower and rules for action. Understood in terms of such intensity, careful consideration of rule-following as taken up in ritualism encourages philosophical thinking about rules and rule-following in general.
Informing the broader philosophical debates about rule-following, rituals represent a limiting case, or at least an extreme, that dramatically indicates the role of ‘social-situatedness’ in rule-following. Rituals also serve to show the far-reaching social and political implications of thinking philosophically about the nature of rules, something that has drawn many philosophers, like Wittgenstein and Polanyi, to give extended attention to the consideration of rituals as a form of meaning that is distinct from ordinary words or sentences.

Regarding ritual rule-following specifically, a controversial question often appears initially when debating the nature of ritual behavior: are ritualists acting rationally? Since ritual has been regarded as a form of rule-following that is somehow defective, it is crucial to note that this concept of "defect" frequently implies an underlying charge of irrationality on the part of the ritualist. My position implies a rejection of this understanding. By emphasizing the essential role of social cultivation of tacit and logically “loose” capacities for enacting traditional symbolic and semiotic meaning, I am not arguing that performers of ritual are somehow "irrational" rule-followers. It is not as if ritualists perform solely on the basis of inexplicit thinking, without grasping some meaningful understanding. One should not underestimate the various levels of merged rationality involved in actions guided by tradition, and to support this claim the remaining chapters will explore more of these dimensions.

While an emphasis on epistemological individualism may seem to go hand in hand with concepts of rationality in many forms of philosophy, rationality by no means has been understood historically according to a single and widely agreed upon model. Is it rational to follow the ritual rules of one's own religious culture? Of course, this depends upon what could be meant by “rationality,” a debate beyond the scope of this endeavor. Importantly, however, one of the most thought-provoking aspects of ritual is its general tendency to develop and call
upon implicit modes of understanding and acting on the basis of principles like Lawson and McCauley’s “frequency hypothesis”, especially when this occurs in coordination with the application of explicit rationality, under even the most formal definitions of the concept. A novice ritualist, by virtue of exerting rational or instrumental effort into becoming proficient at ritual praxis, renders herself (even if we only apply the insight of the frequency hypothesis), more likely to become a "cultivated" ritualist, a ritualist that performs differently as the role becomes natural to her identity. Even if only on the basis of this observation, there is no basis for regarding religious ritual praxis as a form of irrational behavior; it is easily comprehensible that performing a regular ritual role could be rationally desirable, if only because becoming a cultivated ritualist, especially in a highly intensive ritual tradition, is often a desirable social position to achieve for many kinds of reasons.

Nevertheless, it is pivotal to realize at this point that the significance ritual traditions attribute to ritual performance cannot be understood by reducing ritual behavior to simple, “inner” cognitive decisions to follow traditional rules regularly. Freud, though he mistakenly regarded rituals as unfortunate acts guided by anxiety and repression, realized that any attempt to understand why ritualists follow such rules must acknowledge rituals as a distinct form of action that may intensively coordinate a variety of aspects of experience, potentially engaging everything from the realm of explicit consciousness to the realm of “semiotic” associations of resemblance, or other modes of tacit experience. Without understanding ritual actions as engaging both realms of representation, the explicit and the inexplicit, rituals will tend to look like a mere fetish for syntax. Understanding subjectivity at its sedimented “depths” features the fact that a thorough understanding of ritualized rule-following, regarding both the symbolic and semiotic semantics of ritual actions, allows even the non-ritualist to understand how the mode of
rule-following exhibited by rituals allows religions, and others, to cultivate iteratively tendencies to perform 'dispositionally enactable' actions.

Kristeva and Deleuze, both reacting to Freud, call for a theoretical shift that closely parallels the Prābhākara position regarding Vedic ritual hermeneutics. Both recognize that religious rituals are generally not structured in the same manner as mere or neurotic repetitions; they are not explainable as trite rule-following that merely succeeds at regarding the superficial as the profound through an inverting lens. Valuable theoretical approaches to the study of ritual do not assume that religious ritual may be adequately interpreted by only describing the capacities involved in terms of reductively formal systems of representation. A set of rules coordinated to transform continually the rule-follower’s rule-following cannot be fully explained in that way. Kristeva, Deleuze, and Prabhākara would defend the view that there is something about ritual action that goes beyond ordinary action, and they would argue this for good reason. They argue this primarily because an essential element of what allows religious rituals to attain symbolic and semiotic significance resides in the iterative rule-following relationship between the action and the actor, in their shared immediacy. Religious ritual rule-following cannot be reduced to an ordinary rational capacity to act chiefly because the means of following religious rituals simultaneously implies this renewable cultivation, within the actor/action union that constitutes the ritual itself. Put differently, rituals continually cultivate themselves. The cultivated/cultivating 'subjective body' of the actor is implicitly part of the following of the rule, making it such that any interpretation of ritual meaning should explicitly recognize this limitation. To perform religious ritualized rule-following always, to some degree, requires simultaneously following and developing something implicit within oneself, and indirectly, within one’s society.
Acknowledging ‘implicit meaning’ in religious ritual should also not be regarded as embracing a kind of mysticism. To say that theoretical representation of this form of significance must thereby be regarded as limited does not mean that one should retreat from theoretically informed interpretation. Theories of ritual interpretation, especially when informed by culturally indigenous hermeneutics, should aim to become theories conceptually isolating theoretical dimensions of ritual traditions that indicate principles establishing these multifarious systems of rules and meaning. This chapter best illustrates this theoretical approach by starting with the example of the agni hotra, and by considering the philosophy of Vedic ritual hermeneutics and its corresponding principles of resemblance and equivalence of action, as clarified by Brian Smith. It is of particular importance for philosophers of religion to notice that the classical Mīmāṃsā schools of philosophy are entirely unconcerned with the perplexities of theism, which leads to an understanding of “religion” grounded in ritual praxis and ritual contemplation, which should prove especially valuable to a field largely dominated by theism. Most importantly, the Prābhākara school of Mīmāṃsā, regards religious experience as grounded in a profound commitment to transforming individuals on the basis of implicit and social aspects of human nature. The key Prābhākara insight, framed in terms of the concept of preraṇa, provides an insightful account of the dramatic capacity of ritual to personally transform the ritualist such that the actor and the ritual rule enacted are experienced as a unity. This unity clarifies, without resorting to mysticism or theism, how a ritual may be said to be performed, not on the basis of the actor’s interests, but on the basis of the command of the rule itself. The complexity of this insight is especially clarified when understood in terms of Timothy Lubin’s analysis of the two senses of vratā (cosmological and worldly). His analysis reveals preraṇa as
a “semi-nomological” motivating force within which one experiences oneself as doing what one is already impelled to do by nature.

Smith’s study of concepts of resemblance, equivalence, and substitution in Vedic ritual rule-following also brings to light other distinct aspects of ritual rule-following as religious experience, particularly its ability to reach a wide variety of levels of social and economic status. The logic of resemblance connecting equivalence and substitution in ritual acts reveals ritual rule-following as possessing a power to perform tasks that would otherwise be impossible, particularly when encountering obstructions or lacking elements. This malleability in the midst of equivalent purpose allows for ritual acts of religious meaning to occur at many levels of society, even those suffering from major lack of material wealth. This is vividly revealed through Smith’s two concepts of synecdochic “ritual condensation.” While “upward” ritual condensation easily allows extravagant rituals to fulfill the purpose of simpler rituals, it is extremely important to recognize the immense social, and perhaps ethical, value in “downward” ritual condensation, which allows even the most expensive of ritual duties to be achieved by more austere rituals.

Before concluding, it is also crucial to take a brief inventory of some common major errors that this chapter has identified in approaches to understanding ritual meaning and its relation to rule-following. The most important of these errors can be condensed into seven primary criticisms:

1. It is essential to avoid understanding rule-following in general in terms of classic Cartesian dualisms, particularly the ubiquitous distinction between “inner” and “outer” that places a radical gulf between thinking and action.
2. Ritual rule-following is not a matter of following rules that are simple abstractions; it involves following something at least partly experienced as part of one’s own nature.
3. Ritual rule-following should also not be understood as an act of psychological
displacement, such that without performing the ritual one falls into fear, anxiety, and self-blame stemming from repression and the loss of an original state of meaning for an action. A key corollary of this error is that psychoanalysis is not needed as a clinical treatment of ritualism.

4. Human decisions and actions in general should not be understood as taking place entirely in terms of explicit modes of ‘means-end’ reasoning (a problem explored at length in the next chapter).

5. It has frequently been underestimated, and often ignored, that ritual rule-following has the power to produce, reinforce, and even creatively transform sedimented habitual behavior and tacit understanding.

6. The meaning established by following ritual rules is not a form of meaning that should be interpreted or judged according to strictly non-contradictory logic, as is traditional with words and sentences; instead ritual semantics should be approached as based on a logic of resemblance-based, yet socially-prioritized and embodied, associations.

7. Repetition, particularly in the case of ritual, should not be understood according to traditional concepts of imitation, which are founded on concepts of “model” and “copy”; sameness of ritual action always includes some difference, which is often distorted or concealed by the claim to sameness, making it often very difficult to identify.

Keeping these problems in mind, the remaining chapters, focusing on four other key approaches to religious ritual interpretation, will each indicate how those searching for meaning in religious rituals should remain mindful of the irreducible nature of the practice itself while simultaneously isolating theoretically essential dimensions of ritual action that unveil the limits of rationality in interpreting rituals. Limitations of rationality in interpretation, at least in this regard, do not call for an abrupt end to interpretation; in effect, the primary way to resist the reductionistic power of theory is to build the question of the limitations of theory into the theory itself. “Religion,” viewed through this lens of ritual hermeneutics, is revealed to be a field of human experience that most prominently reveals the tensions involved in establishing a harmony between thinking and acting. Religions, especially via their rituals, produce a mode of experience in which humans most strongly exhibit the attempt to unify thinking and action, particularly in terms of socially situated, narrative systems of symbolic association. This
“harmonizing” cannot be abundantly accomplished without the complex process of ritualization, particularly due to its unique relationship to rule-following.

The distinctiveness of ritual rules, to wrap-up the observations of this chapter, can be analogically illuminated by reflecting on the etymology of “rule.” As many who have thought deeply about rules have noted, the word “rule” derives from the Latin “regula,” and literally denotes “a straight piece of wood” or “a lath,” which customarily connotes inferentially “a stick to be used as part of a trellis or fence.” This historical meaning of the Western concept of rule has a remarkable similarity to the Sanskrit word “dharma,” which literally means “that which firmly establishes or supports.” As latticework supports a plant’s growth by structuring a world within which it may grow, ritual rule-following cultivates a supporting field of tacit significance and capacities within which any religious decisions and actions may become more meaningful, and the support provided is due to the rule being firmly established in routine praxis, and thereby in the bodies of ritualists. Ritual rules are not mere text; they reveal most distinctly what they are when they give rise to what the Prābhākara school of philosophy discusses as prerāṇa, a seemingly nomological prompting to act, on the basis of the apparent value of the command to act alone, within a cultivated body. This process of performative cultivation limits and trains behavior while making it possible to grant significance to even the most habitual of actions. While it may seem to some that a social world widely structured by the use of rituals obscures, or even hides, the motives of individuals for acting, perhaps even more problematic would be a world where the actions of individuals are assumed to be wholly explicit, which would in fact be a world of many hidden motives.
Chapter 2: 
Religious Ritual as Instrumental Action

2.1 The Question of Religious Ritual as Instrumental Action

One question that has long faced scholars of religion is whether to regard religious rituals as instrumental actions. Instrumental action is traditionally characterized by “means-end” thinking and behavior; the actor\(^{26}\) intends to undertake specific means (such as throwing seeds) on the basis of a belief that it will bring about an intentionally desired end (such as feeding birds). But what specifically is philosophically implied by viewing everyday religious rituals\(^{27}\) as 'instrumental actions'? The most familiar turn of phrase used to explain this kind of action says that such action is “a means to an end,” which is usually distinguished from action said to be an 'end in itself;' such as whimsical playing or blind repetition. Now these certainly are not our only two options for making sense of human actions, but this common-sense understanding reveals certain assumptions that can serve as a good starting point for asking whether or not religious rituals should be characterized as instrumental actions. Under the traditional understanding, an instrumental action aims toward accomplishing some end or goal that the actor can specify. That end, thus, should be one known and sought by the actor. And the actor also, presumably, has at least one belief about what kinds of action will bring about the sought 'end-in-view'. Thus, on the surface level, labeling an action as an 'instrumental action' directly implies the following claims:

1. A particular instrumental action (IA) aims to achieve a specific state of affairs, an 'end' (E).

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\(^{26}\) The present account of instrumental action is intentionally simplified to consider only actions undertaken by 'an actor;' but many important philosophical problems surround the possibility of other types of action, such as the controversial example of communal instrumental actions. Such issues will have to be left unaddressed here.

\(^{27}\) It is important to keep in mind that this investigation focuses on daily religious rituals as a paradigm for interpreting religious rituals in general. There is, however, a variety of practices that might be regarded as religious rituals that nonetheless do not occur daily or even frequently. This points to an important limitation of this project.
2. IA must be performed by a particular kind of actor (Joe), one who both knows of and intends to bring about E.
3. IA also entails that Joe has at least one belief about how to bring about E, a 'means-belief' (MB).

There are also other elements indirectly implied, but perhaps less frequently mentioned, in the common account of instrumental action.

4. Joe knows of some way to determine whether or not IA successfully brings about E; Joe has 'evaluational knowledge' regarding IA.
5. Joe knows of some way to determine whether or not a MB can contribute to an IA; Joe has 'practical knowledge' about the likelihood of a MB contributing to a performable IA.

At least these five elements are implied in the common understanding of instrumental action. I do not want to suggest that these five elements are exhaustively adequate for a philosophical understanding of such actions, but I will assume throughout this chapter that these five elements are what scholars implicitly understand when regarding religious actions as instrumental actions. The guiding aim of this chapter is thus to determine if an instrumentalist account should be regarded as generally applicable to religious ritual performances.

It is not, however, completely self-evident how, say, an anthropologist should go about determining whether or not an action is instrumental. Observing another person's thinking, at least on a classic subjectivist view, is often said to be impossible. One might argue that an unfamiliar observer could only observe the actions of a ritualist, without ever having knowledge of the involvement of explicit beliefs. This view, however, raises a variety of difficulties that cannot be adequately addressed in this inquiry. For the present purposes, it will be taken seriously that, for at least some religious ritualists, beliefs are often cited as a motivating force. The question of how to identify whether or not another holds a specific belief, however, will ultimately have to be put aside, although this inquiry into religious ritual actions may reveal
something about the question. For the present purposes, I will assume that the manifestation of belief as a motivating force for an action can be reasonably determined by investigation of prior observable signs of motivation and belief, as is done in legal settings when determining the degree of intent attributable to an action. As we will see, the anthropologist James G. Frazer's account of religious rituals relies upon such an assumption, which I think should be granted to assess fairly his widely influential instrumentalist account of religious rituals.

One can find, in both religious traditions and in studies of religion, accounts of 'prior' and 'observable' appeals to 'direct benefits' acquired by performing religious rituals, and one might assume that such benefits amount to at least part of what it is to perform those rituals. The two daily ritual traditions mentioned in the preface (agnihotra and șalāt), for example, each incorporate a “preparatory and purificatory” phase that must be accomplished prior to the performance of the central ritual. Should not one then be able to say that one performs some part of those rituals instrumentally? After all, a plausible account of why someone performs such preparatory ritual actions is that these ritualists are engaged in the action of bringing about the intentional end of becoming able to perform the central ritual. Should these preparations truly not be regarded as actions completed based on a belief that such preparations will adequately serve a sought purpose?

The plausibility of the instrumentalist claim regarding daily religious rituals seems to acquire additional support when we look at scriptural accounts regarding the approved motivations for performing such rituals. In the Vedic corpus concerning the agnihotra, one finds interpretive elements suggesting that the entire ritual has been at least partially understood in terms of instrumentality. For example, in the Kāṭhakasāṃhitā (6, 5:53.18 ff.), it is said, “Give me life; give me glory; give me offspring”: (with these formulas) he sets (the milk and the
kindling-stick) down in the east (i.e. near the āhavanīya). The agnihotra is a creation. If he should not set it down, the descendants would go away without returning."\(^{28}\) Here the ritual is said to be undertaken for the explicit purpose of bringing about offspring for the ritualist. His performance would seem instrumentally purposeful; he chants out his desire, and the scripture provides him with support of the belief and the means whereby offspring can be achieved. The interpretive scriptures regarding the agnihotra, however, detail a wide variety of other outcomes that may be expected by its performance, and seldom the same outcomes. Other Vedic passages detail that the ritual may be performed as a means for achieving such ends as: bringing the sun up in the morning, preventing the ritualist's death, attacking the ritualist's enemies, and providing food for the performer.\(^{29}\) Other passages, however, particularly those detailing the cosmological origins of the agnihotra, suggest that the ritual is not to be performed primarily due to a particular desire or belief on the part of the ritualist for achieving his own end; instead it is said to be performed because, since the primordial creation, the gods have singled out the agnihotra as a specific act that must be repeated regardless of motivation. What then is the precise role of instrumentality in the performance of such a ritual?

The performance of ṣalāt in Islam is also sometimes associated with achieving explicit ends. In the Qur'ān (20:14) it is written, “Surely I am Allāh: there is no god besides Me: so worship Me alone: and establish ṣalāt for My remembrance.”\(^{30}\) There it appears that ritual prayer is a means to becoming more frequently aware of the presence of Allāh; the ritual might be said to take on the character of an instrumental action designed to produce more reliable


\(^{29}\) Ibid., §13.

memory. Another instrumental characterization of ʂalât is found in the Musnad Ahmad and the Baihaqi records of the life and sayings of Muhammad (ḥadîth), which both report that the Prophet said that ʂalât should be performed as a “means of salvation” and a “proof of faith”.\textsuperscript{31} In these cases, the ritualist’s actions take on a multiply instrumental quality, appearing to be actions undertaken for the purposes of reaching a fortunate afterlife or self-transformation, and for proving to others that one is indeed a Muslim. Similarly, other closely related forms of Islamic prayer are said to produce benefits, making it plausible that the performance of such actions can be interpreted as instrumental action. Friday prayer in the mosque, for example, is widely regarded in contemporary Islam as an obligatory ritual sometimes associated with bringing about explicitly desired goals on the basis of belief in a particular means. The Qur’ān (62:9) states, “O Believers! when you hear the call to the Friday Prayer, hasten to the remembrance of Allāh and leave your trading; this is better for you only if you know it.” The theme of remembrance again appears to be the explicit end of the action, and, since such prayer is undertaken “only if you know it,” it seems clear that this must be an explicit goal sought by the performer of the prayer. Regarding a different means-end relation, Muhammad, according to Ḥaḍrat Ibn ‘Umair and Ḥaḍrat Abū Hurairah, is said to have mentioned while on the pulpit that the Friday prayer is undertaken to prevent a kind of harm from coming upon the ritualist, saying, “People are warned against neglecting the Friday Prayer, otherwise Allāh will seal their hearts, and they will be condemned to negligence (forever)."\textsuperscript{32} The Ṭabarānī Hadith similarly states that this prayer will prevent the sealing of the heart and being “turned [into] a hypocrite.”\textsuperscript{33} This prayer is also elsewhere associated with other desirable benefits, such as rewards returned in the form of good

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 221.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 222.
deeds performed by others. In yet other places, a Friday prayer performed very meticulously, in just the right way, is said to substitute for rewards that would be accrued after years worth of ordinary worship.\textsuperscript{34}

Clearly there is something correct about the assumption that a religious ritual is an action that may be undertaken at least partially in the same manner as an instrumental action, but questions still remain before hastening to characterize religious rituals as \textit{primarily} instrumental actions. For example, are the means-end relations expressed in the above examples enough to characterize the actions themselves? In other words, is the presence of a means-end attitude in a particular ritualist's performance sufficient for understanding the performance on its own terms? Also, is it possible that an everyday religious ritual can be performed in connection with instrumental reasoning and still yet be a wholly different kind of action? Could means-end achievements be merely useful yet unnecessary 'side-effects' that result from ritual performance?

To develop these questions further, it will help to turn to an extended critique of the views of the well-known anthropologist and author of \textit{The Golden Bough}, James G. Frazer, by Wittgenstein.\textsuperscript{35}

From 1930 to 1933 Wittgenstein produced a wide variety of remarks in response to Frazer's famous study of religious practices in \textit{The Golden Bough}\textsuperscript{36}, and many of these remarks focus on interpreting religious rituals. Religious rituals are addressed in a major portion of

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 223.
\textsuperscript{35} I choose these disagreements between Wittgenstein and Frazer particularly because of the influence that both thinkers have had on contemporary ritual studies. It should be noted, however, that there is a closely related debate, stemming from Hume, about the nature of desire and its relation to motivation towards ends and towards means. Philosophical debate, notably between Nagel, Korsgaard, and Davidson, has since addressed this issue further. Stephen Finlay has carefully summarized and responded to this puzzle in a recent article: “Motivation to the Means”, in \textit{Moral Psychology Today: Values, Rational Choice, and the Will}, Springer, 2008, 173-191. While these debates address the question of the relation between desire, motivation towards means and ends, and action as a puzzle requiring a broad theoretical answer, the present project is more directly concerned about how these related themes shed light on the uniqueness of ritualized action.

Frazer’s study. Wittgenstein’s remarks have since been partially republished as an edited collection entitled “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*.”37 Wittgenstein in these remarks is primarily concerned to correct the argument by Frazer that religious rituals are easily misunderstood but nevertheless fundamentally instrumental acts. Frazer focused on an instrumental interpretation of ritual due to his contention that human beliefs and actions generally progress through three stages: from magic, through religion, and then to science. He thereby thought of himself as offering a more scientific approach to discussing religious practices, treating them as evolving yet imperfect social tools, as embodiments of proto-science, rather than as actions stemming from what he imagines as the alternative, a theological perspective that resists scientific study. In response, Wittgenstein instead regards religious rituals as complex formations that Frazer's account is said, at least, to oversimplify or, at worst, to misconstrue. My primary concern in this chapter will thus be to clarify Wittgenstein’s response to ritual instrumentalism in the light of some of his other major works written during and after his comments on Frazer. It will then be argued that a reconstruction38 of a “Wittgensteinian” theory of religious rituals provides a strong basis for showing the limits of a strictly instrumentalist approach.

### 2.2 Frazer's Instrumentalist Account of Religious Ritual

Regarding the history of European fire-festivals, festivals which stem from the ancient religious rituals of pre-Christian Europe, Frazer remarks, “Not uncommonly effigies were burned

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38 It is necessary to recognize that Wittgenstein did not intend his comments to serve as a “theory of ritual” in general. His comments were written primarily with the purpose of illustrating the difficulties inherent in Frazer's account. My 'reconstruction' will thus be based upon my own speculative interpretation of the trajectory of Wittgenstein's remarks.
in these fires, or a pretence is made of burning a living person in them; and there are grounds for believing that anciently human beings were actually burned on these occasions” (FBG, 609).

Frazer assumes that a primary way to interpret such rituals is to trace them historically to originary instrumental acts, understanding them as repeated acts that primarily aim to recapture the instrumental goal of the originary act. Based on this assumption, Frazer argues that the performers of the ritual must be remembering and reenacting some actual killing that occurred in that culture’s near or distant past, primarily due to an attempt to achieve again the efficacy of the original action. This is shown by the fact that, after describing the wide variety of European fire rituals, Frazer remarks that it is possible to make some “general observations” about them (FGB, 641). After discussing commonly repeated ritual elements, including the time of year, the use of large bonfires, the commonality of ritually leaping over fires, and the driving of cattle through or around the fires, he states,

> And as the ceremonies themselves resemble each other, so do the benefits which the people expect to reap from them. But naturally we ask, How did it come about that benefits so great and manifold [such as healthy growing crops, beasts and people, or protection from various cultural and natural calamities] were to be attained by means so simple? In what way did people imagine that they could procure so many goods or avoid so many ills by the application of fire and smoke, of embers and ashes? Two different explanations have been given by modern enquirers. According to one theory the fire is a stimulant, according to the other it is a disinfectant; on the one view the virtue is positive, on the other it is negative. (FGB, 642)

Frazer here begins to show his reasoning for connecting these fire rituals to theories that regard ritual fires as indirect attempts to harness the ordinary powers associated with fire [and similar powers, such as sunshine] for the sake of extraordinary circumstances.

Frazer considers that both views (fire as stimulant, fire as disinfectant) are to some degree correct as interpretations of the fire-festivals because, “In this way we might conclude that, while imitation of sunshine in these ceremonies was primary and original, the purification attributed to
them was secondary and derivative. Such a conclusion, occupying an intermediate position, recognizes an element of truth in both of them” (FGB, 642-3). Yet, in the end, Frazer alters this first compromising view in favor of his final view, which emphasizes the primacy of the purificatory (disinfecting) understanding of the fire rituals. This is because the benefits that are expected to follow from the rituals are not conceived by ritualists “as resulting directly from an increase of solar heat which the fire has magically generated; it is merely an indirect result obtained by freeing the reproductive powers of plants and animals from the fatal obstruction of witchcraft” (FGB, 650). Frazer instead views these rituals as attempts to move toward a direct instrumental use of fire, as a purifying force. The fire rituals are regarded as instrumental actions primarily due to the assumption that they are attempts to harness more successfully the actual powers of fiery purification, a power that allegedly was originally captured in an earlier use of fire. This understanding of the instrumental quality of the fire rituals shows how Frazer utilizes the instrumentalist hermeneutic viewpoint as a way to divorce the explanation of religious rituals from religious explanations. These rituals, for Frazer, are exhaustively explained as indirectly successful attempts to recapture the instrumental results of some prior instrumental act.

The argued prevalence of instrumental themes of purification in fire rituals prefigures Frazer’s view that these fire rituals hearken back to days of human sacrifice. The burning of effigies of human shape, which occurs in many of the fire rituals, is said to relate to beliefs of ritualists that they should free themselves from their own enslavement to magic, in favor of more straightforward instrumental approaches. These effigy-based fire rituals are held to be instrumental attempts to overcome prior fire rituals involving human sacrifice, since the practices of the effigy-using ritualists are described as poorly formulated yet hypothetical approximations of prior and more strictly instrumental endeavors. As Frazer explains, it is as if ritualists are, by
means of ritual, aiming to uncover what truly counts as successful instrumental acts by repeating paradigmatically instrumental acts. Supporting this understanding, Frazer writes, “As the fires are often alleged to be kindled for the purpose of burning the witches, the effigy burnt is sometimes called ‘the Witch’” (FGB, 650). Thereby Frazer concludes that, at least in a wide variety of cases, the burning of human effigies is made sensible for ritualists due to their prior practices of human sacrifice. In this vein, he argues near the end of the section regarding fire-festivals,

The consideration of human suffering is not one which enters into the calculations of primitive man. In the fire festivals which we are discussing, the pretence of burning people is sometimes carried so far that it seems reasonable to regard it as a mitigated survival of an older custom of actually burning them. Thus [in one example] the pretended victim was seized, and a show made of throwing him into the flames, and for some time afterwards people affected to speak of him as dead. (FGB, 652)

This explanation of the fire-festivals as instrumental acts is one of the primary features of Frazer’s work that Wittgenstein attacks in his comments.

The example of fire rituals is but one of many cases in which Frazer employs his instrumentalist account of religious rituals. His general methodological statements in The Golden Bough reveal more broadly the primacy of instrumentalism in his understanding of religious rituals. Frazer considers the work of his famous text to be a work of “fairly probable explanation” of European religious practices and religious beliefs surrounding the theme of the worshipped, and often sacrificed, “sacred king,” beginning with the ancient pre-Roman practices of the priesthood of Nemi (FBG, 3). Regarding his understanding of such an “explanation,” he writes,

It is the very rudeness and barbarity of the custom which allow us hope of explaining it. For recent researches into the early history of man have revealed the essential similarity with which, under many superficial differences, the human
mind has elaborated its first crude philosophy of life. Accordingly, if we can show that a barbarous custom, like that of the priesthood of Nemi, has existed elsewhere; if we can detect motives which led to its institution; if we can prove that these motives have operated widely, perhaps universally, in human society, producing in varied circumstances a variety of institutions specifically different but generically alike; if we can show, lastly, that these very motives, with some of their derivative institutions, were actually at work in classical antiquity; then we may fairly infer that at a remoter age the same motives gave birth to the priesthood of Nemi. Such an inference, in default of direct evidence as to how the priesthood did actually arise, can never amount to a demonstration. But it will be more or less probable according to the degree of completeness with which it fulfills the conditions I have indicated. (FGB, 2-3)

Frazer clearly has in mind a broad application of his instrumentalist assumptions. He not only seeks to describe the actions associated with religious practices; he also aims to produce a plausible explanation of those actions in terms of motives and beliefs that operate as the rationale behind such actions.

Throughout his study Frazer argues that the generic “philosophy of life” underlying religious rituals is primarily instrumentalist, allowing him to deny the validity of other more theological or religiously orthodox explanations of religious practices, seeking instead to argue that religious rituals indirectly aim to approximate scientific achievements. This is why he ends *The Golden Bough* conspicuously on the basis of a means-end explanation, concluding,

> If then we consider, on the one hand, the essential similarity of man's chief wants everywhere and at all times, and on the other hand, the wide difference between the means he has adopted to satisfy them in different ages, we shall perhaps be disposed to conclude that the movement of the higher thought, so far as we can trace it, has on the whole been from magic through religion to science. (FGB, 824)

Magic is the stage at which “man depends on his own strength to meet the difficulties and dangers that beset him,” whereas “in the acuter minds magic is gradually superseded by religion, which explains the succession of natural phenomena as regulated by the will, the passion, or the caprice of spiritual beings like man in kind, though vastly superior” (FGB, 824). Over time,
Frazer believes, this “explanation” becomes unsatisfactory for even more acute minds, and so religion is then superseded by science. Repetitive daily religious rituals, based on this account, thereby are understood by Frazer to be imprecise and patently erroneous forms of instrumentalist action (since they fail to achieve strictly the instrumental aim they were originally produced to achieve) that nonetheless aim to manipulate the natural world according to explicitly known human ends.

Before stepping from Frazer to Wittgenstein's response to Frazer, it is important to keep in mind the intuitive plausibility of the instrumentalist approach to interpreting religious ritual, which lies in its capacity to account for the seemingly obvious fact that rituals are human constructions undertaken in terms of human goal seeking. Should one deny that all religious rituals began at some point as a purposive act upon the world? The instrumentalist approach to viewing religious rituals regards them as a particular class of familiar actions undertaken as a means to an end, namely acts undertaken while having in mind an explicit purpose, or a set of such purposes, for achieving a directly verifiable result. Recall my way of defining “instrumentalism.” Acting according to an “explicit purpose” is understood to imply that an individual performing the ritual is coherently aware of that purpose and has knowingly adopted an “instrumental” mode of thinking and believing as a guide for an intended action. In a loose sense, then, this approach regards religious rituals as “performative tools” used by individuals in a religious tradition. Religious rituals are in this way viewed, albeit reductively, as a collection of particular instrumental acts arranged by the performers according to an intentionally desired coordination.
2.3 Wittgenstein's Response to Frazer

Wittgenstein's response to Frazer’s view is frequently summarized on the basis of Wittgenstein's critical remark that “it makes these views look like errors. All that Frazer does is to make them plausible to people who think as he does. It is very remarkable that in the final analysis all these practices are presented as, so to speak, pieces of stupidity” (WGB, 119).

Wittgenstein does not, however, reject entirely Frazer’s form of anthropological and historical explanation, but, against Frazer, he does specifically argue,

It can indeed happen, and often does today, that a person will give up a practice after he has recognized an error on which it is based. But this happens only when calling someone’s attention to his error is enough to turn him from his way of behaving. But this is not the case with the religious practices of a people and therefore there is no question of an error. (WGB, 121)

Religious ritual practices, on this view, are not simply erroneous proto-science; if that were the case, there would not be a need for the interpreter of ritual to account for why devotees do not turn away from their religious practices precisely when they recognize the presence of an error in those practices. While it is certainly important to acknowledge that recognizing such errors may not always be a simple epistemological matter, Wittgenstein instead grapples with the hermeneutic question regarding what kind of account should be ascribed to rituals in cases where such errors become irrelevant to the practitioner.

He first considers that ritual actions perhaps should be regarded as expressions of meaning or value, rather than understood as end-seeking actions. He notices that something like an expression of meaning must be going on with actions akin to burning human effigies or, in other examples, kissing the picture of a loved one. To clarify this intuition, Wittgenstein argues, “Why shouldn’t it be possible for a person to regard his name as sacred? It is certainly, on the one hand, the most important instrument which is given to him, and on the other, like a piece of
jewelry hung around his neck at birth” (WGB, 125). Wittgenstein here shows that he finds reason to ascribe both instrumental and aesthetic significance to such a practice, acknowledging its at least partial involvement with both spheres of experience. Wittgenstein, clarifying this dual involvement, also proposes that “the characteristic feature of ritualistic action is not at all a view, an opinion, whether true or false, although an opinion – a belief – can itself be ritualistic or part of a rite” (WGB, 129). He instead says that ritualists engage in a “peculiar interpretation of the phenomena. That is, if they were to write it down, their knowledge of nature would not differ fundamentally from ours. Only their magic is different” (WGB, 141). Wittgenstein recognizes religious rituals as actions that may involve the manipulation of the natural world to some degree, but the precise relation between the act and such manipulation is importantly vague and operates according to a logic in which “nothing more than similarity can be asserted” (WGB, 139), namely a logic of family resemblances, a logic that may only be accounted for in terms of the lived experience of ritual. Frazer accounted for this 'vagueness' in religious ritual in terms of error, but Wittgenstein aims to steer away from this kind of account by associating the vagueness of ritual significance with a different kind of logic, a logic based upon resemblance rather than strict truth and falsity. Religious rituals may not be playing the game of basing actions upon beliefs that aim toward non-contradiction; they may be playing a different game, a game in which actions are evaluated according to rules other than those for determining the instrumental success of an action.

Wittgenstein in the above passage invokes a specific sense of “magic”, one distinct from Frazer's, one that is said to be “always based on the idea of symbolism and language. [This] magic brings a wish to representation; it expresses a wish” [my emphasis] (WGB, 125). In other words, a ritual's “magic,” its magical meaning, if you will, is that which most noticeably
distinguishes Wittgenstein's understanding of ritualistic action from Frazer's. The magic of ritual uniquely distinguishes it from other actions, due to its being expressive of a “wish.” As will be argued later in this chapter, the precise role of Wittgenstein's “expressivism” in his comments on Frazer raises a point of disagreement among Wittgenstein’s interpreters that requires bringing up the broader context of Wittgenstein's later works. And the same is true regarding his corresponding understanding of “wish.”

It is important to note that a study of Wittgenstein's treatment of “ritual” or “ritualization” (to highlight the activity of expression) invokes a general understanding of ritual that extends beyond the scope of the present inquiry; it is presented as a concept that applies well beyond the religious sphere. For Wittgenstein the ritualized representation of a wish is by no means rare in secular worldviews. Wittgenstein remarks, regarding his own times, “An entire mythology is stored in our language” (WGB, 133). Wittgenstein repeatedly suggests that ritual represents a fundamental dimension of human experience, going so far as to say, “[M]an is a ceremonial animal. That is, no doubt, partly wrong and partly nonsensical, but there is also something right about it; men perform actions which bear a characteristic peculiar to themselves, and these could be called ritualistic actions” (WGB, 129). For Wittgenstein, and Frazer, rituals reveal something peculiar to mankind; but Wittgenstein does not retroactively impose the standards of his own age upon ritualistic actions, as Frazer did by reducing rituals to a semi-scientific status. For Wittgenstein, rituals represent a distinct kind of action, of a category that is sui generis, bearing some trait that is “peculiar to themselves.” That trait is developed in Wittgenstein's concept of “ritualization” as expression of a wish through actions.

Developing this concept, Wittgenstein remarks that the interpretation of ritual expressions requires acknowledging key differences between ritual traditions because “this part
gives the account its depth” (WGB, 143). We must both account for and simultaneously acknowledge the inexhaustibility of what he calls the “inner nature of the practice,” which “consist[s] not so much in specific actions, as in what one might call the spirit of the [practice, which] lies in the character of the people themselves” (WGB, 145). Or, as he says regarding the case of festivals, “If I wanted to make up a festival, it would die out very quickly or be modified in such a manner that it corresponds to a general inclination of the people” (WGB, 149). This is a major reason why Wittgenstein is concerned to say that “Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages” (WGB, 131). Frazer fails to recognize that his subjects “possess a peculiar interpretation of the phenomena” (WGB, 141). This is primarily because Frazer insists that magic be interpreted scientifically and historically rather than in terms of his subjects’ shared way of living in the world (WGB, 125). It is not that rituals cannot be interpreted in these ways; Wittgenstein does not rule out the applicability of instrumentalist interpretations or historical interpretations of ritual, but he does insist that these do not get at what makes a ritual a ritual. Frazer’s view misses the fact that ritual can be interpreted “by means of the arrangement of its factual content alone, in a ‘perspicuous’ representation,” which “denotes the form of our representation, the way we see things,” what Wittgenstein refers to as a kind of “world-view” that allows people to “see the connections” or “connecting links” that an insider point of view offers (WGB, 133). Thus he refers to ritual as “an extremely developed gesture language” (WGB, 135).

Illustrating his understanding of ritualization through everyday example, Wittgenstein tells the following story about how the significance of a rite might arise for the performer.

When I am furious about something, I sometimes beat the ground or a tree with my walking stick. But I certainly do not believe that the ground is to blame or that my beating can help anything. ‘I am venting my anger.’ And all rites are of
this kind. Such actions may be called Instinct-actions. – And an historical explanation, say, that I or my ancestors previously believed that beating the ground does help is shadow-boxing, for it is a superfluous assumption. The similarity of the action to an act of punishment is important, but nothing more than this similarity can be asserted. Once such a phenomenon is brought into connection with an instinct which I myself possess, this is precisely the explanation wished for; that is, the explanation which resolves this particular difficulty. And a further investigation about the history of my instinct moves on another track. (WGB, 137-9)

The phrase “instinct-action” is central here. If one of the goals of the interpreter of a ritual is to understand the appeal of the ritual for the performers, which often seems to be Frazer’s goal, then an investigation of the history of the act is not what is in order. What is needed is to understand how this ritual becomes invested with meaning for the performers as part of a particular social group. The concept of what might be called “ritual instinct” suggests that the significance of rituals is expected to be less grounded in history or the opinions of the performers than it is grounded in instincts that stem from a mode of living that is peculiar to the performers.

The concept of instinct is thus used here in a curious sense by Wittgenstein, namely to invoke the idea that shared cultural practices and environments actually work directly upon and transform the perceiver, allowing for both an action and also its significance to arise independently of specific beliefs or explicit cognition. It occurs instinctually because it comes “naturally” to a reflexive way of life. This is why Wittgenstein humorously remarks, “If fleas developed a rite, it would be based on the dog” (WGB, 139).

Thus, in response to Frazer's comments about the burning of human effigies, Wittgenstein remarks that the sinister elements that one might attribute to such acts do not depend on the history of the practice having been like this, for perhaps it was not like this at all; nor on the fact that it was perhaps probably like this, but rather on that which gives me grounds for assuming this. Indeed, how is it that in general human sacrifice is so deep and sinister? For is it only the sufferings of the
victim that makes this impression on us? No, rather it is we who ascribe [these acts] from an inner experience (WGB, 147).

The suspicion of an actual murder being involved would say more about the observer than about the performers of the ritual. For such reasons, Wittgenstein’s remarks about Frazer represent an important contribution to thinking critically about the nature of religious rituals and the problem of cultural superimposition when interpreting their elusive significance.

2.4 Reconstructing Religious Ritual in Wittgenstein’s *On Culture and Value*

The Remarks on Frazer by no means represents a clearly worked out philosophical response to Frazer. Reconstruction of Wittgenstein's thinking in those remarks can, however, be fruitfully developed on the basis of his other works written after 1930. In some of his unpublished manuscripts, now edited as a collection entitled *On Culture and Value*39, we can find Wittgenstein again occupied with the topic of ritual. In these works, he gives his reader some clues about why there is sometimes an inclination to regard rituals as meaningless and frivolous. It is important to note that these were unpublished manuscripts, notes in which Wittgenstein is often refreshingly blunt and unrestrained, willing to say perhaps a bit more than in materials he organized for unknown others to peruse. For example, he addresses the interpretation of failed rituals, not solely focusing on those that achieve meaning for those involved. In 1930, during the time of his reading of Frazer, he quips, “Everything ritualistic (everything that, as it were, smacks of the high priest) must be strictly avoided, because it immediately turns rotten. Of course a kiss is a ritual too and it isn’t rotten, but ritual is permissible only to the extent that it is as genuine as a kiss” (CV, 8). This remark suggests a

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way of distinguishing between a failed ritual and a successful ritual. A kiss, when genuine, seems likely to be meaningful due to the participants spontaneously wanting to continue existing within the act itself.

But what is it about a kiss that allows it to avoid the trappings of the “high priest”? For starters, let’s consider the high priest. In that passage I interpret that Wittgenstein is distinguishing between rituals that achieve meaning primarily through inclinations of a people rather than primarily by way of a single individual's will. In other words, the high priest runs the danger of expecting a ritual to become valued by a people on the basis of an individual's authority or command, rather than “in such a manner that it corresponds to a general inclination of the people” (WGB, 149). Perhaps this is why we find Wittgenstein commenting in his notes, with regard to religion in general, “It is often said that a new religion brands the gods of the old one as devils. But in reality they have probably already become devils by that time” (CV, 15).

By the time that a religion cannot maintain its place in people’s lives, it is likely being preserved on the basis of the authority of a few leaders rather than socially grounded tendencies. A kiss can thus be genuine because it can be given and received in an immediately meaningful manner, without requiring someone to be in a position of control.

Following this line of thinking further, in which socially grounded tendencies to act underlie religious ritual performance, the frequently assumed centrality of religious belief becomes suspect as a basis for religion in Wittgenstein’s view. Wittgenstein regards religion as best when grounded in the practices of a people, rather than being based primarily on agreeing with orthodox opinions. And so he writes, “Believing means submitting to an authority. Having once submitted, you can’t then, without rebelling against it, first call it into question and then once again find it acceptable” (CV, 45). Because belief is based upon authority, it compromises
the durability of a religion in a way that genuine ritual does not. Orthodox beliefs, as is frequently shown by religious disputes within belief-centered religions, typically cannot be questioned without that questioning functioning simultaneously as a rebellion against the authority upon which the shared belief was founded. This is crucial for recognizing why genuine ritual plays so important a role in Wittgenstein’s thinking about religion. Genuine rituals performed on the basis of shared spur-of-the-moment inclination (as the best kisses are) become sustained without the intervention of an explicit authority figure. So, in a ritual, as in a kiss, someone stepping back from the act would not be taken as someone in explicit rebellion against established order, but would simply be taken as someone for whom the ritual has not achieved satisfaction, and the reasons for its failure could be sought in a variety of ways, many of which have little to do with belief and explicit social agreement.

Wittgenstein’s manuscripts also make useful parallels between genuine ritual and other forms of genuine acts. Architecture often serves this purpose. The claim that “all rituals are not genuine rituals” can be unpacked in this light. He notes, “Architecture immortalizes and glorifies something. Hence there can be no architecture where there is nothing to glorify” (CV, 69). He also notes, “Architecture is a gesture. Not every purposive movement of the human body is a gesture. And no more is every building designed for a purpose architecture” (CV, 42). As mentioned, he also says that ritual is a complex gesture language. At this point, the parallel between architecture and ritual becomes more revealing. Rituals, like architecture, also are likely to fail when there is nothing to glorify on behalf of a people. When architecture fails in this way, it fails much like the way the high priest can cause ritual to fail. A non-glorifying piece of architecture becomes reduced to serving an instrumental function. It becomes a mere
building, as a religious ritual that does not glorify the inclinations and wishes of a people becomes a mere show conducted by the priest.

Later in his life, in 1947, after the publication of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein wrote in the *Culture and Value* manuscripts,

> It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s *belief*, it’s really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It’s passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation. Instruction in a religious faith, therefore, would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference. It would be as though someone were first to let me see the hopelessness of my situation and then show me the means of rescue until, of my own accord, or not at any rate led to it by my *instructor*, I ran to it and grasped it. (CV, 64)

Genuine religion for Wittgenstein seeks a “portrayal” of its way of life due to the fact that it must be driven by passion to avoid becoming stale and authoritative. Religious ritual provides what is perhaps the primary means of this portrayal. The above passage also serves to reveal more about the mode of genesis of genuine ritual according to Wittgenstein. The genuineness of ritual cannot be based solely upon social pressures put by groups upon individuals. Individual members of a tradition may be “instructed” in a tradition, but this instruction succeeds only on the basis of the individual achieving passion for the resulting shared system of reference. Put simply, genuine rituals, as well as genuine religion, becomes suspect as soon as they are based upon coercion. As Wittgenstein argues, religion and religious ritual require both a socially shared tendency of a people and also the freely given support of individuals within that people.

Because freely chosen but socially cultivated passion is required for genuineness, religious rituals are discussed by Wittgenstein primarily in terms of gestural expression and wish, notions that are further elaborated on in his *Philosophical Investigations*. In his remarks on
Frazer, Wittgenstein centrally asserts that ritual “expresses a wish.” By looking at how this theme is addressed in his other writings, one can move closer to a fuller understanding of this pregnant statement about the nature of ritual. In one of the later manuscript notes from 1948, Wittgenstein states, “What we regard as expression consists in incalculability. If I knew exactly how [someone] would grimace, move, there would be no facial expression, no gesture” (CV, 73). Expressions need not attain strict sameness of syntax or form; they rely far more on loose resemblance and substitutability than other forms of communication. That the wish of a ritual relies for its expression upon a socially-cultivated gestural language also further highlights that ritual cannot be based upon an individual's will or authority. It must also be surprising in some sense, because the expressions or gestures involved must arise as if immediate and somewhat unpredictable, as an instinctual yet active expression of some inner experience. But, as mentioned, the manuscripts collected in On Culture and Value are not the best place to dig further into the theme of “wish” expression; that inquiry only reaches so far. In order to develop further a Wittgensteinian concept of ritual as an action-based expression of wish, it is necessary to look into Wittgenstein’s most widely known later work.

2.5 “Expressing a Wish” in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations

In his Philosophical Investigations (1945)\(^{40}\) Wittgenstein generally addresses the nature of a wish in the following way. He states, “A wish seems already to know what will or would satisfy it; a proposition, a thought, what makes it true, – even when that thing is not there at all!” (Pl, §437). Before unpacking this understanding, it is important to recognize first that the term “wish” has a broad range of possible meanings for Wittgenstein. To avoid the problems of

interpretation surrounding the intersection of wish with other complex dimensions of Wittgenstein's philosophy, I will here restrict my consideration to determining its role in religious ritual.

Regarding ritual, “what makes it true” is the inclination, the instinct, the passion, which might involve thoughts, but the thoughts are not the primary feature. The wish of ritual already somehow ‘knows’ what would satisfy it because its genuineness is based upon a prior readiness, an inner enthusiasm for the act and its social significance. This understanding also helps us to unpack further why Wittgenstein speaks of ritual in terms of satisfaction, an element of Wittgenstein's account that, as will be shown later, has been too easily overlooked by some of his commentators. With regard to wish, he asks,

In what sense can one call wishes, expectations, beliefs, etc. “unsatisfied”? What is our prototype of nonsatisfaction? Is it a hollow space? And would one call that unsatisfied? Wouldn’t this be a metaphor too? – Isn’t what we call nonsatisfaction a feeling – say hunger? (PI, §439)

It would be useful to clarify the distinct nature of a wish's satisfaction in terms of inversely related feelings of nonsatisfaction. The trappings of the high priest, again, provide a useful way to mine the depths of Wittgenstein’s allusive comments.

Imagine that some religious ritualists, after years of performing a ritual on a daily basis, become lax in their performance; at times they cannot bring up their enthusiasm for repeating the performance. A high priest might then be appointed to assure that the ritual is performed at the proper times and in the proper manner. This ritual could become unsatisfying in the sense that the high priest may only manage to invoke a hollow feeling in the performers; his authority may not rekindle their desire to achieve again the passion of the past performances. For ritual, a kind of satisfaction is achieved by way of the arrival of incalculable feeling; to achieve this ritual must
be performed as the expression of a wish that only at first arises unsatisfied. The satisfaction comes with the unexpected arrival of something in the performance that successfully relieves the hollow space opened by the unsatisfied wish. Thus, when a ritual fails to achieve this because it has become based on authority, then unsatisfaction is all that is felt. The ritual only invokes a corresponding yet unfulfilling feeling, an unsatisfied wish for the genuine performance.

On this understanding it becomes clear why Wittgenstein can say, “Saying ‘I should like an apple’ does not mean: I believe an apple will quell my feeling of nonsatisfaction. This proposition is not an expression of a wish but of nonsatisfaction” (PI, §440). An expression of wish is thus not simply a statement aiming to fill a lack. An expression of wish does not just say, “I am unsatisfied.” An expression of wish is accompanied by a “feeling of unsatisfaction” with a particular sense, namely the sense that it is also a wish to feel something more, “something real, something outside the process of believing” (PI, §438). This helps to clarify the deep connection between ritual and wishful feeling in Wittgenstein. Such feelings arising in genuine ritual performances allow for the expression of a wish because those feelings are fulfilled by something more than mere belief, more than cognitive acknowledgment of something being the case. The expression of wish in ritual is an expression of an inclination that seeks a further rarity of feeling, a world of feeling only possible by participating passionately in a shared “system of reference,” a “gesture language” that invokes the shared experiences of a people.

The wish is thus always partially based upon the shared past experiences of a people. Wittgenstein also discusses in his *Investigations* how this past experience becomes a basis for a non-calculated expression of wish.

By nature and by a particular training, a particular education, we are disposed to give spontaneous expression to wishes in certain circumstances. (A wish is, of
course, not such a ‘circumstance’.) In this game the question whether I know what I wish for before my wish is fulfilled cannot arise at all. (PI, §441)

A people, for genuine ritual to be achieved, thus must provide training that cultivates appropriate dispositions in ritualists, but this training does not compromise the ritual in the sense that a high priest might. The proper training is a training of immersion into cultural practices such that one becomes “disposed [my emphasis] to give spontaneous expression” rather than one calculating to give “official” or “correct” responses. In this way, the expression of wish in genuine ritual cannot be described as a case in which “I know what I wish for.” This is an obvious point of contention with Frazer’s insistence that rituals are performed on the basis of intellectual beliefs about how to manipulate the natural world. As with a kiss, a ritual, according to Wittgenstein, produces genuine satisfaction only when it occurs in a way that is spontaneous and yet simultaneously cultivated, as something that is prompted more by depth of socially grounded ways of feeling than by calculated actions. While training and education prepare a person to perform a religious ritual, it only succeeds on this understanding if it arises freely out of the cultivated yet spontaneous feelings of that person.

The treatment of wish in *Philosophical Investigations* facilitates reconstruction of a better understanding of Wittgenstein’s comment, in his remarks on Frazer, that ritually burning objects or sincerely kissing pictures are rituals that are “obviously not based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture [or other object] represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it aims at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied” (WGB, 123). This view of ritual, however, has been the source of a variety of
disagreements between scholars of Wittgenstein, particularly those focusing on the implications of his philosophy for religion. I will turn now to consider and to respond to those disagreements.

2.6 Recent Responses to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion

While reconstructing the implications of Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer, it is wise to avoid what I regard as a common misunderstanding about those comments. John W. Cook, for example, in a 1983 article\textsuperscript{41}, exhibits an erroneous tendency to see Wittgenstein as constructing an explicit theory about religious ritual that is meant to be mutually exclusive of Frazer's instrumentalism. As Cook understands Wittgenstein's remarks, they are primarily objecting to Frazer and others like the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard, who regards rituals (and similar practices, including magic) as “involving beliefs which cannot be true.”\textsuperscript{42} He calls this an “objectivist” stance on such practices. Wittgenstein is said to adopt a stance that Cook labels “emotivist,” partly because he argues that Wittgenstein says that rituals “do not involve beliefs which we can see to be untrue.”\textsuperscript{43} Constructing this dilemma, he then sets out to determine “whether the objectivist or the emotivist is correct.”\textsuperscript{44}

Cook's interpretation of Wittgenstein, as I understand him, is oversimplified. Consider first a few passages from Cook's article that reveal how he uses Wittgenstein's remarks to construct his understanding. Cook writes,

The basic argument implicit in Wittgenstein's notes is that Frazer has gone wrong in the account he gives of the source of ritual practices. Frazer treats magic and religion as springing from intellectual motives, from an attempt to understand and explain things. In opposition to this Wittgenstein suggests that we would do better to compare primitive magic to kissing the picture of a loved one, which “is

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 3.
obviously *not* based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents.\(^{45}\)

This passage reveals a simple initial problem: Cook takes Wittgenstein's reaction to Frazer as able to be summarized in a single “argument.” Now, there may be an underlying unity to Wittgenstein's comments, but the pieces of that unity hardly amount to a single, simple argument; Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer are largely suggestive, requiring a great deal of unpacking, rendering the establishment of explicit arguments on the basis of those remarks a primarily reconstructive undertaking. A second problem is Cook's assumption that ritual actions either involve the kinds of “intellectual motives” required to support Frazer's instrumentalism or they do not involve such motives. These two options do not get at the heart of Wittgenstein's remarks. To understand why this is so, it helps to consider the possibility that Wittgenstein is saying something that reaches beyond this division between “objectivism” and “emotivism.” Cook is, however, right to note that Wittgenstein is concerned to argue that ritual and magic behavior do not require beliefs as their “basis.”

Wittgenstein applies this argument to both religious ritual and magic, although I will not deal here with their difference in Wittgenstein's thinking. Cook applies Wittgenstein's remarks on magic to religious ritual largely based on a passage, in which Wittgenstein says that “what makes the character of ritual action is not any view or opinion, either right or wrong” (WGB, 7). This has led some readers like Cook to assume that Wittgenstein is saying that religious rituals are therefore wholly beyond the sphere of evaluation, because, not being based on reason-supported belief, they involve nothing that can be said to be in any sense “true” or “false,” or “right” or “wrong.” In fact, Cook eventually argues in his article that the proper view toward magic and religious practices is that they are not, scientifically speaking, false (contra Frazer),

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 3.
but that they are rather primarily “incoherent, nonsensical.”\textsuperscript{46} Thus, Cook concludes that “the anthropological study of religion is not essentially different from the study of magic and witchcraft,”\textsuperscript{47} namely the study of incoherent, and thus (in some non-scientific sense) unsuccessful, behavior.

Cook's understanding of religious rituals as incoherent acts stems from his initial oversimplified division between objectivism and emotivism. This is also the source of his misunderstanding of Wittgenstein, whose remarks on Frazer are not easily arranged into an explicit theoretical position. It is important to remember that Wittgenstein famously rejected there being any general form for all propositions, thus making it important to consider the possibility that Wittgenstein's view is that there could be meaningful expressions that are not based upon beliefs resulting from intellectual reasoning. The way that Cook conceives “objectivism” determines beforehand the erroneousness of religious rituals because those rituals are assumed by Cook to be based upon beliefs grounded in incoherent reasoning. “Emotivism,” on the other hand, is said to deny the possibility of error in such practices due to those practices being wholly beyond the spheres of meaning and belief. Wittgenstein, as I understand him, is making neither claim. He regards religious rituals as meaningful expressive practices that nonetheless cannot be characterized as committing instrumental errors due to rationally flawed beliefs.

Such misunderstandings of Wittgenstein might lead one, wrongly, to interpret his philosophy of religion as saying that religious rituals are beyond criticism or that religious rituals may be meaningful only for those already situated within particular religious groups. Such 'fideist' readings of Wittgenstein would fail to acknowledge, first, that Wittgenstein on many

\textsuperscript{46} Cook, “Magic, Witchcraft, and Science,” 35.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 36.
occasions saw good reason to discuss religion with a variety of intellectuals, and, second, that Wittgenstein aimed to convey a philosophical understanding of religious rituals that was intended to correct some aspects of Frazer's approach to interpreting rituals. To claim that Wittgenstein was a fideist would be to understand his writings on religion as an attempt to protect religion from any investigation. Such an approach, however, stems from a misunderstanding not unlike Cook's association of Wittgenstein with a strict emotivism. Wittgenstein's emphasis on “expression” as central in religious rituals is too easily glossed as “expression of emotion.” But Wittgenstein does not say that religious rituals are primarily gestural expressions of emotions. By insisting upon understanding rituals as “expressions of a wish,” Wittgenstein has avoided being associated with the traditional understanding of emotional expressions as beyond criticism.

Wishes, for Wittgenstein, importantly resemble both beliefs and desires. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, an expression of a wish does not just say, “I am unsatisfied.” This belief is certainly associated with the wish, but there is more to a wish. A wish not only involves a belief-like, yet often largely unconscious, longing (about that which is lacking and desired), but it also simultaneously implies a feeling of unsatisfactoriness. It is this dual nature of wish, as both belief and feeling, that requires further consideration. A traditional emotivist view of Wittgenstein's expressivism would fail to acknowledge this crucial detail, primarily due to oversimplification of the possibilities of linguistic expression. Language, especially when based in performative actions, can do more than simply express beliefs or bare emotions. The concept of “gestural wish expressions” represents an attempt by Wittgenstein to overcome this limited, and perhaps positivistic, view of language.
Some commentators have, however, sought to distance Wittgenstein's views on religious practices from expressivism, finding a center for those views in other elements of the remarks on Frazer. Brian Clack, for example, argues that Wittgenstein was not an expressivist: “it is in fact a fundamental error to believe that the Remarks on Frazer constitute an expressive theory of religion.” Clack focuses more upon Wittgenstein's references to religious rituals as grounded in “instinct-actions,” based primarily on the following quotation mentioned earlier in this chapter.

When I am furious about something, I sometimes beat the ground or a tree with my walking stick. But I certainly do not believe that the ground is to blame or that my beating can help anything. ‘I am venting my anger.’ And all rites are of this kind. Such actions may be called Instinct-actions (WGB, 137).

Clack understands Wittgenstein to be saying in the above passage that a religious ritual is such by virtue of the fact that its parts are enacted naturally, without deliberate effort. This is the sense in which Clack sees the gap between Frazer and Wittgenstein: Frazer seeks to determine the instrumental function of religious rituals, and thus focuses on explaining why rituals are performed by ritualists in terms of the ends they are expected to bring about. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, did not seek to distinguish himself from Frazer on the basis of expressivism, but on the basis of understanding rituals as instinctive reactions. Clack distinguishes instinctive reactions from expressive actions by the quality of “naturalness” or “spontaneity,” emphasizing that instinctive reactions are done simply because such doers are nearly unintentionally driven to react. The true gap between Frazer and Wittgenstein is thus, according to Clack, based on the gap between “spontaneous” action and “ratiocinative” action.  

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49 Ibid., 134.
Clack's view, however, also misses the depth of Wittgenstein's account. Religious rituals are not simply pre-cognitive reactions. While it certainly is true that all religious rituals do, according to Wittgenstein, rely on predisposition toward instinctive action, nonetheless instinctive action does not alone account for what distinguishes Wittgenstein's view of religious ritual. This is why reconstruction is necessary when seeking to understand what Wittgenstein is saying in the Remarks on Frazer. His comments on religion should not be taken as offering a full-fledged theory of religion or ritual. Wittgenstein likely believed that his remarks suggest an underlying theoretical unity, but he certainly did not set out to explicate that unity systematically. Wittgenstein seeks to capture a wider variety of central characteristics of ritual actions in his statements than Clack recognizes. His statements do frequently regard rituals as repetitive actions that depend upon instinct, but further work should be done to link up the instinctive dimension of ritual with Wittgenstein's understanding of ritual as expression of a wish.

An all-too-common view, rightly rejected by Clack, is that Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer commits him to an emotivist and expressivist view of religious rituals. This misunderstanding is based on the assumption that Wittgenstein is saying that there is a necessary dualism between propositional expressions (those based upon rational beliefs) and merely symbolic expressions (those not based upon beliefs). While I have disagreed with this simplistic dualism, it is important to note that Clack and others have missed how the concept of “instinct-action” (not “instinct-reaction”) problematizes and avoids the above dualism. Other philosophers, perhaps most notably Phillipe de Lara50, have given careful attention to the concept of “ritual instinct” in Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer, and this has done a great deal to point

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interpreters in the right direction for overcoming oversimplified views of Wittgenstein's understanding of religious practices.

In a recent article, de Lara rightly focuses on how understanding rituals as “instinct-actions” serves the purpose of more fruitfully addressing the relation between rationality and ritual. While he does argue that it is important to regard Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer as “not only sketchy but fragmentary,” de Lara centrally argues that a major goal of Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer is “to overcome the alternative between intellectualist and expressive explanations of belief.” This is said to be accomplished primarily by way of the concept of ritual instinct. For de Lara, and similarly with Clack, ritual instinct plays the most central role in Wittgenstein's thoughts on magic and ritual. But for de Lara this does not require separating Wittgenstein's comments from expressivism regarding ritual actions. As he rightly notes,

Wittgenstein is no more an expressivist in the *Frazer Remarks* because of his rejection of intellectualism than he is a behaviorist in *Philosophical Investigations* because of his rejection of mentalism. In both cases, he is not substituting an alternative theory to the one he rejects. In the *Frazer Remarks*, what he means is that magical behavior MAY be the expression of a wish (burning an effigy of one's enemy), of an emotion (beating the ground for anger), that it MAY or may NOT rely on belief: one can say meaningfully “I fear the wrath of the gods”, either while believing or not believing in such gods.

The above passage is closer to my understanding of Wittgenstein's comments on Frazer. De Lara realizes the broad understanding and non-reductivist spirit with which Wittgenstein approaches the topics of religion, ritual and magic. De Lara also does not aim to reduce Wittgenstein philosophically, avoiding the temptation to interpret Wittgenstein as offering a simplistic alternative theory to Frazer's. I, contra de Lara, nonetheless argue that more emphasis should be placed on the characterization of religious rituals as “expressions of a wish.”

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51 Ibid., 111-2.  
52 Ibid., 113.
Importantly, however, de Lara has valuable thoughts for going in this direction. He rightly notes “‘instinct' does not consist only in compulsive behavior along definite and fixed patterns, but also in the spontaneous _invention_ of rituals.”\(^53\) This concept of “spontaneous invention,” as a kind of instinct, comes close to suggesting the sense in which “expression of a wish” relates to “instinct-action.” Ritual instinct certainly is a pervasive component of ritual for Wittgenstein, but the sense of “spontaneous invention” suggests an understanding of how such instincts are simultaneously also “actions,” and not mere “reactions” as Clack suggested. However, de Lara retreats from this line of understanding, instead relying upon an understanding of “instinct-actions,” ignoring that Wittgenstein also understood such phenomena to be “instinct-actions.” Thus, in de Lara's general characterization of Wittgensteinian “rituality,” he ends up defining the term as, “a human disposition to react [my italics] in a certain way (typically pointless) towards 'significant phenomena', displayed not only in instituted rites (magic, religion) but also in other contexts, private and social.”\(^54\) This commentator clearly realizes the breadth of applicability in Wittgenstein's thoughts on ritual, but ignores the significance of expression in ritual. “Expression” is invoked by Wittgenstein not simply in terms of emotions, but specifically in terms of wishes, those peculiar linguistic expressions that may operate both in relation to beliefs, and also behaviorally, and thus in terms of non-cognitive expression. I find it hard to believe, however, that Wittgenstein's comments aim to characterize religious rituals as “typically pointless” acts. In a given religious ritual, there is generally a meaning that may be associated with that act, but that meaning is just not reducible to achieving the goal of an instrumental action.

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\(^53\) Ibid., 118.
\(^54\) Ibid., 118.
As I understand it, one major philosophical contribution resulting from Wittgenstein's response to Frazer is that he (1) denies that rituals are essentially instrumental actions (realizing that they require their own unique treatment as actions) and yet (2) simultaneously asserts that rituals can be evaluated as meaningful actions (just not in the manner that instrumental actions are evaluated). Rituals can be described as having been correctly or incorrectly performed; they may be successful or unsuccessful; they may be satisfying or unsatisfying; they may be fake or genuine. They simply may not be characterized as instrumentalist errors, and they still generally involve a “point.” That point, however, is just not as readily available as Frazer imagines it to be for those standing outside of a particular ritual-performing community. According to Wittgenstein, the outside interpreter of a religious ritual, whether anthropologist, philosopher, or otherwise, must realize that the key to understanding the meaning and value of a religious ritual lies in evaluative standards embodied, often unconsciously, in the practices of the social group involved. This is one of the primary benefits of invoking the concept of instinct-actions.

The important question, then, for understanding the significance of Wittgenstein's improvement of Frazer, is: what mode of interpretation would a “Wittgensteinian” approach to religious rituals promote? One key to that mode of interpretation would certainly lie in discovering how communities embody, via group and individual actions, native standards for deciding the significances of particular rituals. This requires taking seriously that community's capacity to interpret themselves and their actions. It does not, however, presume that every native understanding will be accurate; it only presumes that native modes of “living with others” include embodied evaluative practices that, if reflected upon, reveal implicit yet non-intellectual decision procedures.
2.7 On the Limits of Instrumentalism for Interpreting Religious Rituals

One way to begin understanding the problems inherent in a strictly instrumentalist view of religious ritual is to notice that such a view fails to account for what many participants in ritual have regarded as an obvious fact. Religious rituals often seem to fail precisely when one becomes aware that the act has been constructed for an individual's own purposes. Consider the following account of a “ritual in the making” as offered by Ronald Grimes, an American scholar of religious rituals. Following the events of Sept. 11th 2001, a collection of his students, in a seminar on religious ritual, collaboratively produced and performed a ritual in response to their own feelings about the state of the world after that day. The members of the performing class created the entire ritual. Below is a passage detailing the initial stages of that ritual.

Elemental Gestures: A Script for a Rite

Setting: On a draped or matted table in the center of the room: a mound of sand, earth, or stones; a bowl or small sandbox to contain them; a pitcher of water; a bowl to pour it in; a candle or lamp and matches; a piece of fruit or a flower; a knife; incense and matches or a wind instrument.

Participant #1 introduces the actions with words calling attention to the purpose of the gathering or to one or more of the following themes: the emptiness as well as the importance of human speech and social gatherings; the preciousness of the moment and the importance of small things; the pervasiveness of trouble.

The choice of words should fit the occasion and reflect the constituency of those gathered. The words below are only examples.

“Buddhists say that all suffering, and all release from suffering, is now – in this very moment and in this very place.”
“The Gospels say that not even a sparrow can fall without divine notice and divine compassion.”

Participant #2 approaches the table, scoops up a handful of earth in both hands, speaks the words [below], then sprinkles it slowly into the bowl, on the floor around the table, or onto a flat stone or board. This and each subsequent gesture is slowly paced, enacted simply and without pomp or deliberate stylization.

“This is earth. May it ground our words and actions and continue sustaining the multitudes of life forms around the world.”

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55 Ronald Grimes, Rite Out of Place (Oxford University Press, 2006), 82.
Following the element of earth, similar stages were performed for the elements of water, light, life, and air. After the ritual was initially performed, during a particularly “appreciative” class discussion, one of Grimes’ students, a student from Six Nations Reserve, candidly complained that the ritual was inauthentic, on account of it having been “hokey.” The student then questioned, “Well, you made it up, right? [T]here was no tradition or anything. And you are not a medicine man or a priest. The whole thing was artificial.” 56 This account draws attention to the problem that “apparent constructedness” in a ritual can easily become the basis of that ritual’s failure. And so, if a religious ritual’s success is so easily compromised by too strong an association with an immediately explicit purpose, there is likely something lacking in the instrumentalist approach to interpreting religious rituals.

There are many approaches contemporarily available to scholars of religion for interpreting ritual traditions. Such writing, frequently identified under the genre of “ritual theory” or “ritual studies,” contains its own debates over the question of whether religious rituals should be characterized as instrumental acts. These debates frequently center around key interpretive conceptual themes, such as “function,” “praxis,” “agency,” “efficacy,” and “action.” And many writers on religious ritual traditions have shown a tendency to eschew instrumentalism. For instance, on occasion the theme of religious ritual as “praxis” has been used to highlight a practical reasoning dimension within ritual performance that treats religious rituals as fundamentally instrumental acts. But, scholars like Cristoph Wulf have rightly noted that “ritual praxis” can also refer to a form of “more or less conscious practical knowledge that forms the basis of ritual acts,” 57 instead preferring to highlight how ritualists are trained by way

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56 Ibid., 84.
of pedagogy that is not based upon producing instrumental thinking and acting, but upon embodiment of “mimetic acquisitions” as a basis for acquiring ritual competence.

Still, many other scholars of religious ritual today find instrumentalism appealing. For instance, the theme of “ritual agency” has been used to highlight an instrumentalist understanding of ritual actions. It has recently been used by William S. Sax in a theory of ritual that analyzes the dynamics of ritual as instrumental action based on cosmological theories, developing a plausible account of ritual agency by seeking to explain precisely how rituals accomplish their social effects. Such theories recognize that ritual is often directed toward specific ends and thus has an 'agentive' dimension.\(^{58}\)

Sax, however, also wishes to capture the sense in which rituals rely upon collective activity. Wittgenstein's criticisms of a reductively instrumentalist approach would likely prove useful for scholars like Sax working to negotiate the philosophical tensions between characterizing rituals as seeking “specific ends” and rituals as collective activity.

Additionally, some contemporary scholars of religious ritual approach ritual instrumentally in terms of the theme of “ritual efficacy.” This theme, stemming from the works of Hubert and Mauss, was originally associated with a perceived efficacy of the ritual on the part of ritualists. Recently, however, the term is used in a wider variety of ways. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, in a well-regarded 1990 book, insightfully highlighted the “duality of ritual efficacy,” a duality that he extracted from Malinowski's studies of ritual traditions. This duality, according to Tambiah, refers to a form of efficacy that is said to be “objectively' false” while remaining “subjectively' true to the actors.”\(^{59}\) Still other approaches have sought to identify the theme of


\(^{59}\) Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality (Cambridge University
“ritual efficacy” solely in terms of the immediate effects of a ritual, regardless of the intentions of the actors, thus moving even further away from the difficulties of the instrumentalist approach.

One other widely influential theme frequently carries with it instrumentalist presuppositions, namely the broader theme of ritual as “action.” The question of what makes a human action is the source of many debates today in analytic philosophy of action. Religious studies scholars have sometimes directly associated nearly any form of human action with intentional instrumental action, as Frazer did. Perhaps one of the most impressive critiques of this tendency is to be found in the writings of James Laidlaw and Caroline Humphrey. Their many works have repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that “Ritual is action in which intentionality is in a certain way displaced so that, as we summarise the matter, human agents both are and are not the authors of their ritual actions.” For them, rituals generally (1) occur partially unintentionally, (2) are stipulated according to repeatable rules for action, and (3) appear to ritualists as somehow emerging from a unity that is outside of themselves. As I shall argue in another chapter, such work is not only intimately aware of many of the problems raised by Wittgenstein when interpreting ritual as “action”, but it also suggests promising ways for improving upon Wittgenstein's thinking about ritual.

Aside from these contemporary themes in ritual studies, scholars focused on specific religious traditions have struggled with and addressed the problems inherent in interpreting religious rituals. Regarding the theme of instrumentalism in Islamic ṣalāt, the history of its development has proved revealing, particularly regarding how the times of day for prayer

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61 Ibid., 277-8.
initially became established. Uri Rubin's research, as presented in “Morning and Evening Prayers in Early Islam,” makes it clear that one finds in the early formation of Islamic daily prayer a further dependence upon social networks of meaning, corroborating Wittgenstein's insistence that a ritual's meaning stems from local social phenomena rather than instrumentalist origins. Rubin explains how the five daily prayers routinely practiced by Muslims originally stem from pre-Islamic rituals that were performed only twice a day, at sunrise and at sunset. Early Islamic leaders and scholars unsuccessfully attempted to distance ṣalāt from these earlier practices, primarily by insisting that the pre-Islamic prayers amounted to a form of heretical sun-worship. Muhammad himself likely began this distancing, as it is reported in multiple accounts that he, during a pilgrimage shortly before his death, insisted that the morning and evening prayers begin, respectively, before sunrise and after sunset. Today, however, many Muslims perform ṣalāt at the times of sunrise and sunset. Rubin, based on these early divergences from pre-Islamic practices, concludes, “These traditions indicate that despite the efforts exerted by Muslim scholars to suppress prayers during sunrise and sunset, due to their alleged pagan nature – prayers at these hours were never abandoned in early Islam...[because] [t]he sacredness attached to these hours was greater than the fear of paganism.”62 Clearly, this difficulty experienced by early Muslim scholars was not due to the fact that Muslim practitioners still sought to recapture the efficacy of sun worship, as Frazer might suggest.

While it has been noted by many scholars of religion that the requirement to perform ṣalāt five times a day stems from a ritualized intensification of the pre-Islamic practice of praying at morning and evening, the question of the relation of an instrumental purpose to this intensification is usually not directly considered. One might speculate that praying five times in

one day is an instrumental result of having first added an additional third prayer, and then intensifying this tripartite division into an easily memorable pattern. One might also speculate that any further additions (beyond five) would require an *impractical* monopolization of the day's *productive* hours, thus making the number five the most *instrumentally practical* way to make ritual prayer central to one's life without inhibiting the other dimensions of one's life. However, the temptation to understand the pentadic nature of Islamic daily ṣalāt in this way would, as Wittgenstein has argued, lead the scholar of religion astray. The repetitive and bodily-instinctual quality of such rituals, after having been performed regularly, leads the practitioner away from the, perhaps original, tendency to perform religious rituals on the basis of explicitly practical ideals. What is significant about the pentadic dimension of ṣalāt is primarily that it remains reliably pentadic, and it does not change to another number of repetitions should that number of repetitions become more practical for specific individuals. The repetitions and the fact that the repetitions are symbolically grounded in a group's way of living and acting are more significant for understanding these religious rituals than any supposedly originary instrumental purposes, as sought by scholars like Frazer.

Annemarie Schimmel has also revealed much about the limits of instrumentalism in her studies of ṣalāt as practiced by a variety of schools of Islam, including Şūfīsm. She begins by highlighting the fact that the Qur'ān reserves petitional prayer as a prerogative of mankind. She writes, summarizing the Qur'ānic view of prayer, “[T]hough everything created praises God in its own tongue, man alone can address God and speak his sorrows and hopes, putting them before the wise Lord.”\(^{63}\) This expectation, that prayer may operate instrumentally as a petition to God, led to a variety of debates between Şūfīs regarding the appropriate attitude toward prayer as

petition. While there are some Šūfis who regard \textit{ṣalāt} almost exclusively as instrumental acts of petition, she argues that, “On the whole, the moderate Sufis agree that God's not answering every prayer eventually proves to be as useful for the petitioner as the granting of his wish should be.” Ultimately she says that true prayer in Islam must move beyond instrumental self-understanding because one cannot truly seek to make Allāh respond to one's own acts of petition. Allāh's responses to prayer arrive on Allāh's own timing, and not as an instrumental result of petitionary prayers. Instead, she concludes, “The real value of prayer is to find consolation in the act of praying, by which human will is made to conform to the divine will.” On this view, the act becomes valuable in itself rather than in terms of the achieving of an explicit goal.

Few commentators on Islamic religious practice, however, can compare to the widely respected Muslim philosopher Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111). In his famous multi-volume \textit{Revivification of the Religious Sciences} there are few dimensions of the religious traditions of Islam that are left untouched. In his chapter on worship, al-Ghazālī first collects the essential scriptural bases for determining ritual prayer. He then considers a variety of purposes traditionally attributed to \textit{ṣalāt}, including purification, observing a scriptural compact with Allāh, atonement for sins, and repayment for benefits received. However, the primary feature of ritual prayer turns out to be internal to the act itself. Prayer, for al-Ghazālī, primary entails the embodiment of a kind of self-detached “humbleness” and quietness of mind. As he writes regarding \textit{ṣalāt} and other forms of Islamic worship, “Worship is a form that the law has made and our devotion is given reality by acquiring it. Its spirit and inner life are humbleness, intention, presence of the heart, and singleness of devotion.”

\begin{footnotes}
\item [64] Ibid., 159.
\item [65] Ibid., 160.
\item [66] Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid. \textit{The Mysteries of Worship in Islam}, trans. Edwin E. Calverley (Sh. Muhammad 91
\end{footnotes}
Explicating the inner life of ṣalāt, al-Ghazālī details “humbleness” and “presence of the
dmongness” and “presence of the heart” as a kind of suppression of one's own wishes before Allāh, focusing instead on allowing
these inward traits to help one not become “submerged in one anxious thought or other.”

Regarding presence of the heart specifically, he says that, “by this we mean that the heart is free
from everything but what the worshipper is engaged in and what he utters, so that the work may
be associated with both the acts and the words, and that the thought may not be wandering to
other things.” While there is here an intentional dimension regarding prayer, it is thus limited
to performance of the prescribed acts and utterances, with no thoughts toward ends other than the
single-minded intention to perform those very acts of worship. Humbleness, for al-Ghazālī,
becomes the most central and meaningful feature of ritual prayer, a distinct “feeling of
satisfaction” cultivated by the practice of ṣalāt, described as simply resting content, without
seeking any ends, in “the knowledge of the gaze of Allāh upon His creature, and the knowledge
of His majesty and the knowledge of the creature's shortcomings.” The outward prostrations
and other movements of ritual prayer are thereby, according to al-Ghazālī, said to be bodily
enactments that bring about a kind of inward prostration that is the most essential feature of
ritual prayer.

Scholars focused on Vedic ritual traditions have also given good reason to extend an
account of religious ritual beyond the limits of instrumentalism. In the Vedas, the central term
used for ritual is “yajña” (with adhvara, iṣṭi, yāga, and homa as close synonyms), a term most
frequently translated as “sacrifice,” meant in the sense of a “giving up” and not in the sense of
“killing.” In such rituals, there is always a “vidhi,” a process or actual rendition of a prescribed

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Ashraf, 1977), 34-5.
67 Ibid., 40.
68 Ibid., 44.
69 Ibid., 71.
course of action derived from interpreting the Vedas. The yajña-vidhi is regarded as a nitya or “obligatory” performance within the religion, and is to be performed daily by yajñikas or ritualists. To understand the concept of yajña, it is important to consider initially the tale of the Puruṣa Sūkta of the Rg Veda, which is perhaps the first place where the term is used. As K. Satchitananda Murty summarizes in his book Vedic Hermeneutics,

In the Puruṣa Sūkta, after saying that Puruṣa (the Person) is all this as well as what has been and shall be, and that one-fourth of him is all the creatures, three-fourths of him is eternal life, it is said that the gods sacrificed with Puruṣa as the oblation. His limbs were torn and scattered. From that all came, for Puruṣa divided is everything. Gods sacrificing sacrificed the Puruṣa (yajñena yajñaṁ ayajanta devāh); these were the first dharmas; by them did the mighty ones gain heaven. It is difficult to understand what the hymn means. Sayana [a later proponent from the Mīmāṃsā school] says the gods performed this sacrifice mentally with Puruṣa as the victim. This means that they meditated upon the whole world as being made from the body of the great Puruṣa. If everything is Puruṣa, then anything sacrificed becomes the Puruṣa. It is thus said in the Veda that yajña (originally performed by the gods) is performed to yajña by means of yajña. That which is sacrificed is thus what is essential to the performance of sacrifice, namely the vidhi, the required course of action. In that action, particular symbolic objects are “given up” and offered into a fire as oblation to the Supreme Puruṣa, which is simultaneously regarded as the very stuff of the sacrifice. Sacrificial elements such as ghee, kuśa grass, firewood, the sacrificial platform and the fire itself invoke symbolic associations within the Vedic “system of reference,” with each element corresponding to individual themes within larger complexes of ideas, such as seasons and directions.

Charles Malamoud, in his well-regarded work on ritual in ancient India, Cooking the World, notes that the Brahminical doctrine, that “it is the sacrificer himself who is transformed

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71 Charles Malamoud, Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India (Oxford University Press, 2000), 91.
into the sacrificial oblation,” offers a profound way to regard the nature of religious rituals.

“Nothing less than an entire anthropology is concentrated in this formulation.”72 This
“anthropology” suggests viewing ritual not as a means toward specific ends, but as a process the significance of which is contained in that very act. In other words, the sacrifice is generally performed for its own sake, because it simply should be performed, not for a specific goal in the mind of the performer. In the Mīmāṃsā school of ritual interpretation, it is sometimes said that benefits can be expected from performing yajña, but these benefits are not to be regarded as the ends of the yajña. As Malamoud explains it,

The sacrifice, in as much as it consists of the destruction by fire, of sacrificial materials, abolishes itself at that very moment in which it comes to an end. This cause, even though it is perishable, nevertheless establishes a distant effect, which is the attainment of heaven. This is because a trace of the sacrifice remains: this is called the apūrva, 'a particular tendency, established by an ongoing sacrifice, which is expected to bear fruit at a later time'.73

Malamoud here refers to apūrva, mentioned in my previous chapter, as a “residual effect,” because it is not a direct end of the sacrifice and because it is an effect the coming of which is unpredictable from the viewpoint of the sacrificer. This theme of the “remainder” or “residual effect” implicit in Vedic ritual performance becomes for Malamoud a major theme for unpacking the nature of ritual, primarily on non-instrumentalist grounds.

According to Krishna Roy’s general presentation of the Mīmāṃsā traditions of hermeneutics in her book Hermeneutics East and West74, the basic thought of the schools is focused on principles of adhikaraṇa, often translated “interpretation,” which divide such acts into two major camps: interpretation of words and sentences, and interpretation of sacrificial

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72 Ibid., 5.
73 Ibid., 20-1.
acts. As she notes, “The primary objective of the Mīmāṃsā system is to go back from the expression of the idea to the idea behind it, to solve the important problem of the relation between thought and action, injunction and application” (HEW, 93). The Mīmāṃsā tradition is argued to be “very much concerned with the socio-cultural and philosophical implications of the various problems connected with the adhikarins (or persons entitled to) of Vedic sacrifice” (HEW, 85). Wittgenstein's account of ritual similarly recognizes the importance of “training” individuals on the basis of social dispositions. A Vedic sacrifice cannot be performed by just anyone; it must be performed by someone who is 'fit' or socially entitled to perform it. Ritual actors are socially cultivated and ritually purified to become worthy of their performance.

One important Mīmāṃsā theme that connects closely with a primarily non-instrumentalist understanding of religious ritual is atideśa, “transferred or extended application” as distinguished from upadeśa, “that which is directly mentioned or implied in the Vedas” (HEW, 88). This theme addresses how elements of one form of sacrifice might be extended to another, provided there is no unavoidable ‘tension’ involved in such an extension. For instance, many Vedic rituals are understood to be subordinate rituals (vikṛti), in the sense that primary ritual significances or ritual structures, determined by a paradigm ritual (prakṛti), are extended or transferred to these subordinate rituals such that they are said to achieve their significance indirectly by promoting or supporting the paradigm ritual. As Roy notes,

Such transference is conditioned by such factors as prakaraṇa (context) and sthāna (position). This topic of transference immediately leads to two other principles of ūha or modification and bāḍha or suspension. The principle of ūha (which has been translated as ‘adoption’ and ‘modification’) mainly concerns the material environment of a spiritual duty. The principle of bāḍha (suspension) implies prohibition owing to inconsistency which becomes necessary for reconciling conflicting texts. (HEW, 88)
This notion of transference invokes a kind of logic that is to some degree similar to Wittgenstein’s well-known notion of “family resemblance,” a logic of symbolism by which overlapping similarities may become the basis for applications of ritual elements to differing circumstances provided there is nothing in place to rule out such extensional applications. Brian K. Smith notes, in *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*\(^{75}\), there are two general senses in which extended transference in Vedic ritual allows for a symbolic extension of ritual performance, and the second sense sometimes is used to establish a sense in which multiple individual ritual performances can serve as one continually uninterrupted ritual performance.

“The first is a kind of interior extension whereby the purpose extends from the center – from the principal rites – to the periphery or subsidiary rites. The second...is the extension of details from one whole ritual to another.”\(^{76}\) As Malamoud notes, this second principle is sometimes used in the *agnihotra* to encourage that “one should curdle the [milk] remains of the *agnihotra* in order to insure the continuity of the sacrifice.”\(^{77}\) Such an extension can allow for a single *yajña* to be carried on indefinitely.

This logic of ritual extension gets developed even further in relation to the remaining two principles mentioned by Roy. *Ūha* or “modification” singles out the fact that differing material environments will call for development of rituals in ways suitable to those environments. Some rituals, for instance, may call for an element of ritual that is impossible in a certain environment, and it will often be necessary to alter the application of the ritual to suit such circumstances. For example, if the fire for the *agnihotra* for some reason cannot be lit or rekindled, perhaps due to rain or flooding, then there are acceptable (though usually less valued) ways to modify the fire.

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\(^{76}\) Ibid., 129.

\(^{77}\) Malamoud, *Cooking the World*, 17.
offering, such as by instead placing the offerings onto a tuft of *darbha* grass or even in water. The principle of *bādha* is also designed to aid extended transference of ritual injunctions in cases when ritual texts may conflict about what to do in certain circumstances, such as when mechanical errors occur during the printing of a text. These principles make clear that the logic of Vedic ritual is not blindly rule-based; often ritualists must improvise based on context-dependent awareness, sometimes even deciding on the basis of something like Wittgenstein’s “ritual instincts” or “trained spontaneity” to determine if a given action will be recognized as appropriate by their religious community.

Mantras chanted in Vedic rituals also give some clue to how performers regard their actions. Consider the mantra “*idad agnaye na mama,*” a Sanskrit mantra repeatedly invoked during the Vedic *yajña* that is the *agnihotra*, an oblation to the Vedic god of fire, Agni. Translated literally, this mantra means, “This [implied oblation or offering] is for the sake of the Fire [Agni], not mine.” This mantra can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but three central ways come immediately to mind. First, the mantra singles out a broadly applied Vedic teaching that ritual acts are not to be performed for the sake of the direct interests of the individual, but simply because they must be spontaneously performed, because one owes it to the gods. Second, the mantra invokes the central theme of sacrifice as a “giving up,” namely that something valuable is being released to the god. Thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly, in the light of the *Puruṣa Sūkta*’s insistence that what is sacrificed is the Supreme *Puruṣa*, there is a real sense in which the oblation, even prior to the *yajña*, is “not mine,” not truly the possession of the *hotr* or ritualist, because the sacrifice continues the original sacrifice in which the sacrificer and the sacrificed are both part of the Supreme Person that is all things. This mantra thus illustrates that

Vedic ritual tradition does not regard the satisfaction inherent in a ritual as the satisfaction of the performer’s cognitive goals. Instead, the emphasis is put upon the appropriately passionate confession, release, and relinquishment of such desires in order to become part of the ongoing sacrifice of the larger community and even the cosmos.

A Wittgensteinian approach to religious ritual thereby can be shown to accommodate a wide variety of interpretive strategies traditionally associated with Islamic ritual prayer and Vedic ritual. Wittgenstein recognizes that ritual actions cannot be regarded as simple invocations of semantic content or discrete rational goals; instead they must be treated as a unique form of meaningful expressive action. And not regarding religious rituals as primarily means-end activities, he rather acknowledges that a logic of tradition-based resemblances and culturally prepared action must be at the basis of any account of the inner nature of a ritual. Wittgenstein also considers religious rituals to be best interpreted as actions complete in themselves, primarily unconcerned with external factors, whether they be historical precedents or individual profit. Frazer’s instrumentalist view could offer little in response to these traditions’ self-understanding aside from the culturally insensitive argument that these views are the result of an error of self-misunderstanding.

2.8 Concluding Reflections on Religious Ritual as Instrumental Action

So are everyday religious rituals instrumental actions? The answer would have to be negative if this question is a question about what makes ritual distinct from other forms of religious action, such as scriptural study, conversion technique, or reverential contemplation. Wittgenstein offers important arguments against the instrumentalist understanding of religious
ritual in his reaction to Frazer and in other later writings. Yet he does not rule out the possible involvement of instrumentalist action as a component of rituals. Such action would, however, operate as an inessential variation within the distinctive operation of ritual instinct and the ritualized expression of a wish. More importantly, Wittgenstein's responses to Frazer sketch a view of ritual that suggests important insights about what a theory of ritual would have to take into account. Wittgenstein's suggestive contribution projects the need for any view of ritual to produce an understanding that bridges a variety of traditional gaps. Ritual may be simultaneously personal and social; it may be both expressive and instrumental; it may appear blindly repetitive and yet be meaningful; it may not be based in belief and yet invoke recognizable symbols or concepts; it may be highly emotivist and yet evaluable. Wittgenstein's rejection of and response to reductive instrumentalism regarding religious rituals certainly does not amount to a respectably comprehensive theory of religious rituals. For instance, while Wittgenstein’s comments rightly emphasize the relation of ritual performance to the phenomenon of ‘belonging’ to a social group, they do not anticipate, for example, the kind of depth developed by Mīmāṃsā theory about the constitutive role of eligibility frequently built into ritual traditions. Theorizing ritual eligibility does a great deal more to explain precisely how belonging to a social group or belonging in a social role (and the ritual powers made possible through them) are established and maintained in social praxis. Wittgenstein does, however, encourage the present inquiry to envision more concretely the challenges faced by the interpreter of religious rituals as a primary component of religious life.

Wittgenstein's thinking on ritual should then not be taken to suggest a sufficient theoretical outline for interpreting religious rituals, but it does suggest fruitful directions for further development. Rituals can be interpreted historically and anthropologically, but Frazer’s
view clearly misses the fact that rituals can be interpreted, as Wittgenstein notes, “by means of the arrangement of its factual content alone, in a ‘perspicuous’ representation.” In contrast to Frazer, Wittgenstein promotes an approach to ritual interpretation that recognizes genuine rituals as complete and meaningful acts in and of themselves. This is why he states that, when attempting to understand them from the outside, “one can only describe and say: this is what human life is like” (WGB, 121).

What more can be said of what the outsider-interpreter should do when interpreting religious rituals? Wittgenstein seems to answer that the outsider should work to describe carefully, with sensitivity to linguistic and social context, ritual expressions as dependent upon an ever-manifest-yet-inexhaustible way of life, a way that it is difficult to articulate as an outsider. This would require a careful balance between participation and observation on the part of the interpreter, particularly because a major component of the sense of religious rituals can only be uncovered through performance itself. But Wittgenstein does not view such inquiries as fruitless or unnecessarily demanding; instead they are to be performed with a sense of importance and with deference to the social world of the performers, as well as a corresponding philosophical desire to bring thinking to bear on deep and fundamental aspects of human social experience. Such an interpretation, as mentioned earlier, would also primarily require particular attention to the ways in which ritual performances themselves embody inherent standards for their own evaluation. As Wittgenstein says, a great depth is encountered in the attempt to describe such practices. It is a task worthy of a mainstream academic philosopher or a philosophically motivated anthropologist. “When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there” (CV, 65). The inexhaustibility of the task does not make it a fruitless one. Wittgenstein’s objection to Frazer is that he attempts to exhaustively
explain the magic of ritual. But, “[a]n error occurs only when magic is interpreted scientifically” (WGB, 125). This is why Wittgenstein went to great lengths in his notes to show why “Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages” (WGB, 131).

For Wittgenstein, any study of ritual should be philosophically aware of how religious ritual operates at the margins of human linguistic capacities, leading inquirers into complex territories of particular ways of acting. Such considerations should also aim to be aware of the traditional, cultural pedagogical processes involved when ritualists acquire the ‘training toward spontaneity’ required by such performances. In Wittgenstein’s remarks regarding the development of a more genuine anthropology, he advises,

One could begin a book on anthropology saying: When one examines the life and behavior of mankind throughout the world, one sees that, except for what might be called animal activities, such as ingestion, etc., etc., etc., men also perform actions which bear a characteristic peculiar to themselves, and these could be called ritualistic actions. (WGB, 129)

Such an anthropologist thus would not seek to interpret reductively the ritual actions of others on the basis of evaluative concepts that are central to one’s own culture, as Frazer did with instrumentality. Such an anthropologist regards a distant culture’s ritual actions as “peculiar to themselves” because there isn’t just one kind of cultural foundation that is needed for actions to become meaningful. Ritualistic actions become meaningful as expressions of culturally specific wishes, cultivated inclinations to find among one’s companions a shared activity of impassioned meaning that unites a group through its own version of “the way we see and do things.”

With this understanding of anthropology in mind, it becomes clear that the essential problem with the instrumentalist view of ritual is that it ultimately refers back to a need to verify shared *intellectual* beliefs, since religious rituals, even when undertaken in a solitary manner, are ultimately group acts (due to their repeatable nature), as Wittgenstein's understanding highlights.
Their sense is grounded in a shared symbolic language made possible by religious social
organizations and their cultivation of the behavior of persons. The syntactic view that ritual is a
simple form of explicitly rational rule-following, discussed in the prior chapter, is partly right to
be suspect of attributing individual belief-based meaning to ritual due to the fact that a divergent
variety of beliefs are offered by ritualists to explain their actions, making it seem impossible to
call each performance “the same ritual” if the belief requirement were to be held as central. It
would be wrong, however, to assert that belief could have nothing to do with religious ritual
performance. Many ritualists will rightly say that their own performance is based on belief. It
cannot, however, be the case that religious rituals themselves, as repeatable acts, are grounded
in specific beliefs about the efficacy of those acts, since rituals are sets of actions that may be
repeated by different performers likely to hold divergent beliefs about a particular ritual.
Religious rituals are acts that may be repeated by different individuals, and they are based in a
particular form of repetition; they do not require a regularization of intellectual beliefs among
each and every participant to be repeated. Instead the continued practice of religious rituals relies
on a practical social unity that reaches deeper than explicit intellectual belief, reaching to the
level of what Wittgenstein calls “ritual instinct,” an admittedly underdeveloped concept that
nonetheless points the way to further clarification of other dimensions of ritual performance,
such as socially transformative action, practical morality, and performative aesthetics.
Chapter 3: 
Religious Ritual as Self-Transformative Action

3.1 The Question of Religious Ritual as Self-Transformative Action

Philosophy of religion traditionally has included discussion about the nature and possibility of a distinct kind of transformative experience, often debated under the generic phrase “religious experience,” presumably to ensure that a broad range of voices may enter into the dialogue. In most collections or anthologies devoted to the field of philosophy of religion, mysticism is traditionally included as one way to approach an understanding of such an experience. Mysticism generally regards religious experience as experience about which the intellect seems to fail as a means of representation, experience wherein commonplace perceptual distinctions may seem to fade away and even ordinary observations regarding the divide between subject and object may become eclipsed. Mysticism, however, is not the only way that philosophers of religion have addressed religious experience. Other approaches to clarifying the distinctiveness of religious experience aim to avoid the ambiguities of mysticism. Freudian psychology, for example, famously regards religious experience as a distinct form of wish fulfillment, one in which powerful illusions deceptively substitute for deep repressed desires, such as the desire for a protective father figure guaranteeing the satisfaction of our deepest needs, or for a cosmic promise that universal justice will prevail, or for solid assurance that there will be an attractive form of life after our inevitable deaths. Still other approaches seek naturalistic explanations for a distinction between ordinary perception and “religious” perception. Needless to say, any claim that there is a distinct form of religious experience will be met with a variety of competing modes of explanation. One thing, however, does seem to be agreed upon by most, if
not all, philosophies of religious experience. Religious experience is generally regarded as profoundly transformative of those involved.

Not all attempts to make sense of the transformative aspect of religious experience come from among the members of religious institutions, as may be easily discovered by surveying many naturalistic approaches. Just as naturalistic explanations of religious experience (frequently based on studies of the brain) are offered, still other non-religious approaches have been developed. My argument in this chapter gathers insights from a selection of religious and philosophical sources to develop a non-sectarian hermeneutic approach that recognizes socially instituted religious ritual as a distinct mode of religious activity capable of creatively transforming subjective or personal identity. I focus predominantly on integrating ritual-hermeneutic themes, primarily developed by the Muslim philosopher al-Ghazālī, into the context of more recent critical theories of subjective identity.

Islam has long regarded its core ritual practices as facilitators of profound self-transformation. This chapter initially examines how the Qur’ān conveys a theme of ritualized self-transformation as purification of the self, and how the widely influential Muslim philosopher Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī clarifies the nature of this ritual transformation, particularly in the context of Qur’ān recitation rituals. Both ‘traditionally inappropriate’ and ‘dangerously conformist’ ritual performances are ruled out by his in many ways ‘Socratically critical’ thinking about ritual, chiefly due to his insistence upon a ‘critically hermeneutic’ and ‘imaginatively intense’ concept of ritualism based on his broader epistemological account of ḥarām, understood as an original, inborn epistemic disposition argued to be distinctive of humans. Expanding al-Ghazālī’s inquiry, I then argue that another Muslim philosopher, Ibn al-‘Arabī, clarifies the influence of imagination upon Islamic ritual, in a way that is largely consistent with al-Ghazālī’s account.
This picture of Qur’anic ritual drives me to explore an underlying question addressed by al-Ghazālī and the major Muslim Andalusian philosopher, Ibn Ṭufayl. The question concerns whether socially instituted ritual practices should be regarded as at all necessary for religious self-transformation. While Ibn Ṭufayl encourages that a largely non-social and religiously transformative life may be lived, al-Ghazālī argues that social cohesion through ritual is, at the very least, an indispensable aspect of religious self-transformation. Taking the investigation of al-Ghazālī’s thinking on ritual one step further, by utilizing pointers from contemporary Islam scholar Ebrahim Moosa’s critical reading of al-Ghazālī’s broader philosophical oeuvre, I argue that a theme of intersubjectivity in al-Ghazālī’s philosophy of the self and *fitra* strikingly resembles arguments in contemporary philosophies of personal identity (particularly those incorporating a philosophy of the human body as an intersubjective entity – an entity whose personal identity is created, maintained and developed primarily via worldly relations with others). To illustrate this resemblance, the ensuing section considers recent feminist critiques of Kant’s theory of the self as an autonomous rational agent; these arguments reconsider how relations to others and actions performed with others may constitute the self, particularly in the ritually active domestic household. As a key example, contemporary studies of Islamic immigrant households excellently exhibit the importance of these feminist critiques for understanding religious ritual praxis. Lastly, to synthesize the prior sections, I argue that theories of symbolic action and of ritual in the works of Pierre Bourdieu serve to conceptually frame the core insights of these other approaches in a non-exclusivist way, adding depth and breadth of application to al-Ghazālī’s explanation of ritual as self-transformation and to the feminist philosophies of ritualized selfhood. Bourdieu’s account will be shown to articulate an explicit socio-theoretical, and essentially secular, vision of ritualized self-transformation as a
lived process synthesizing religious norms and narratives with symbolic social actions by way of
a praxis of intersubjective embodiment.

3.2 Qur’ānic Ritual as Self-Purification in al-Ghazālī’s Critique of Slavish Ritual

O my Lord! Make me one who establishes regular Prayer, and also such among
my offspring O our Lord! And accept Thou my Prayer. (Qur’ān 14:40)79

Islam places great emphasis upon ritual prayer as a process of both self-cultivation and
social preservation. The practice of ritual prayer (ṣalāt) is described consistently in the Qur’ān
as a transformative process of ritual purification, a prescribed action for worshippers to keep
their identities morally (and materially) clean in the eyes of Allah, while simultaneously
establishing a future unity of traditional praxis. The practice of ṣalāt is, in this sense,
conventionally recognized as a means for shaping self and society.

The Qur’ān emphasizes that ṣalāt, like most religious rituals, should be practiced in a
precisely repetitive manner to achieve its transformative power. To begin with, ṣalāt requires
practice and continual refinement of ṣabr. “O ye who believe! Seek help with patient
Perseverance (ṣabr) and Prayer: for Allah is with those who patiently persevere” (Qur’ān 2:153).
The Arabic term “ṣabr,” translated commonly as “perseverance,” has a wider range of meaning
than its English counterpart. As Islam scholar ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali notes in his widely used
English translation of the Qur’ān, “It implies (1) patience in the sense of being thorough, not
hasty; (2) patient perseverance, constancy, steadfastness, firmness of purpose; (3) systematic as
opposed to spasmodic or chance action; (4) a cheerful attitude of resignation and understanding”
(Qur’ān, p.28, n.61). Ritual prayer performed in this manner requires more than behavioral

translations used here come from this edition.
consistency, but also patience, understanding, and acceptance regarding the traditional understanding that innately immoral human beings are best when guided in thought and deed by the message of Allah.

The Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam notes that in the broader Islamic historical context “ṣabr” connotes

the ἀταραξία of the Stoic, the patience of the Christian and the self control and renunciation of the ascetic… Here we already can trace the Hellenistic sphere of thought for which renunciation was the kind of life fitting the true man, the wise man, the martyr. (SE, 480-1)

And, in the narrower context of Islamic Ṣūfī asceticism, “the word has here become, so to speak, a technical term and to a very high degree, as ṣabr is the cardinal virtue in this school of thought” (SE, 481). Throughout the various streams of Islam praxis the resignation and resoluteness of ṣabr functions as an initial disposition required for establishing ṣalāt as a religiously transformative action. By requiring ṣabr in ritual prayer, “Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, ye Members of the Family, and to make you pure and spotless” (Qur’ān 33:33). As the Qur’ān explains it, “[He who] establishes regular prayer…purifies himself [and] does so for the benefit of his own soul” (35:18). To facilitate this, a worshipper adopts ṣabr as a mode of disattachment toward her present self, and, relinquishing such attachment, is said to open the way toward purification (tazkiyah). This central theme of purification as ritual transformation is central to the present concerns of this project, particularly because al-Ghazālī’s philosophy of ritual integrates Ṣūfī connotations of ṣabr, such as the religious aspirant’s need to distinguish between and closely monitor her own physical ṣabr (renunciation despite bodily

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81 To clarify the meaning of the word, it is revealing to note that in Arabic it is literally associated with the pruning of a plant, thereby removing that which impedes further growth.
stress and suffering) and psychological ṣabr (renunciation despite natural impulses that impede spiritual development) (SE, 481). This distinction is clarified in terms of philosophy of fitra, conceived as a natural or inborn epistemic state unique to all human beings, a state that makes possible renunciation, pursuit of genuine knowledge, and moral self-development.

While fitra represents the common core of human epistemic capacity, nonetheless transformation of the self through ṣalāt is not said to have the same result for every worshipper, implying that ṣalāt may result in greater and lesser degrees of transformation. “[Believers] who establish regular prayers…have grades of dignity with their Lord” (Qur’an 8:1:2-4). These grades of dignity, achieved through ritual prayer, correspond to greater and lesser degrees of moral purification, purification that operates differently for each individual due to varying degrees of natural (bodily temptation) and social (worldly corruption) imperfections. The religious practices of Islam thus are represented by tradition as a path of purification whereby a worshipper seeks to utilize fitra and ṣabr to establish a continually greater corrective concord between herself and the message of Allah.

Still, not all Muslim philosophers explain fitra in the same way, and this has important implications for illuminating their distinctive concepts of self-transformation via ritual praxis. Al-Ghazālī, for instance, thematizes fitra as a primarily innate set of general capacities possessed by any fully developed adult human; thus the model of self-transformation he associates with religious ritual tends to emphasizes the struggle toward purification of ṣabr as a literal “transforming back,” namely in the sense that the ritualist seeks to remove or nullify contaminating influence accumulated through experience of bodily temptation and ordinary social life, for the purpose of realizing her own underlying divinely inspired nature. For al-Ghazālī ritual self-transformation is largely a project of uncovering and recovering a previously
established self-nature. When considering the views of al-Ghazālī, one should thereby bear in mind that some Muslim philosophers, particularly Ibn al-ʿArabī as I will argue later in this chapter, more strongly incorporate a theme of creative self-transformation together with a theme of uncovering and recovering.

Al-Ghazālī’s thinking on this matter can be clarified further through the example of Qurʾānic recitation rituals. Islam generally requires a Muslim to recite ritually passages of the Qurʾān, in addition to, and often in coordination with, ṣalāt, thus transforming her by way of gradually accrued blessings (baraka) derived from establishing a deeper understanding of revelation. In *The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qurʾān* al-Ghazālī theorizes proper practice of this recitation and its role in self-transformation, developing his account in terms of two sets of rules, one set for “external” (regarding outward, physical performance) recitation, and a second set for “mental” (regarding inward, attitudinal, and cognitive comportment) recitation. The guiding principle is that mere outward coherence with tradition is not enough for appropriate ritual performance; ritual must involve a pursuit of deeper understanding in order to achieve self-transformation. This is especially important to notice for those who might regard ritual performances in the mode of ṣabr, like ṣalāt or scriptural recitation, as exclusively passive modes of action, requiring no understanding or critical thinking.

Al-Ghazālī writes from a concern that slavish forms of Qurʾānic recitation, those that do not require pursuit of proper understanding of the Qurʾān, run the risk of plunging Islam into mindless conformity. The “external” requirements of recitation, presumably widely traditional during the time he wrote, are rather straightforward. Most involve presentation of one’s social

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82 Al-Ghazālī, *The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qurʾān*, trans. Muhammad Abul Quasem (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1979), (hereafter cited in the text as RI).
body among the religious community: being clean, being polite, dividing the text recited only into traditionally approved sections, performing the required prostrations and supplications, being audible to oneself while not being too loud to disturb others. Some outward requirements, however, serve as a bridge from which al-Ghazālī develops his account of the inward tasks required. Such outward tasks include performing an appropriate amount of recitation to match one’s sincere level of religious aspiration, reading from a Qur’ān that is regarded as beautiful by the reciter, reciting beautifully, slowly, and distinctly without ostentation and affectation while also simultaneously encouraging oneself to weep.⁸³

Al-Ghazālī argues that these outward requirements require critical reflection on the claims of the Qur’ān. While this may seem trivial to some, this point is crucial for noticing the Socratic character of al-Ghazālī. As with Socrates, who would challenge others in his society with questions about how well one truly knows what one claims to know, during al-Ghazālī’s time (and likely for many Muslims today) there was a perceived threat that interpreters of the Qur’ān may be left in confusion, and in response they may seek to twist its meaning to fit personal preferences, which raised al-Ghazālī’s concern that many Muslims would resort to “mere” or “blind” recitation to avoid such temptation. Al-Ghazālī significantly notes that this potentiality for slavishness is nonetheless influenced by an understanding, albeit a misunderstanding, of one of the Prophet Muhammad’s claims: “Whoever explains the Qur’ān according to his personal opinion shall take his place in Hell” (RI, 86). From al-Ghazālī’s perspective, to understand this claim a vital hermeneutic distinction needs to be made between coercing the text according to personal preferences and engaging the text according to clear

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⁸³ To clarify this last point, outward weeping is said to be necessary because the reciter should genuinely and emotionally “reflect on his shortcomings in respect of the commandments of the Qur’ān and its threats of punishment” (RI, 44).
understanding, and the “mental tasks” he explains are designed to avoid the former while insuring the latter.

Although I will not examine the full set of ten mental tasks, it does seem that the overall character of those tasks revealingly discloses al-Ghazālī’s general understanding of the kind of thinking required by ritual performance and the relation of such performance to religious self-transformation. These tasks make it clear that recitation requires an active synthesis of imagination (khayāl) and critical thinking, in that recitation requires the ritualist to be prepared (which includes being appropriately educated in traditional hermeneutic debate about scripture) to persistently improve one’s imaginative ability to present in one’s mind “the exalted nature” of the author of the text (RI, 56-61). The exalted status of Allah is said to be revealed not only by the Qur’ān, but also by the ritualist’s knowledge of “His attributes, His majesty and His works” (RI, 60-1). This reflection on a traditional and theological conception of divinity should not then be mere abstraction; the ritualist must “suppose that every part of the Qur’ān is intended for him” (RI, 72); she must “feel the Qur’ān” (RI, 75). Al-Ghazālī’s ‘practical hermeneutic’ (as I would refer to it, since the interpretation of the ritual is understood to be taking place ideally in the performing ritualist) for Qur’ānic recitation requires moving from attempting to understand the elevated nature of “divine speech” in the Qur’ān to more complex and more imaginative “mental tasks.” The ritualist initially must engage in “pondering” (RI, 62) and “understanding” (RI, 65) about her interpretive knowledge of the text and traditional meanings associated with the text; “[u]nderneath them are hidden meanings” (RI, 65). As al-Ghazālī intriguingly puts it, to develop beyond this level of interpretation, “The Qur’ān reader should be greedy in seeking this understanding” (RI, 66).
Preparation for amplification or intensification of this practical hermeneutic also requires effort toward acquiring self-knowledge. Such efforts allow for “getting rid of the obstacles to the understanding of the Qurʾān” (RI, 69). According to al-Ghazālī, these efforts must guard against “four veils” that distort the process of incorporating this hermeneutic into the praxis of the ritual itself: “direction of all care to the exact pronunciation of the letters” (RI, 69), “pure dogmatic following of an authority” (RI, 70), “man’s insistence upon sin” (referring to temptations that may arise during a ritual) (RI, 71), and, fourth and most importantly, “personal opinion” (RI, 72). Simplification or trivialization of the task of ritual performance (in the case of recitation, via exclusive focus on pronunciation), slavishness or radical conformity, and any temptation of the body toward sin thought to cloud the development of the self: it seems reasonably clear how these could impede appropriate understanding and ritual performance. It is key to notice, however, that the fourth veil directly responds to a need to clarify the Prophet Muhammad’s claim about scriptural interpretation. Al-Ghazālī aims to delimit the specific sense of “personal opinion” said to impede any reading of the Qurʾān. He argues that this phrase strictly implies interpretations regarded by “leading exegetes” as uncontroversially “wrong” interpretations, despite the extant differences of interpretation among the major schools of Islamic scriptural hermeneutics (RI, 72, 86). Clearly, avoiding these veils requires preparatory effort toward gaining both self-knowledge and also enough empirical and textual knowledge of tradition to access traditional interpretations of the Qurʾān.

Such preparations are said to lead a ritualist beyond simple access to accepted understandings of the surface meaning of the text. As al-Ghazālī theorizes, the “hidden meanings” of the Qurʾān are disclosed to the ritualist only when more imaginative “mental tasks”
are performed. To move beyond this initial level of suitable recitation, the ritualist must learn to encounter recitation of the Qurʾān as a direct encounter with a divine message of great depth.

Human beings have no power to penetrate into the depth of the divine wisdom, just as they have no power to penetrate with their eyes into the light of the sun itself. They, however, attain from the light of the sun itself only that which their eyes can bear and which enables them to seek information about their needs. Divine speech then is like a veiled king whose face is unknown [but] whose decree is carried out…” (RI, 59)

For the ritualist to encounter the text more fully, eventually as if it were literally divine speech revealed through his own reciting body, he must then “abandon the inner utterances of the soul (ḥadīth an-nafs)” (RI, 61) to encourage “rising to [a state in which he feels that he is] hearing the speech of God from God and not from himself” (RI, 80). This ‘self-quieting’, while reciting, leads to an imaginative encounter with the text in which the text itself in some way becomes God’s speech.

Al-Ghazālī divides this process of self-development into three levels of interpretive ritual encounter with the Qurʾān. In the early stage ritualists understand themselves to be reading to God. Eventually, however, “a man views with his mind that God is seeing him, addressing him with his kindnesses, and secretly conversing with him with his gifts and beneficence”; this level is characterized by the ritualist embodying a combination of “modesty, magnification [imagining the excellences of God], listening, and understanding” (RI, 81). If this second level is performed appropriately and regularly, it becomes possible for the encounter to reach to what al-Ghazālī presents as the highest level of religious encounter during Qurʾān recitation, ‘when a man feels that he is seeing the Speaker [i.e. God] in the speech [i.e. the Qurʾān] and His attributes in its sentences. He does not think of himself, of his Qurʾān-reading, nor the relation of divine gifts to him as the one upon whom they are bestowed” (RI, 81). The ritualist becomes “engrossed in the
vision of the Speaker, being divested of thought of anything other than Him” (RI, 81), “getting rid of any sense of his ability and power and his looking at himself with the eye of satisfaction and purification” (RI, 82).

Claiming his own direct experience of this state of recitation, al-Ghazālī writes, “I was being lifted to a green meadow where there were different types of flowers from Paradise. I was constantly looking at them until the day-break… These mystical intuitions can only occur after one gets rid of one’s self and does not look at one’s self with a sense of satisfaction and purification, nor at one’s passion” (RI, 84). This last passage eloquently ties together the elements of al-Ghazālī’s theory of ritual self-transformation as purification; by experientially restricting any aspects of the self not suited to appropriate hermeneutic relationship with divinity as revealed in the divine speech of the Qur’ān, the fiṭra, regarded as the common basis that allows human beings to have a relationship with the divine, becomes foregrounded in experience and thus recovered as “purified” of obstructions. The ritualist then may use her fiṭra to epistemologically and experientially focus on an understanding of the divine. The three levels of performance (which might be expressed differently as the literal, the imaginative, and the mystical) laid out in al-Ghazālī’s The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qur’ān represent a process of intensifying critical understanding, ṣabr, and aesthetic imagination for the purpose of ritual purification. While in that text he focuses primarily on recitation, the nature of his theory suggests that he would likely argue that there are analogue stages in ṣalāt, and I expect in other Islamic rituals as well.
3.3 Ibn al-‘Arabī on the Nearness (Tashbīh) of God in Ritual Prayer as Self-Transformation

The attempt to elucidate the promising but perplexing relationship so often described between aesthetic imagination, religious ritual performance, and religious self-transformation is addressed by many Muslim philosophers. Ibn al-‘Arabī, also a philosopher of religion, offers another approach to negotiating this relation, and his view, along with al-Ghazālī’s view, regards religious ritual as a necessary requirement for religious self-transformation. To understand the unique contribution of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view, it is important to first grasp his general philosophical orientation toward religion. One core insight in the religious philosophy of Ibn al-‘Arabī is that he regards Islamic religious life as a continual pursuit of an ideal religious state in which one practically realizes a harmony between the incomparability (tanzīh) and similarity (tashbīh) of God.

Religiously conservative thinkers in the Islamic tradition most frequently held that tanzīh should be the exclusive orthodox position regarding an understanding of God, in order to emphasize the radical difference between God and humanity, and the utter impossibility of humanity coming to know God without full submission to His will. Ibn al-‘Arabī, although somewhat unorthodox by conservative Islamic standards, soberly maintained that God as tashbīh must be maintained in a balance of tension with tanzīh, for he frequently argued that regarding God exclusively as tanzīh amounts to rendering any religious relation with God impossible. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, human rationality, in its attempt to grasp the details of reality, inevitably loses sight of the underlying unity of existence. This tendency of rationality to pluralize experience of reality is said to prevent an intimate religious relationship with God. In other words, Ibn al-‘Arabī regarded the injunction to regard God as tanzīh as an intellectual
barrier between God and humanity, one that causes religious practitioners to lose sight of many aspects of God’s perfection.

Ibn al-‘Arabī, like many Ṣūfī philosophers, believed that a state of personal transformation could be reached within which the intellectual cravings of rationality could be overcome. While regarding rationality as an essential element of religion, he nonetheless emphasized that rationality must be regarded as secondary to religious practices that facilitate direct experience of God as *tashbīh*. Appropriately performed *ṣalāt*, according to Ibn al-‘Arabī, would be understood to promote a radical transformation of the self, such that the heart (*qalb*) is tuned to allow for a harmonic alternation between approaching God as *tanzīh* (via rationality) and God as *tashbīh* (via direct religious experience). Ibn al-‘Arabī also wrote specifically on how this harmony is accomplished by way of an aesthetics of appropriate ritual prayer, which is said to uniquely utilize the human imagination (*khayāl*) as a necessary basis for direct religious experience. While this form of aesthetic praxis will be addressed in greater detail in my later chapter on aesthetics, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s understanding of the self-transformation resulting from such prayer is directly relevant to the present focus.

Like many other Muslim Ṣūfī thinkers, Ibn al-‘Arabī regards the *qalb* as a spiritual organ. That organ, according to Ṣūfī practice, is the center of an imaginatively produced spiritual body created by the Ṣūfī practitioner’s internal vision of himself before God during ritual prayer. Islam scholar Henry Corbin, in *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton University Press, 1969), translates Ibn al-‘Arabī’s phrase for this body, “ṣūra mithāliyya,” as “apparitional body.” The apparitional

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85 In the Arabic “ṣūra mithāliyya” the adjective “mithāliyya” stems from the noun “mithāl,” which may mean “example” or “allegory.” For this reason, it is tempting to adjust Corbin’s translation “apparitional body” to something like “paradigmatic body.”
body of the worshipper is said by Ibn al-‘Arabī to be in most aspects similar to the objective body, but it is one that appears within dreams or other imagined worlds. Through the apparitional body, the *qalb* gains the power to influence and shape the objective body of the person, resulting in a form of self-transformation. In the following passage Corbin translates one of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s central explanations of the phenomenon: “Thanks to his representational faculty…every man creates in his Active Imagination things having existence only in this faculty. This is the general rule. But by his *himmāt* [intentions of the heart, aspirations] the gnostic creates something which exists outside the seat of this faculty” (CA, 223). Explaining this passage, Corbin writes,

> In the case of the gnostic (‘ārif), the Active Imagination serves the *himma* which, by its concentration, is capable of creating objects, of producing changes in the outside world. In other words: thanks to the Active Imagination, the gnostic’s heart projects what is reflected in it; and the object on which he thus concentrates his creative power, his imaginative meditation, becomes the *apparition* of an outward, extra-psychic reality. (CA, 223)

The worshipper is said to be able to, among other things, utilize the aspirations of the heart (*himmāt*) to change his objective world (*‘ālam al-shahāda*), which importantly include changes in himself. In this way, the imagined object on which the Active Imagination is concentrated becomes endowed with an outward reality transformed by the *himmāt* in an intermediate world, simultaneously subjective and objective, “which is the encounter of the spiritual and the physical and which consequently dominates the outward world of ‘real’ objects” (CA, 234). The *himmāt* thus operate, for the persevering worshipper, as a transformative interpreter (*tarjumān*) between objective self and a religiously cultivated desire for a different future self, by which the worshipper may bring about substantial changes within herself via religious practice. Thus, according to Ibn al-‘Arabī, ritual prayer, performed in the appropriately imagined manner,
operates as a vehicle for self-transformation toward becoming more perfectly aligned with the values of the religious tradition through a *creative* harmonization of the worshipper with the traditional religious aspirations of such worshippers. While some may simply view this process as one of indoctrination, Ibn al-`Arabī’s normative emphasis on the creative role of the imagination indicates a significantly more complex process by which a worshipper works within tradition to develop the self, a process that will be addressed again in the context of the final chapter of this project in connection with the religious aesthetics of Ibn al-`Arabī and al-Ghazālī.

3.4 Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Ṭufayl on the Role of Socially Instituted Ritual in Religious Life

Muslim philosophers of religion also widely debate the broader and more contentious question of the general importance of social institutions in religious self-transformation. While Muslim thinkers rarely if ever deny the transformative power of *ṣalāt* and recitation, several have questioned the extent to which such practices must manifest themselves *socially*, as a group practice. Some Muslim philosophers have gone so far as to regard all ritual worship as an inherently private affair, requiring nothing more than a sincere relation between Allah and his follower. Others, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of living within a society united by organized ritual worship. An indirect disagreement between al-Ghazālī and Ibn Ṭufayl, another widely influential Muslim philosopher, reveals core arguments at play in these debates. Both wrote extensively about their understandings of the appropriate Islamic relationship between social practices and religious ritual.
In his philosophical autobiography, *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazālī provides what is perhaps the most dramatic way to approach a general view of his thinking on the wide variety of subjects upon which he wrote. *Deliverance* reorganizes most of the main themes in his corpus into a single narrative whole organized temporally according to key stages in his lifelong pursuit of religious self-transformation. It also outlines his reactions to many of the major religious schools of thought at the time, schools toward which his own philosophy of religion is organized as a response. And so, in one text the reader finds simultaneously the development of a philosophy of religion, a dialogue with other contemporary religious thinkers, and an intimate parallel to al-Ghazālī’s personal religious path.

In *Deliverance* al-Ghazālī introduces four groups of intellectual or religious elites that influenced his pursuit of self-transformation: the *Mutakallimūn* (specialists in systematic legal theology, *Kalām*), the *Bāṭinites* (followers of Shi‘a Imams), the Philosophers, and the Şūfis (the mystic-ascetic tradition within Islam) (DE, 58). Al-Ghazālī, early in his life, became famous as a specialist of *Kalām*, as the premier intellectual mind in the Ash‘arite school of interpreting the Divine Law of the Qur‘ān and Sunna, yet he states, “Subsequently, however, I found it a science adequate for its own aim, but inadequate for mine” (DE, 59). His training made him explicitly familiar with the ritual injunctions proclaimed in the Qur‘ān. This training also led him to become well-educated in the history of philosophy, and he wrote much about its capacity for producing knowledge, although in the end he decided that, regarding philosophers, “to all of them, despite the multiplicity of their categories, cleaves the stigma of unbelief and godlessness” (DE, 61). Yet, of the four elites influencing him, he shows the least regard for the *Bāṭinite* followers of the Imams; as he saw them, “their doctrine comes down to deceiving the common

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folk and the dim-witted by showing the need for the authoritative teacher” (DE, 73). These were the first three major influences on the early thinking of al-Ghazālī, and his autobiographical narrative conveys vividly how each exerted a serious influence upon his later religious practice. Through his tale, he not only displays intimate knowledge of their doctrines and practices, but he also suggestively conveys their unique religious strengths by creatively invoking central supporting images and passages from the Qur’ān and Qur’ānic literature. The key personal aspiration said to guide his religious exploration is the search for the highest knowledge, which, in the end, he argues, can only be found in direct relationship with God. Thereby, each of these first three groups suggests for al-Ghazālī a way of searching for that highest knowledge, although each is eventually regarded as unsatisfying (DE, 77-78).

Al-Ghazālī’s personal dissatisfaction with the limitations of Kalām and philosophy led him to an existential crisis, which eventually caused him to seek truth and religious self-transformation in a way that emphasized the centrality of embodied religious praxis, particularly those practices emphasized by ascetics. He left his fame and prestige behind, and for eleven years he followed the path of Śūfīsm, a path followed primarily by ascetic Muslims devoted to simple living and ritual practices aiming toward directly transformative religious realization. His primary concern was to, by way of embodied praxis, transcend the limitations of intellectual religious contemplation. This path led to a religious experience known by Śūfis as “fanāʾ,” transformative absorption of the self into God, the goal of his Śūfī practices; and, after this experience, he concluded, “the Śūfis are those who uniquely follow God Most High, their mode of life the best of all, their way the most direct of ways, and their ethic the purest” (DE, 81).

It was thus only in this final of the four paths, the path of Śūfīsm, that al-Ghazālī became convinced that he had found knowledge beyond doubt. Philosophy and Kalām, though essential
to his religious transformation, were thought by al-Ghazālī to rely on dubitable foundations, if
adopted solely on their own. Şūfism, however, opened the way to an experience that certified
the truth of what was previously in doubt, by way of cultivating a directly embodied encounter
with God through the practices of a ritually ‘perseverant’ religious community. According to
well-known Islam scholar Carl W. Ernst, the Arabic term “taṣawwuf” is regularly used to refer to
this tradition of Şūfism, literally meaning “the path of becoming a Şūfi,” a path which involves
characteristic “ethical and spiritual goals and functioned as teaching tools to open up the
possibilities of the soul.” According to al-Ghazālī, the truths revealed by Şūfi religious practice
gave him greater confidence in the knowing capacities of the human form, for through fanā’ and
the testimony of others in the Şūfi community it became apparent that each human’s fiṭra
(original epistemic disposition) includes the capacity to recognize truth in four main ways:
sensation, practical moral reasoning, intellectual reasoning, and the capacity to receive divine
insight by way of prophecy, the ultimate fruit of the Şūfi Tarīqa (“Way”) (DE, 83). More
importantly, Şūfi practice emphasizes that religious transformation requires that religious
practice engage each of these realms of experience. Having tasted a life-changing mode of
praxis that even transformed his trust in human intellectual capacities, al-Ghazālī thus turned
during his last years toward once again teaching and writing about Kalām, philosophical
thinking, and Şūfism in hopes of reviving the religious and intellectual spirit of Islam. Thus, his
philosophical autobiography should be read as a personalized narrative for encouraging the
reader to seek a deeper understanding of why embodied religious praxis within a religious
community is necessary to avoid becoming mired in a solely intellectual approach to religion.

Martin (Macmillan Reference USA, 2003).
But not every Muslim religious philosopher agreed with al-Ghazâlî. Placing doubt on the transformative value of socially grounded religious praxis, the philosophical novel Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzân\textsuperscript{88} by Abu Bakr Ibn Ṭufayl (ca. 1110-1186) articulates the ultimate place of the human within the universe by an account of how religious experience stems from the natural capacity to reason about human experience. It is important to recognize that Ibn Ṭufayl is a seminal figure in the history of Islamic philosophy and Western philosophy in general, particularly in the development of naturalism. A variety of contemporary scholars have argued that his thinking strongly influenced the Scientific Revolution. Sami Hawi, for instance, in his 1997 book *Islamic Naturalism and Mysticism*\textsuperscript{89}, argues that Ibn Ṭufayl anticipated many core aspects of Darwin’s thinking. “Ibn Ṭufayl believed in the slow generation of life from inorganic matter, the notion of struggle for existence, and the necessity of adaptation of the organism to the environment, all of which are evolutionary Darwinian concepts” (HN, 124). The story Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzân directly exemplifies these prefigurings, and Ibn Ṭufayl’s closely corresponding critique of traditionalist human societies.

Ḥayy, the main character of the story, is the only human living on an island. His entire young life is spent without other humans. He is raised only among non-human animals, but his natural philosophical capacities continually develop until he has discovered principles for philosophical logic and scientific inquiry, as well as an understanding of the cosmos according to a kind of Neoplatonic metaphysics. The tale essentially is about the human soul, revealing its nature through the story of a particular soul developing of its own natural disposition (fitra), independently of the obstructions of society. Ibn Ṭufayl constructs this situation to emphasize

\textsuperscript{88} Abu Bakr Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzân*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Gee Tee Bee Press, 2003), (hereafter cited in the text as T).

the self-sufficiency of the soul as the basis of a critique of society, comparing the achievements of Ḥayy in isolation to the achievements of a nearby culture. As with al-Ghazālī’s story, the narrative dimension is here used to engage the reader’s imagination such that the story hopefully completes itself in the reader via insight gained into a process of self-transformation. But Ibn Ṭūfayl’s tale differs from al-Ghazālī’s, first in that it is largely fictitious. Ibn Ṭūfayl does, however, use some resemblance to his actual social world; the nearby culture in the story is described, in a thinly veiled way, as based on a strict religion directly based on Islam. Ḥayy’s intellectual self-sufficiency and his personal religious awakening thus stand in the account as an exemplar against which to criticize popular Islamic religious praxis, and perhaps even societies in general, as impeding religious self-development. It is crucial at this point to realize that Ibn Ṭūfayl’s Ḥayy is first an Aristotelian philosopher; his mysticism requires and directly stems from an independent and rationalist intellectual foundation. For al-Ghazālī such a foundation is regarded as helpful, but not strictly necessary.

The climax of Ibn Ṭūfayl’s narrative is a metaphysical vision of divinity, the source of Ḥayy’s eventual self-transformation and religious enlightenment. There, like al-Ghazālī, Ibn Ṭūfayl uses language that resonates strongly with images and passages from the Qur’ān, opening the text toward a wider appeal in the Muslim world. But Ibn Ṭūfayl also couches the relationship between divinity and the human world within a speculative Neoplatonic metaphysics, a strain of philosophy often associated in Islam with heretical theology. After experiencing absorption (fanā’) into “the One” or “the True Being” or “the Necessarily Existent Being,” Ḥayy notices that from the One, analogized as the sun, emanates a hierarchy of spheres of pure intelligence, each mirroring the light of the One and reflecting it to the lower spheres.
He saw a being corresponding to the highest sphere, beyond which there is no body, a subject free of matter, and neither identical with the Truth or the One nor with the sphere itself, nor distinct from either – as the form of the sun appearing in a polished mirror is neither sun nor mirror, and yet distinct from neither….He saw it to be at the pinnacle of joy, delight, and rapture, in blissful vision of the being of the Truth, glorious be His Majesty. Just below this,… this again was neither identical with the Truth or the One, nor with the highest sphere, nor even with itself, yet distinct from none of these. It was like the form of the sun appearing in one mirror, reflected from a second which faced the sun…Thus for each sphere he witnessed a transcendent immaterial subject, neither identical with nor distinct from those above, like the form of the sun reflected from mirror to mirror with the descending order of spheres. (T, 152)

Eventually Ḥayy discovers that other lesser spheres follow each sphere of subjectivity mirroring the One, “until finally he reached the world of generation and decay, the bowels of the sphere of the moon” (T, 153). There he discovers a peculiar being. This being too is “free of matter,” and it too mirrors the Divine, except that it is described as having “seventy-thousand faces,” each praising and glorifying the divine. “It was as though the form of the sun were shining in rippling water from the last mirror in the sequence, reflected down the series from the first, which faced directly into the sun” (T, 153). Shortly after, Ḥayy realizes that he, as a disembodied subject, is one of those many bodiless faces. Ibn Ṭufayl quickly clarifies the ambiguity of this one being with many faces, saying, “If it were permissible to single out individuals from the identity of the seventy-thousand faces, I would say that he was one of them” (T, 153). In other words, in this passage he describes a group of religious souls that are as accomplished and as devoted as Ḥayy, each represented as fundamentally non-bodily entities. Ḥayy thus is portrayed as one of the rare souls who have distanced themselves from their embodied selves, the material world, and society in order to live a primarily intellectual life contemplating and praising the joyful Divine. And, based on this ultimate experience, the final part of the narrative is thus devoted to showing how
traditional social religious praxis is an unnecessary distraction from the possibility of achieving Ḥayy’s enlightened state.

This tale, unlike al-Ghazālī’s text, portrays philosophical contemplation as naturally, even necessarily, leading to religious pursuits so long as the fitra remains unhindered by social conventions, as exemplified by Ḥayy’s discovery of religion without culture and without any companionship. Yet, for al-Ghazālī, single-minded reliance upon the pursuit of philosophy could lead to self-deception, disbelief in religious tradition, and rejection of religious ritual praxis. Al-Ghazālī never saw the need to reconcile the relationship between religion and philosophy, instead preferring to view each as accomplishing individually valuable aims. Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Ṭufayl both include in their narratives the message that the pursuit of knowledge, religious or philosophical, leads to religious obligations. Al-Ghazālī argues that knowledge is only worth seeking if it allows one to live a moral and healthy life in a religious society, while also seeking a deeper realization of God. Ibn Ṭufayl, however, is less concerned with the possibility that there might be social obligations involved in the pursuit of higher forms of knowledge.

Ibn Ṭufayl has more faith in what some Muslim philosophers have regarded as society’s “weeds,”90 exceptional individuals who, like wild, uncultivated plants in a garden, do not follow traditional norms. This is why he uses Ḥayy’s story to represent the development of the unobstructed fitra; epistemological and religious obstructions are thought to arise directly from socio-cultural involvement. Al-Ghazālī offers less support for those who reject tradition so strongly. Yet, connected with this fact, it should be noticed that during his lifetime al-Ghazālī

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90 A concept developed in the philosophies of al-Fārābī and Ibn Bājja. For more on this concept see Michael S. Kochin’s “Weeds: Cultivating the Imagination in Medieval Arabic Political Philosophy,” in Journal of the History of Ideas 60, no. 3, 399-416 (Johns Hopkins Press, 1999).
was famous for promoting a kind of political “gradualism;” he repeatedly advised against revolts and war against societies of differing religious practice, since his emphasis on religious ritual at the same time required temperance by intellectual reasoning.\textsuperscript{91} Ibn Ṭufayl, from al-Ghazālī’s perspective, would likely be viewed as too radical and revolutionary to appreciate religious community. Al-Ghazālī held that religious reform could only take place after the establishment of social peace and religious harmony. This, however, does not mean that he viewed social norms as beyond reproach.

3.5 Ebrahim Moosa on al-Ghazālī’s “Dīhlij-z-ian” Compromise with Social Convention

So, how did al-Ghazālī negotiate this compromise between the demands of regional religious traditions and his insistence that critical, individual reasoning is necessary to avoid mere dogmatism in religious praxis? How did he seek to avoid problems of blind conformity and individualistic intellectualism? Recall that for Ibn al-‘Arabī the himmāt (religious aspirations) and the apparitional body guiding the worshipper toward a transformation of the self in religious ritual are essentially shaped by religious tradition. However, while these two concepts add considerable depth to an understanding of the operations of the “Active Imagination” toward self-transformation, they do not do enough to clarify how such private experiences are influenced by the social aspects of religion. Al-Ghazālī’s thinking more directly addresses the influence of social traditions on the religious imagination, and this aspect of al-Ghazālī is given special attention by religion and philosophy scholar Ebrahim Moosa. Moosa’s

\textsuperscript{91} See Massimo Campanini’s introductory article “Al-Ghazzali,” in History of Islamic Philosophy, 258-274, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (Routledge Press, 1996), especially p. 260.
book, *Ghazâlî and the Poetics of the Imagination*\(^{92}\), vividly details how al-Ghazâlî’s philosophy of religion acknowledges the influence of traditionally cultivated religious practices on the shaping of the self. Moosa’s interpretation of al-Ghazâlî explores a dynamic in al-Ghazâlî’s philosophy neglected by many commentators. While many notice that much of al-Ghazâlî’s philosophy focuses more heavily on the pursuit of knowledge than on the significance of Islamic religious praxis, Moosa argues that al-Ghazâlî’s emphasis upon seeking knowledge is not as epistemologically individualistic as it may seem. “Knowledge is essentially about ethics – how to live and transform the self and others. Al-Ghazâlî acknowledged that he first acquired informative discourses and reports, what we would call the facts of knowledge. But it takes something more for information and facts to morph into proper knowledge, by which one grasps a sense of reality” (MG, 91). Religious ritual and other social actions, al-Ghazâlî emphasized, were required to bring about what Moosa asserts is al-Ghazâlî’s primary concern: “to reconstitute his physical senses as well as his self” (MG, 91).

For Al-Ghazâlî self-transformative religious practice requires careful attention be paid to major ‘gaps’, especially the gap between academic intellectualism and religious praxis. He was acutely adept at this in his own personal life, largely because of his extensive familiarity with the complexity of his socio-religious world. According to Moosa, al-Ghazâlî’s successful ability to occupy a social space for accessing religious, intellectual, and other divergent arenas of social praxis and discourse is best accounted for by noticing Al-Ghazâlî’s philosophical tendency to characterize his own methodological position of inquiry in terms of “dîhîlîz” (lit. “threshold”) concepts. “In his own complex space, or the dîhîlîz, the intermediate space or the threshold space

that Ghazālī identified – one with intersecting boundaries and heterogeneous notions of practices and time – he forged different narratives of religion” (MG, 27). His philosophy embodies this threshold concept in a variety of ways, in that most of his work negotiates boundaries between conventionally separated realms of experience: mental and physical, traditional and heterodox, familiar and new, religious and philosophical, exoteric and esoteric. This aspect of his philosophy is central to Moosa’s understanding, particularly due to its capacity to account for the experience of “subalternized” contemporary Muslims (MG, 34).

What we learn from Ghazālī is that his dihlīz-ian subjectivity was one that zigzagged and freely oscillated between the dominant, juristic discourses like law and theology while also effortlessly crossing over to the heterological discourses of mysticism. And along the way, he also decided to raid the archives of philosophy for good measure… The psychic restlessness that he exhibited in his mental and physical criss-crossing over the threshold (dihlīz) offers salient lessons for the postcolonial and postmodern Muslim subject in search of emancipatory knowledge and resources to address her many dilemmas. Admittedly, when located at the dihlīz, one acknowledges the gray areas, intermediate zones, and degrees of uncertainty that are not unequivocally resolved. Despite Ghazālī’s most wrenching desire for personal certainty in matters of faith, in the realm of the ethical he was aware that there is always a penumbra of uncertainty. (MG, 274)

This capacity to face uncertainty is at the heart of the metaphorical term “dihlīz”: a Persian word that literally refers to “that space between the door and the house.” “The dihlīz signifies the space as well as the action of two entries: entry from the outside and entry into the inside… Viewed from the house proper, the dihlīz is located on the outside. But viewed from the door leading to the street, the dihlīz is on the inside” (MG, 48). Unlike a border, the dihlīz is “a welcoming space,” and “it is neither entirely private nor totally public… Even though it is located between spaces, the dihlīz frames all other spaces” (MG, 49).

Al-Ghazālī sought to think from a philosophical space where one may creatively synthesize the variety of social influences available for cultivating oneself, which allowed him to
incorporate a wider range of human behavior in his approach. His insistence that Muslim philosophers take Qur’anic recitation and ʿalāt seriously stems from his framing of the dihlīz as a kind of “alchemical” zone in which a thinker may filter out erroneous or misleading influences arising within social praxis while cultivating the self. Later Muslim philosophers came to refer to al-Ghazālī’s alchemy of the self as his “science of transaction” (MG, 239), by which the religious seeker “develops a unique integrity (istiqāma) within the self” through learning to negotiate between and harmonize the tensions between the variety of forces that “transact” in the shaping of the self (MG, 239). Al-Ghazālī emphasizes that the process requires fiqh (“discernment”), which leads to more than just knowing the precise nature of Islamic law. Ijtihād (“intellectual effort”) toward the development of fiqh could eventually lead one to become a faqīh al-nafs (“discerner of the self”), capable of knowing the social and mental constitution of oneself in profound ways. Al-Ghazālī’s route to self-knowledge also requires three kinds of knowledge of the ordinary world: psychological, domestic, and political. It requires acquiring knowledge of general human psychology, so as to facilitate acquiring “understanding of the self and the possible ways in which self-discipline can be exercised” (MG, 243). It also requires the ability to manage a wide array of domestic affairs, ranging from simple care-giving in the home to the demands of domestic religious practice. Lastly, it requires “knowledge of politics and the skills to manage the polis” (MG, 343). In short, fiqh al-nafs (“discernment of the self”) requires careful investigation of personal, social, and political spheres of experience.

Ritual prayer and other Islamic rituals are critical to al-Ghazālī due to their intensive focus on the symbolic transformation of personal identity, because “sacrality enters through the metaphoric domain” (MG, 91). Moosa emphasizes that al-Ghazālī sought to promote this
transformation through the incorporation of ‘prosopopeia’ (*lisān al-hāl*) into one’s actions, namely acting as if one’s actions or speech is constituted in relation to an imagined person, in this case a reconceptualization of al-Ghazālī himself. In this regard, al-‘Arabī’s concept of the apparitional body connects directly with al-Ghazālī’s philosophy, but, according to Moosa, what al-Ghazālī uniquely emphasized was that the imagined self becomes transformative precisely because the construction of an apparitional body is an act of interpretation. For al-Ghazālī, a hermeneutics of the self is at the heart of the transformative relation. Religious practices, especially the Ṣūfī practices of al-Ghazālī’s later life, are regarded as utilizing the imagination in order to reconceptualize the self in terms of newly gained experience. As al-Ghazālī developed his understanding of Islam, his approach to religious practice continually made use of *lisān al-hāl* as a means by which to precisely direct his *qalb* to transform his nature. In this way a self-interpretive dimension, what Moosa refers to as “narrativity of the self,” becomes central to al-Ghazālī’s approach to rethinking religious practice as a process of self-construction. “To come to grips with the structure of al-Ghazālī’s narrative is to recognize that his commitment to the logocentric discourses of law, theology, and philosophy in the early part of his career prefigured their counternarratives (heterologies), the most relevant being the complex tapestry of mysticism” (MG, 92). Al-Ghazālī’s turn to Ṣūfī mysticism in later life was undertaken with a direct concern to take his self-transformation further than could be achieved by intellectual means. One of his primary contributions regarding religious ritual, thereby, is to notice that the core orthopraxy of a religion loses its significance if it is subjected to the continual scrutiny of instrumental or intellectual rationality without allowing the imagination to engage in creative re-interpretation of the self based on socially grounded religious aspirations.
Moosa at one point parallels this understanding of religious praxis to Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion, noting that for Wittgenstein also “established beliefs are preceded by the events and experiences that inform them. Needless to say,… a range of practices precede beliefs that finally crystallize into a dogma, or article of faith” (MG, 139). For al-Ghazālī, it is clear that core Islamic ritual practices and Ṣūfī practices are essential to his understanding of ethics and religion. One might, however, speculate that al-Ghazālī adopted such positions primarily because the political power of Islam at the time would not have allowed him to espouse a rejection of traditional Islam. Moosa’s study of al-Ghazālī, however, makes it clear that al-Ghazālī’s insistence on the core religious practices of Islam is sincere. “I would argue that, for al-Ghazālī, there was a dialogical relationship between macro and micro politics, namely between the government of the polis and the government of the body” (MG, 214). Al-Ghazālī did not think it was feasible for one to simply take care of one’s ordinary life and religious pursuits without acknowledging that one is inevitably part of and responsible for the welfare of a larger society.

In connection with this line of thinking, Moosa also makes a convincing case that al-Ghazālī anticipates the contemporary philosophical conception of the “intersubjective self,” a concept conspicuously absent in Ibn Ṭufayl. Viewing the care of the self as no simple affair,

His ethical paradigm is thus configured on three inter-linking aspects: the disciplining of the soul (tahdhib al-nafs), the governance of the body (siyāsa al-badan), and the administration of justice (ri’āya al-‘adl) in society…. To become a subject of God, the self must become a subject to itself in a necessary and voluntary act of self-surrender. Liberation, in Ghazālī’s scheme, consists in subduing one’s animal nature and turning instinctive drives into ideas, thoughts, and imagination. It is when the corporeal body is allegorized that the possibility of realizing one’s higher theomorphic nature also increases. (MG, 216)
Ethical and religious self-development require more for al-Ghazālī than individual rationality; they also require practices that shape the body’s habits and instincts to perform service to society and service to the divine. In al-Ghazālī’s world there was no act that combined the disciplining of the self with the effort to uphold responsibilities toward society more seamlessly than traditional religious ritual, as a careful reading of his analysis of Qur’ānic recitation reveals.

The phrase “tahdhīb al-nafs,” translated by Moosa as “disciplining of the soul,” is key here, although Moosa’s translation of tahdhīb as “disciplining” could be improved. “Tahdhīb” literally denotes more than just disciplining; it additionally refers to a sense of continued refinement, making “persistent refining of the soul” a more revealing translation of tahdhīb al-nafs. This translation also more directly connects the phrase to al-Ghazālī’s “alchemy” of the self, since tahdhīb is a kind of “refinement” that implies a “cleansing from impurities,” as when purifying gold. For al-Ghazālī tahdhīb al-nafs seeks to refine the self critically and gradually so that it becomes sustainably capable of its best performance, particularly by refining the goals and desires of the self. Such extensive effort requires resolutely maintained engagement of one’s own mind and social body, and this is why the regular and repetitive nature of traditional religious ritual clearly represents a vital and essential force for self-transformation to al-Ghazālī. The transformation possible by ritual performance, when achieved through al-Ghazālī’s critical yet imaginative hermeneutic approach “to reconstitute his physical senses as well as his self” (MG, 91), is thought to impact successfully more aspects of selfhood than would blind conformity or individualistic intellectualism.

It is important at this point to note that, while I do find Moosa’s interpretation of al-Ghazālī to be persuasive, there may be some doubt among contemporary scholars regarding whether al-Ghazālī actually intended to convey a concept of intersubjectivity as Moosa presents
it. To be fair, Moosa’s phrasing when discussing al-Ghazālī does directly reflect common themes in contemporary philosophy, themes that regard the body as the creative ground of an intersubjective self. It is clear, for example, that Moosa’s thinking on al-Ghazālī was strongly influenced by Michel Foucault’s writing on similar themes; his ubiquitous use of the phrases “care of the self” and “technologies of the self” stem directly from Foucault’s writings. However, regardless of whether Moosa’s portrayal of al-Ghazālī is accurate (and I suspect it is), for the present purposes it is important to notice that a theory of the self-transformative nature of religious ritual requires an account of the self as an intersubjective embodied entity, for it is according to this understanding of the self that the transformative power of religious ritual may be understood most clearly. While Foucault’s understanding of the body might seem to provide the most promising site for further development of this understanding, I instead look next at recent feminist theories of self responding to Kant’s theory, which largely ignores the intersubjective dimension of personal identity, thereby exhibiting many of the kinds of problems that al-Ghazālī sought to avoid when theorizing the self.

3.6 Feminist Critiques of Kant’s Theory of Selfhood and the Role of Ritualized Domestic Space

Debate over the nature of personal identity is of course as central to philosophy today as it ever has been. However, while Plato and many other past philosophers regarded the self as an immaterial thing distinct, even separable, from the body, today most philosophers of personal identity theorize the self as largely made up of extrinsic relations. The issue is no longer simply a question of how the psychological self relates to the physical body. Instead, the most important debates about personal identity surround how a person is determined by relations to everything
else in their world, particularly other persons. Nonetheless, the view of the self as an immaterial substance is still largely influential in many societies, particularly in the realms of politics and conventional morality (some aspects of mainstream abortion debate offer a clear example).

Challenging such views, feminist philosophers of the self have often drawn critical attention to the negative repercussions of viewing the self as a non-physical thing. While ancient concepts of self have been critiqued for centuries, a good deal of contemporary attention is directed at Kant, in particular, because of his highly influential understanding of the self as a free, autonomous, and rational agent that transcends body and culture.

Diana Meyers has published many works analyzing and developing the contributions of feminist theory to the discipline of philosophy. Representing the central concerns of a wide variety of feminist responses to Kant’s theory of selfhood, she argues, “Age, looks, sexuality, and physical competencies are extraneous to the [Kantian] self. As valuable as the capacities for rational analysis and free choice undoubtedly are, it is hard to believe that there is nothing more to the self.”

Put generally, feminist critiques of the Kantian “disembodied self” tend to argue that such a view is at best radical simplification of human subjectivity, and at worst a masked attempt to situate masculine social values as central priorities for ethics and politics. To address the perplexities of human personhood, while not ignoring its realistic diversity, far more needs to be taken into account than rational decision making. Meyers highlights three major strands of feminist philosophy that take into account more of the psychological, physical, and extrinsic-relational breadth of humanity when theorizing personal identity – psychoanalysis, object relations theory, and poststructuralism. Reviewing these approaches also helps to frame the

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distinctiveness of ritual praxis as a form of self-transformation within the broader concerns of critical philosophies of selfhood.

Julia Kristeva, discussed earlier in chapter one, is perhaps the most influential feminist philosopher to take a psychoanalytic approach to developing a philosophy of self. Nancy Chodorow, on the other hand, is well known for having developed insights from object relations theory. Comparing the two approaches, Meyers explains,

Kristeva seeks to neutralize the fear of the inchoate feminine that, in her view, underwrites misogyny… But whereas Kristeva focuses on challenging the homogeneous self and the bright line between reason, on the one hand, and emotion and desire, on the other, Chodorow focuses on challenging the self-subsisting self with its sharp self-other boundaries. Chodorow’s claim that the self is inextricable from interpersonal relationships calls into question the decontextualized individualism of the Kantian ethical subject… (FS, 251)

Kristeva’s approach aims to show that traditional philosophers of the self have sought to discover its nature by overemphasizing masculine social roles, particularly due to the fact that patriarchal societies tend to associate masculinity with law, reason, and clarity. This gives rise to the well-known tendency to identify femininity with being ‘capricious’, ‘irrational’, or even ‘hysterical’, due to the tendency of many forms of traditional masculinity to devalue the emotive and appetitive aspects of selfhood. Kristeva highlights the need to reconsider the nature of supposedly “inchoate” dimensions of selfhood, and, as I argue, an analysis of ritual praxis brings these inexplicit aspects of personal identity to the fore when inquiring into ritual’s self-transformative potential. Chodorow’s critique of the Kantian self likewise finds support when analyzing ritual’s influence on selfhood. She argues that Kant’s emphasis on the self as autonomous and ontologically separate from other selves tends to frame the self in a socially unrealistic way, namely as an isolated and fundamentally private entity. Object relations theory, a field of study closely related to the psychoanalytical tradition, argues that selfhood is created,
maintained, and developed primarily in relations to others, such that others become literally an essential part of personal identity.

Both Kristeva and Chodorow provide angles from which to appreciate religious ritual praxis as transformation of selfhood. Both emphasize, to different degrees, the mutability of selfhood and the roles that non-cognitive experience and social relations play. The most promising contribution, however, comes from Judith Butler’s poststructuralist philosophy. For Butler, the process of ritualized performance itself becomes more central. Meyers regards Butler’s contribution to the philosophy of personal identity as one of the most vocal rejections of “this failure to come to grips with the diversity of gender” (FS, 252). As Meyers clarifies,

For Butler, psycho-dynamic accounts of the self, including Kristeva’s and Chodorow’s, camouflage the performative nature of the self and collaborate in the cultural conspiracy that maintains the illusion that one has an emotionally anchored, interior identity that is derived from one’s biological nature, which is manifest in one’s genitalia. Such accounts are pernicious. In concealing the ways in which normalizing regimes deploy power to enforce the performative routines that construct “natural” sexed/gendered bodies together with debased, “unnatural” bodies, they obscure the arbitrariness of the constraints that are being imposed and deflect resistance to these constraints. (FS, 252)

Butler’s approach emphasizes the need to take account of how “normalizing regimes” socially constitute the self as existing with a spectrum of varying degrees of acceptability and non-acceptability. Religious ritual – particularly as it is practiced on a daily basis, and especially as it is practiced within a domestic religious household – by taking a clue from Butler, can be regarded as a profoundly powerful force that shapes the self.

Clarifying this line of thought, philosopher Elizabeth Spelman lucidly illustrates the importance of domestic praxis for maintaining personal identity. In the chapter, “The Household as Repair Shop” from her monograph *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World*[^4], she

examines many forms of domestic labor traditionally, although not exclusively, undertaken by women. “[W]omen’s work in the household has been to the larger society what the combined work of gas station, car wash, and repair shop is to automobiles” (HR, 32). Much of this work involves the commonplace repairing of relationships and of the human body. “The household functions – or is supposed to function – as a multipurpose repair site. It offers a pretty good microcosm of the variety of repair activities humans engage in” (HR, 34). In this way, Spelman argues, the tradition of repair distinctive to “domestic femininity,” while not always (or even often) non-harmful to the repairer, nonetheless offers an essential insight into how repair represents a core aspect of maintaining a self. And the domestic repair performed traditionally by women not only focuses on maintaining basic socio-familial relationships and general bodily health; it also focuses on the literal “repair of persons” (HR, 41). Often through the imparting of lessons and other normative practices of repair, a caregiver in a household may do a great deal to shape the personal and moral identities of those with whom she lives. “Persons are by their very nature bound up in relations to others, and tensions and conflicts in those relations are at the heart of moral dilemmas” (HR, 44). Spelman’s inquiries into “repair” as a central aspect of human personhood decidedly opens important avenues for thinking about how selves are maintained and even transformed in everyday social environments like the home.

Focusing more directly on the details of religious ritual praxis, sociologists of religion Shampa and Sanjoy Mazumdar harmonize nicely with the thinking of Kristeva, Chodorow, and Spelman when they argue, “For many, the home is the cornerstone of religious identity.” Their many years of recent work on domestic religious praxis draws much-needed attention to the fact

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that more often than not it is revealing to regard domestic space and domestic ritual as a major
locus from which religious identity is creatively maintained. Perhaps more frequently than
temples, churches, or even everyday village shrines, the home serves as the ubiquitous bedrock
of familiarity from which religions are empowered to transform personal identity. Nowhere is
this fact more dramatically illustrated than in the home of the religious immigrant to a
predominately secular landscape. Some of Mazumdar and Mazumdar’s most provocative work,
at least for the purposes of this project, focuses on Islamic immigrants to the United States
because, as they explain, “When immigrants left home, they left behind the physical
‘objectifications’ of their religion, such as their churches, mosques, synagogues, sanctuaries,
pilgrimage sites, altars, and icons” (AR, 127). In some places immigrants (of almost any
religion) may even feel they have to avoid openly displaying their religious books or materials;
in this way everyday domestic religious ritual can become, at least for some, a last bastion for
sustaining religious identity.

Muzumdar and Muzumdar argue that immigrant Muslim homes in the United States are
usually deliberately designed to facilitate religious self-transformation. Their study shows how
home occupancy rituals (particularly for purifying the building), aesthetics and artifacts, personal
ritual purification, daily religious rituals, food and holiday rituals, and the traditionally central
role of women are all coordinated to establish domestic space as a veritable workshop for
making selves. These homes not only establish ritual praxis within their borders, they also are
designed in terms of the realization that “engaging in any rituals requires a domestic practice and
relays the importance of such domestic practices in establishment of Muslim identity, the role of
women in this process, and the balancing of congregational, formal, public practice with the
domestic” (AR, 141). Women, too often regarded as marginal or unpronounced in public
Islamic ritual, are more often than not a powerful force for developing significant religious lives at home. Often the overseer of the home, frequently a woman, transforms the domestic building occupied into “Muslim space” (AR, 128).

Home occupancy rituals, for example, are particularly important. Dogs, for instance, are especially regarded as unclean animals, and so carpets and floors will be carefully cleaned to remove any trace of them, specifically due to the popularity of dogs as pets in the United States. In fact, most Muslims do not keep dogs or cats as pets due to the chance of contaminating the religious spaces of the home (AR, 133). Any food-containing appliances or shelving are also cleaned in a like manner, since many foods in the United States are not regarded as ritually pure in Islam. More directly connected to daily religious ritual, the placement of copies of the Qur’ān in the new home can only occur after the home has been purified. The location of the copies is particularly important. It is usually placed at a higher level than other objects (and never on the floor), frequently just above eye level while standing, and usually in a place that is easily seen when entering a room or the home itself (AR, 130). Even the time of the placement of the Qur’ān in the home for the first time can be important; “some place it in the home a week prior to physically moving in” (AR, 128), presumably a further effort at home purification. More frequently practiced, the entrance to the home is marked as a ritualized space, with many Muslim families placing an Arabic inscription over the front door to inform outsiders of their Muslim identity (AR, 129).

To facilitate ṣalāt many Muslim homes will include a qibla compass, which points in the correct direction for facing Mecca during prayer. Prayer mats are frequently placed in positions where prayer will occur, particularly if that location is not regarded as absolutely clean. Aural devices are also often placed in these locations to remind occupants of the appropriate times for
prayer. One interviewee indicated to Muzumdar and Muzumdar, “I think having [these] objects gives me a sense of security because I feel as if they keep me safe from harm and remind me of who I am when I feel lost or bewildered” (AR, 131). Homes are also designed to facilitate individual preparations for daily prayer. Many bathrooms are custom designed to include devices for aiding in the cleaning of the body prior to prayer. “For example, South Asian Muslim households have lotas that resemble watering cans. Some toilets have bidets. Physical purity before prayer further involves cleansing through the performance of ablutions (wudu/wazu)” (AR, 136). Such ablutions are required by all Muslims before performing salah, and for each of the five daily prayer sessions; these rituals involve extensive cleansing of the body, with particular attention to the cleansing of all areas of the head and neck, including rinsing the inside of the mouth.

These are just a few examples to illustrate the kinds of ritual arrangements that may be enacted in a domestic space for the purpose of transforming the self. In the homes of Muslim immigrants,

Daily rituals structure their lives from the moment they wake up in the morning to the time they go to bed at night. Prayer five times a day is a constant reminder of religion. For Muslim children, participating in and observing rituals at home is an important learning process. It helps them internalize the “objective” and “subjective” reality of the sacred. (AR, 139)

To be sure, this kind of arrangement is by no means uncommon in other religious traditions. Yet the case of Muslim immigrants to the United States serves to illustrate dramatically how religious traditions explicitly and implicitly regard ritual praxis as a primary force for self-transformation, particularly in the form of daily actions within domestic space, as stressed by theories of selfhood contributed by Butler and Spelman. While the feminist theories of self-considered here have certainly offered well-developed insights for understanding ritual as a self-
transformative practice, as I am arguing, in the next section I will maintain that Pierre Bourdieu provides the most advanced theoretical account of how a religious ritual may operate in terms of the intersubjectivity of the body as a component of self-transformation.

3.7 Bourdieu’s Contribution to Understanding Ritual as Self-Transformation

Bourdieu conceptualizes ritual as a general social practice (not necessarily religious) involved directly in the production and maintenance of social institutions of symbolic power and, more broadly, in the development of language in general. Rituals in general are investigated as “rites of institution” in his *Language and Symbolic Power*:\(^{96}\) “To speak of rites of institution is to suggest that all rites tend to consecrate or legitimate an arbitrary boundary,…the limits which constitute the social and mental order which rites are designed to safeguard” (LS, 118). “[T]he important thing is the line” (LS, 118). In any ritual there is the attempt to establish the passage of an event as a fundamental symbolic act within the social order. The line thus represents some practical event emerging from within a broader social situation:

> There is thus a hidden set of individuals in relation to which the instituted group is defined. The most important effect of the rite is the one which attracts the least attention: by treating men and women differently [for example], the rite consecrates the different, it institutes it, while at the same time instituting man as man…and woman as woman. (LS, 118)

In this passage the effect that “attracts the least attention” marks one of the most important features of Bourdieu’s account of ritual. In other places, he refers to this effect as one leading to “misrecognition,” an important concept that will be illustrated shortly. This passage also implicitly refers to another central concept for Bourdieu, that of a broadly shared, socially

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embodied way of being of a people, a “habitus,” within which the line-consecrating ritual occurs. Prior to any rite of institution there is already a socially grounded and widely accepted notion of how “man as man” or “woman as woman” is to be understood, regarded, or treated. Rituals thus bring about new social distinctions on the basis of established social praxis within a broader habitus.

“Habitus” is one of Bourdieu’s fundamental philosophical concepts. Nearly all of his works throughout his life continued to enrich the notion. Describing his concept of habitus, Bourdieu notes, “[T]he factors which are most influential in the formation of the habitus are transmitted without passing through language and consciousness, but through suggestions inscribed in the most apparently insignificant aspects of things, situations, and practices of everyday life” (LS, 51). The insignificant or extremely familiar structures in society thus bear a special power for sustaining the social divisions that define a habitus as a social space. While explicit content from language or thought can influence a habitus, it primarily maintains itself on the basis of social structures that inculcate widespread pre-reflective opinions or embodied dispositions further detailed by the eccentricities of one’s station in the pre-existent social order.

Bourdieu, using the example of circumcision rituals from Islamic Kabyle society observed during his field studies in Algeria, illustrates how rituals are performed and “naturalized” based upon socially produced embodied symbolisms, symbolisms that may not be reflectively cognized by the individuals involved.

[C]ircumcision separates the young boy not so much from boys still in childhood, but from the women and the feminine world; i.e., from the mother and from everything that is associated with her…[A]s the process of institution consists of assigning properties of a social nature in a way that makes them seem like properties of natural nature, the rite of institution tends logically…to integrate specifically social oppositions, such as masculine/feminine, into series of cosmological oppositions – with relations like: man is to women as sun is to the
moon – which represents a very effective way of naturalizing them. Thus 
sexually differentiated rites consecrate the difference between the sexes: they 
constitute a simple difference of fact as a legitimate distinction, as an institution. (LS, 118)

The above analysis exemplifies the relationship between a process of “symbolic naturalization” 
and the “misrecognition” fostered by the performance of a ritual. In Kabyle society, men and 
women are traditionally understood according to a variety of traits associated with common male 
and female physical differences. The male-circumcision ritual draws a further line between men 
and women (that between the circumcised male and femininity in general, marking the end of the 
more direct female involvement with the child-male), publicly associating the natural differences 
between men and women with the consecration of a new difference. “Misrecognition” then 
occurs because of the new, largely unexplained, association of the ritualized difference with 
a set of assumedly natural differences, thereby allowing for the ritualized difference to appear to 
be justified on the basis of natural differences. In other words, the ritualized enactment of the 
arbitrary distinction makes that distinction “magically” plausible due to its resemblance to prior, 
easily accepted distinctions. For Bourdieu, rituals in general are socially transformative actions 
precisely because they rely upon misrecognition of ritual actions as actions that are a manifestly 
“natural” part of the habitus.

Religion, then, according to Bourdieu, would incorporate ritual as a form of symbolic 
embodied efficacy for actualizing “the power they possess to act on reality by acting on its 
representation” (LS, 119). Religious ritual is thus not merely formal choreography; it is able to 
transform an individual’s social reality and thus reality in general in two primary ways. First, it

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97 This unfortunate term is used by Bourdieu, despite his recognition in many passages that such 
“misrecognition” is an inevitable part of human praxis. The connotation of error implied here, by the traditional 
usage of the term, must be, at least to a large extent, disassociated from the technical meaning of the term in the 
present context. Further scholarly investigation, however, into the implications of this potential connotation for 
Bourdieu’s corpus would certainly do much to clarify further his implicit metaphysical commitments.
transforms “the representations others have of him and above all the behavior they adopt towards him” (LS, 119). Second, it also alters “the representation that the invested person has of himself, and the behavior he feels obliged to adopt in order to conform to that representation” (LS, 119). Thereby ritual is frequently described by Bourdieu as a form of “social magic” able to “create difference ex nihilo, or else (as is more often the case) by exploiting…pre-existing differences, like the biological differences between the sexes or…the difference in age” (LS, 120).

For Bourdieu rituals achieve this through the socially authorized power of institution or consecration. “To institute, to assign an essence, a competence, is to impose a right to be that is an obligation of being so (or to be so). It is to signify to someone what he is and how he should conduct himself as a consequence” (LS, 120). The imposed sense of essence, this “social essence,” is the direct product of a ritual’s power. Ritual places a human being in a new role, a social role that serves to reinforce and maintain tradition on the basis of the obligations or rights involved in the new role. It is important to notice that the “right to be” and the “obligation of being so” are simultaneous in ritual, and this is clearly reflected in the fact that many rituals utilize the distribution of honorary titles for the newly established social roles. Rituals thus not only empower individuals who have crossed through them, but they also transform their social identities and impose obligations as “naturally” required because, as a social event, the community recognizes and accepts those obligations as belonging to those who fulfill such roles. The ritualized individual is also expected to live according to the new expectations associated (often implicitly) with that power. Thus, the “social essence” assigned to an individual in a ritual is defined by Bourdieu as “the set of those social attributes and attributions produced by the act of institution as a solemn act of categorization which tends to produce what it designates” (LS,
Ritual, accordingly, may be understood as performative action producing and maintaining tacitly binding social identities.

Also, even though the performance of ritual requires understanding society as invested with the privilege to impose new norms, the power of the ritual still “rests fundamentally on the belief of an entire group…that is, on the socially fashioned dispositions to know and recognize the institutional conditions of a valid ritual” (LS, 125). The socio-symbolic efficacy of a ritual will then vary according to the degree that the audience and participants are willing and ready to receive it. “The belief of everyone, which pre-exists ritual, is the condition for the effectiveness of ritual” (LS, 126). On this understanding, rituals have a two-sided nature. On one hand, rituals are a means for dominant classes of society to impose belief or social distinction on dominated classes so that those beliefs or distinctions are taken as natural. On the other hand, however, rituals manage to produce a “veritable miracle” by which “consecrated individuals believe that their existence is justified, that their existence serves some purpose” (LS, 126). Therefore, Bourdieu’s understanding of ritual according to these two ways allows individuals to develop as simultaneously dominated and self-creative beings. It is crucial to note here that, while al-Ghazālī would emphasize that the best rituals transform the self in the sense of reestablishing a relationship with a person’s divinely established original nature (fiṭra), Bourdieu places far more emphasis on the malleable nature of selfhood, and without presuming a speculative metaphysical basis for human nature. Still, both directly acknowledge that rituals may condescend and marginalize, but each also emphasizes that rituals may transform a person in terms of widely desired social values. A ritual, depending on how it is performed, could be a miracle or a curse.
Importantly, rituals are not understood by Bourdieu as simple verbal communications; instead, the role of the body as an intersubjective vehicle of communication is emphasized. Language in general is understood more broadly as a “body technique,” with a variety of forms of expression included.

The sense of acceptability which orients linguistic practices is inscribed in the most deep-rooted of bodily dispositions: it is the whole body which responds by its posture, but also by its inner reactions or, more specifically, the articulatory ones, to the tension of the market. Language is a body technique, and specifically linguistic, especially phonetic, competence is a dimension of bodily hexis in which one’s whole relation to social world, and one’s whole socially informed relation to the world, are expressed. (LS, 86)

“Bodily hexis” is widely used throughout Bourdieu’s corpus. In his early text Outline of a Theory of Practice, he explains the phrase. “Bodily hexis speaks directly to the motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, because linked to a whole system of techniques involving the body and tools, and charged with a host of social meanings and values” (OP, 87). It is “political mythology realized, em-bodied” and is thereby a socially durable way of “standing, speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (OP, 94-5). This understanding then provides the scholar of religion with a way of understanding the bodily-performative dimensions of ritual according to the prior and broader role of the body in the social struggle for influence. This understanding of language as embodied suggests how rituals create and use meaning to transform individuals, despite the fact that the actions involved may seem arbitrary or without semantic explanation. The actions of ritual are themselves a mythologizing of the socio-political norms of a society, creating new individuals not only by imposing social duties or speech on them, but also by requiring them to “act out” embodied forms of socially

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determinative language. Body language is thus another form of implicit social norms that ritualists utilize to guarantee further the acceptability of the transformations brought about.

The speech, symbols, and dispositions of embodied individuals are not the only form of social norms available for use in religious rituals. Larger patterns can be incorporated as well, so as to make the magic of the ritual seem “natural” to the participants and audience. For instance, Bourdieu often highlights a key relationship between ritual performance and the establishing of calendars based on natural seasonal cycles. “[T]he calendar is indeed one of the most codified aspects of social existence” (OP, 97). In Islam, for example, the Muslim lunar calendar re-establishes the Gregorian calendar’s year 622AD as the first year of the calendar due to the fact that it marks the hijra, the journey of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina, officially beginning the religion. Religions also frequently make use of calendars both as a way to regularize the performance of rituals and also as a way to further “naturalize” ritual. By performing religious rituals, such as marriage, only in a certain season, such as spring, associations are invoked between the need for marriage and the necessity of natural cycles. Rituals in this way become perceived as required for “socially obvious” linear-temporal reasons.

[A] calendar substitutes a linear, homogenous, continuous time for practical time, which is made up of incommensurable islands of duration, each with its own rhythm, depending on what one is doing, i.e. on the functions conferred on it by the activity in progress. By distributing guide-marks (ceremonies and tasks) along a continuous line, one turns them into dividing marks united in a relation of simple succession. (OP, 105)

Thus, the calendar not only makes the performance of ritual seem more plausible by “naturalizing” them according to “guide-marks” stationed according to seasonal cycles; calendars also provide ritualists with a way of assuring that ritual performance is linear and routine, thus increasing the capacity for rituals to become habitual in a society, which in turn
allows for mere “guide-marks” to transform into socially real “dividing marks.” By distinguishing ritual performance from the non-linear “functions” of practical time, Bourdieu reveals ritual as a form of habituation or habit formation aimed toward self-transformation.

The habituation involved in ritual produces what Bourdieu calls “symbolic power,” one of the most complex and central concepts in his philosophy. For the purposes of this investigation, the significance and production of symbolic power in ritual performance can only be described briefly. In another text, The Logic of Practice99, the relation of symbolic power to rituals is directly discussed.

Ritual practice performs an uncertain abstraction which brings the same symbol into different relationships by apprehending it through different aspects, or which brings different aspects of the same referent into the same relationship of opposition…This uncertain abstraction is also a false abstraction…This mode of apprehension never explicitly limits itself to any one aspect of the terms it links, but takes each one, each time, as a whole, exploiting to the full the fact that two ‘realities’ are never entirely alike in all respects but are always alike in some respect. (LP, 88)

And so, rituals, according to this understanding, use symbolic structures from within society in a very loose and underdetermined way, utilizing resemblance and imitation so as to employ a range of implications associated with a symbol. A homology of symbolic oppositions can thus be established, which allows for ritualized imposition of further symbolic oppositions (such as in the analogies “man : woman :: east : west” or “sun : moon :: dry : wet”) (LP, 88).

Bourdieu explains this mimetic production of symbolic power on the basis of a revealing analogy between music and ritual, suggesting that sequences of symbolic ritual practices can be seen as analogous to musical “modulations.”

[Accordingly,] the specific principle of ritual action, the concern to stack all the odds on one’s own side, favors the logic of development, with its variation against

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a background of redundancy. These modulations play on the harmonic properties of ritual symbols…Another modulation technique is association by assonance, which can lead to connections without mythico-ritual significance (*aman d laman*, water is trust) or, on the other hand, to symbolically overdetermine connections (*azka d azqa*, tomorrow is the grave). (LP, 88)

Bourdieu thus illustrates how ritual makes maximum use of polysemy in performed actions, a process similar to Umberto Eco’s description of the “unlimited semiosis” frequently used in Hermetic texts. These modulations, however, are not always intellectually explicit in ritual, for the ritualists or an audience. Thus he refers to this “logic of development” as a “logic of practice” to distinguish explicit intellectualist logics from those that make explicit or implicit use of the ambiguities of practical symbolic structures.

The notion of a practical logic, from the point of view of traditional logic, easily seems like a contradiction in terms. This is because ritual practice, according to Bourdieu, has a natural tendency to exclude intellectual attention from itself and its operations. “It is unaware of the principles that govern it and the possibilities they contain; it can only discover them by enacting them, unfolding them in time;” thus rites are said to “demonstrate the fallacy of seeking to contain in concepts a logic that is made to do without concepts” (LP, 92). This fallaciousness is due to the fact that rituals speak of homologies and analogies, when in fact they are simply events during which actions are coordinated into performative schemes of behavior. It is because of this “loose logic” that Bourdieu applies the term “misrecognition” to the mechanism by which rituals produce new identities. That which is directly a simple matter of imposed actions is said to be misrecognized by the ritualists as informative and meaningful due to the logic of the practice.

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100 This phrase, coined by Eco, indicates how that which a sign signifies, the signified, in certain usages, may interminably imply further signifieds solely by virtue of traditional networks of association. The phrase is discussed in many of Eco’s works. For key examples, see the Indiana University Press publications of *A Theory of Semiotics*, *The Role of the Reader*, and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. 

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Although Bourdieu may seem to regard rituals as meaningless, his account of the symbolic efficacy of ritual helps one to understand why rituals are frequently associated with the power to achieve meaningful self-transformation.

If ritual practices...are practically coherent, this is because they arise from the combinatorial functioning of a small number of generative schemes that are linked by relations of practical substitutability...This systematicity remains loose and approximate because the schemes can receive the quasi-universal application they are given only in so far as they function in the practical state, below the level of explicit statement and therefore outside of the control of logic, and in relation to practical purposes which require them and give them a necessity which is not that of logic. (LP, 94)

Rituals take place “only because they find their raison d’être in the conditions of existence and the dispositions of agents” (LP, 96). If rituals are to be associated with meaning, they should then be connected with the traditionalized narratives and aspirations underlying them.

Turning his attention to religious practices in particular, in *Practical Reason*¹⁰¹, Bourdieu praises Max Weber for making an important step forward for the study of religion as a social practice.

Weber reminds us that, to understand religion, it does not suffice to study symbolic forms of the religious type, or even the immanent structure of the religious message or of the mythological corpus...Weber focuses specifically on the producers of the religious message, on the specific interests that move them and on the strategies they use in their struggle. (PR, 57)

The social space of “positions” that these religious specialists occupy in the broader competitions of society is what Bourdieu refers to as “the religious field.” Here “field” is understood as a sub-division of the larger habitus, one specifically composed of the structures set forth and maintained by religious institutions. Aside from this understanding of the religious field, however, Bourdieu acknowledges that categorizing religions according to the practical interests

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of religious specialists will likely be denounced as unrealistic by those specialists. “[Such objectification] risks making us forget that [a religion] is an economic enterprise that can only function as it does because it is not really a business, because it denies that it is a business” (PR, 113).

Bourdieu’s core philosophical insight is that reality should be understood as simultaneously a material and symbolic world. It is not the case that the economic or material bases for religion are more fundamental. Thus, Bourdieu concludes, “Religious institutions work permanently, both practically and symbolically, to euphemize social relations” (LP, 116). It is not the case that religious specialists always act out of a desire for economic profit at the expense of their followers; they are also caught up in the symbolic efficacy of their practices, the social-restructuring power of their practices. “Clerics themselves have an ambiguous economic status, as they live in misrecognition: they are poor, but their poverty is only apparent and is elective. This structure suits a double habitus of ambiguous practices and discourses, of double meanings without a double game” (LP, 118). Their life is thus not a “double-game” because the economic and symbolic dimensions of their practices are co-determinate parts of the same game. Thus it becomes apparent how a religious ritualist can often require the performance of religious practice while simultaneously being aware of the material benefits sought by such orthopraxy.

As Bourdieu shows, the formation of ritual is constituted on the basis of an essential relationship between symbol and practice in the social habitus. Religious ritual is further mediated by the field of religion, which even further determines the symbols and practices of the habitus by euphemizing social relations and the habituation of socio-religious duties. This nexus of determinative relationships allows the intellectual observer of religious ritual to regard such ritual as a socially basic opportunity for delegating powerful symbolic connections between
religious orthopraxy and religious orthodoxy via the practice of ritual. Orthodoxies are sustained by the orthopraxies of ritual; orthopraxies are sustained by the orthodoxies of doctrine. And, more importantly, throughout the process there is always the potential for orthopraxy to influence or transform orthodoxy, or vice versa. The inter-determination of orthopraxy and orthodoxy is especially relevant for philosophies of religion that view ritual performance as a mere manifestation or dramatization of orthodox philosophical beliefs. Religious beliefs or religious doctrines, depending upon the situation, may turn out to be more grounded in practice than in explicit meaning.

But, according to Bourdieu, what happens if religious rituals become transparent? In other words, what happens if the necessity for “misrecognition” becomes publicly revealed? Does Bourdieu argue that religious rituals are the kind of phenomenon that should be deprived of power by a critique of ritual practices? Or, is there a sense in which some misrecognition in religious ritual can and should remain unscathed even after such a critical analysis of ritual? Bourdieu’s account clearly does not require regarding all religious ritual as a form of unnecessary or violent social imposition by a dominant class. Rituals are a powerful and transformative part of human religion, from the most controversial performances to the least noticeable. Their immense symbolic power should thus not be underestimated as a valuable form of self-transformation and social communication. Rituals introduce into religions symbolic transformations of individuals on the basis of a set of socially empowered actions. Bourdieu presents such actions as potentially operating as both a miracle and a curse. It is thereby important to notice that religious ritual can be used to deceive as well as to reveal. Thus the primary lesson to be learned from Bourdieu’s analysis of ritual’s transformative power is not that religious rituals are to be invariably exposed as deception. The lesson is more neutrally a matter
of not disregarding the “double meaning” implicit in ritual self-transformation when one decides to apply analysis to them.

3.8 Concluding Reflections on Religious Ritual as Self-Transformative Action

While this chapter develops a central aspect of the meaning attributable to religious ritual, that of facilitating transformation of the socio-symbolic self, clearly this aspect of ritual is not sufficient to account for what makes a religious ritual a distinct form of meaningful action. The kind of self-transformation brought about by religious ritual is not unique to ritual, since other actions in the habitus potentially bear the kind of embodied significance discussed by al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-ʿArabī, some feminist theories of performative selfhood, and Bourdieu. Their contributions do, however, point toward an understanding of religious ritual that offers a plausible non-religious account of how performing an “imagined self” or “apparitional body” can become the basis of a very real kind of self-transformative religious experience. The imagined image of self utilized in Islamic ritual prayer is not a purely private creation of the individual; those images are cultivated by the religious teachings, religious practices, and the socialized habits of the worshipper, such that any movement of the objective self toward similarity with the imagined self will be recognized and reinforced by the religious community.

It is also important to recognize that Bourdieu, despite his broad implications for interpreting many religious traditions, does have limitations. Throughout his account Bourdieu considers all ritual actions as a form of strategic or instrumental action, an action performed for the sake of drawing a social line. Religious rituals, as argued in my second chapter, aim to distance themselves from instrumental action. An improved account of religious ritual meaning
should thus make it clear that strategy may be incorporated into religious ritual, but such rituals should not be reduced to simple strategies due to the fact that their performance requires that ritualists distance their actions from their own explicit interests. This correction to Bourdieu would help to prevent a simplistic interpretation of religious rituals as something akin to a form of social competition.

There is also another problem in Bourdieu’s theory for developing a theory of religious ritual meaning. Bourdieu analyzes rituals as primarily public events, yet many religious rituals are largely private affairs, especially those occurring in domestic space or those seeking mystical states of consciousness through religious ritual practice. Bourdieu’s account largely disregards questions regarding the existential or subjective reasons for performing rituals, and this is why, especially in the Islamic context, it is important to supplement Bourdieu’s general account of ritual with indigenous traditions of hermeneutics regarding religious ritual, particularly those that highlight the role of individual religious aspirations (himmāt) for performing ritual. To make matters worse, many influential philosophers of religion (such as Friedrich Schleiermacher or William James) have recurrently disregarded the public manifestations of religion as inessential, preferring instead to define religion as a private and personal affair. To remedy this dualistic disagreement over the private or public nature of religious experience, it is crucial to connect the private experience of ritual more closely to its social constitution (an insight clearly at odds with Ibn Ṭufayl’s account of Ḥayy’s religious development), thus disclosing how private aims are socially constituted, and vice versa. Bourdieu’s theory of ritual, as a sociological account, relies heavily on exhibiting social structures said to determine or limit individual choices. A more existential account of religious ritual, still keeping the social structures at play in mind, would lead to a distinctly fuller and more satisfying account of religious ritual as a fundamental part of
human religion. The next two chapters of this dissertation will aim to generate a theoretical perspective from which to avoid these dangers of overemphasis on the public or private in religious experience.

To sum up, as this chapter has argued, core Islamic ritual practices, particularly Qur’ānic recitation and ṣalāt, may be understood as natural facilitators of self-transformation. Thinkers like al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-‘Arabī argue that such practices harness the power of the human imagination to creatively reconfigure and reinterpret the objective self on the basis of an imagined self composed largely in terms of the religious aspirations of the worshipper. The disagreement Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Ṭufayl regarding whether socially instituted ritual practices are required for religious self-transformation illustrates that some Muslim thinkers, including Ibn Ṭufayl, do deny any serious role for socially instituted ritual practices in the pursuit of religious self-transformation. Al-Ghazālī, however, especially as portrayed by Moosa, offers the most well-defined theory within the Islamic context, primarily due to his understanding that religious aspirations and ritual practices should be interpreted as partly grounded in a society of like-minded religious practitioners, for it is largely through critically understood yet theologically imaginative embodiment of religious narratives that self-transformation by religious ritual practice can be sustained in a socially meaningful way. The feminist critiques of Kant’s theory of selfhood considered here lead toward this realization as well, with the crucial contributions of Butler and Spelman indicating most directly the role of socially embodied ritual praxis in self-transformation, particularly in the domestic sphere. Nonetheless, I have argued that Bourdieu’s theory of socio-symbolic naturalization provides the most detailed contemporary account among those considered here for explaining precisely how such embodied narratives become reproduced by the actual practices of socially ritualized bodies. This philosophical approach for explaining
the nature of religious ritual’s transformative power also leads to my more general conclusion
that the relation between religious ritual action and personal identity reveals not only that
religious rituals can profoundly transform personal identities but also that personal identities in
general are often in large part already naturalized by ritual actions. Religious rituals clearly
exemplify a form of action that may directly transform personal identity and personal experience
because personal identity is often largely constituted on the basis of individualized yet social
embodiment of traditionally meaningful religious narratives and other forms of socio-religious
significance. Such ritual behaviors, for those experiencing them, are “threads” that support and
structure the fabric of social worlds, particularly due to their dynamic relationship with
integrating, and implicitly creating, tacit experience of the intersubjectivity of the body.
Chapter 4:  
Religious Ritual as Moral Action

4.1 The Question of Religious Ritual as Moral Action

The last chapter already indicates a strong reason to consider the moral dimension of religious ritual significance, namely that religious rituals frequently aim to cultivate personal identities in ways that develop the moral character of a person. The present chapter will now directly examine the fact that moral significance is frequently attributed to religious ritual performance, at least by many religious practitioners. Whether it is significant to interpret religious rituals as moral actions is a question too seldom asked by contemporary studies of religion. Few of today’s social scientists, in particular, seem interested to inquire about the moral positions of their subjects. Many seem willing, in some way or another, to gather “naturalistic” or at best “narrative” representations of their subjects independently of interpreting their normative concerns; yet religious practitioners often assert that religious rituals are profoundly moral acts, if not the very core of a community’s ethical life. This is clearly illustrated in that fact that becoming “slack” in the performance of ritual, in many religious communities, is frequently regarded as the mark of an immoral mindset, and, in extreme cases, such slackness is punished severely. Is this way of regarding religious ritual acts simply a matter of asserting social control over individuals? Or is there something critical to notice in the fact that religious rituals are traditionally regarded as moral obligations? Even secular rituals, such as appropriate ways of greeting others in a social context (a bow in Japanese society, a ‘namaste’ in Indian society, a “Hi” or handshake in American or European societies), are such that though no one is formally punished or made to feel ‘depraved’ if they neglect or mis-practice them, nevertheless regular omission of these rituals earns people the secular reprimand or ill-repute of
being ‘rude’ or ‘boorish’. If there is some moral overtone to even a secular assessment of good or bad manners, chances are that religious rituals would have a stronger moral dimension. With this in mind, it should then be reasonable to ask: on what philosophical grounds can one begin to understand the moral dimension of religious rituals?

Daily prayer rituals are regarded as obligatory (wājib) in nearly all sects of Islam. But is such obligation best understood as a moral obligation? Perhaps such prayer should be understood as a morally neutral performance that is required of Muslims simply because Allah commands it. Perhaps the moral or ethical quality of the action is beside the point. This does not seem to be the case, however, in Islam; many scholars of Muslim religion, for example, have noted that the legal and the ethical in Islam are generally intimately intertwined, and perhaps are inseparable. In the Encyclopedia of Islamic Law: A Compendium of the Major Schools\(^{102}\), Laleh Bakhtiar’s recent adaptation of al-Mughniyyah’s famous study of fiqh (Islamic practical law) according to the major schools of jurisprudence in the Islamic world, Islamic religion professor A. Kevin Reinhart states in his introduction,

> Even the largest work of fiqh does not comprehend the full range of Islamic law, because Muslims believe that for every conceivable human act in any possible circumstance there are correct ways to act, and very possibly, incorrect ways to act. This metaphysical concept of an underlying moral significance to all acts is expressed in the concept of shart’ah, often translated also as “Islamic law,” but which means Law as the concept of “right action,” in the abstract; fiqh is the human attempt to understand shart’ah. (xxxiv)

One of the sections in this encyclopedia is devoted to describing meticulously the requirements for performing daily ritual prayer (ṣalāt), and the various ways that one could fail morally in that performance. For the Muslim, it seems clear that ṣalāt is seriously understood as an obligatory moral action.

In fact, most Muslim scholars who have written on prayer seem to agree. The Qur’ān states that Allah “only created men and genii for the purpose of worshipping” (51:56). In this context, Allah is traditionally said to observe constantly all human acts (and thoughts) as implicit or explicit acts of worship, to be judged in accordance with their moral worth. In the Qur’ān, Allah is reported to have said, “We will set up a just balance on the Day of Resurrection, and no soul shall be wronged in anything. Whosoever has wrought a grain of good or ill shall then behold it” (21:47). The Islamic context clearly seems to leave little room for denying the moral significance of ṣalāt or other religious ritual obligations.

The moral worth of Islamic religious ritual is clearly grounded in the moral superiority of the one who gives the command to perform rituals, namely Allah. In the Vedic Hindu tradition, however, the morality traditionally associated with religious ritual is more difficult to understand, largely because it is often not grounded primarily in a transcendent source. This fact provides an important opportunity for investigating any claims to morality associated with religious rituals, for, if such morality can be made plausible independent of reasoning based on transcendent sources, then a minimalist case will have been made. Therefore, in this chapter, I will first interpret a classic Hindu defense of the morality of Vedic ritual obligations found in the text known as the Bhagavadgīṭā, which I will generally refer to as “the Gita,” as has become common in many academic contexts that comment on the text. After this, I will then compare this account with a consideration of how the ethical philosophy of Immanuel Kant might regard the moral worth of religious ritual acts. Even though Kant did not have a high opinion of the

\[103\text{ In Islamic mythology “genii” are intermediary beings between divine beings and humans, and their actions may be good or evil.}\]

\[104\text{ When citing passages from the Bhagavadgīṭā, I will use the convention of using roman numerals for chapters and standard numbers for verses. The translation cited is by Winthrop Sargeant, SUNY Albany Press, 1994.}\]
value of religious ritual, Kant’s ethical philosophy bears striking resemblance to the Gita’s ethical philosophy and its account of the morality of religious ritual. This comparison will thereby aim to show (1) that the moral philosophy of the Gita is, for the most part, not eccentric to the Hindu religious tradition and (2) that both the Gita and Kant’s own ethical philosophy provide substantial ground for interpreting the morality of religious ritual. These investigations will then provide a basis for making more general conclusions about the morality of religious ritual acts.

4.2 Ritual Morality in the Bhagavadgītā

The epic religious texts that extend the earlier Vedic tradition, which provide what is perhaps the widest influence upon Indian religious traditions since their redaction, most importantly include the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, the latter containing the Bhagavadgītā. These two religious epics have had foundational influence upon contemporary Hindu religious practice and thought. Each epic, in its own way, narrates a tale illustrating the nature and implications of the ethical tradition of dharma. The widely discussed term “dharma” has a broad meaning that is difficult to capture precisely, and so a variety of translations frequently offered, such as “duty” or “religion,” succeed only minimally at conveying the thicker sense of the term. I will here leave the term in the Sanskrit and define it as “a complex of Hindu socio-religious ethics grounded in practical rationality,” calling primarily upon the interpretation of J.N. Mohanty. In his Classical Indian Philosophy, he defines dharma as a kind of dynamic “Hindu Sittlichkeit,” which, for Hindu tradition,

106 “Sittlichkeit” is a term most famously used by both Kant and Hegel, in different ways, to refer to the ethical dimension of human society. Kant’s distinctive usage will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
is the concrete ethical self, the actual norms, duties, virtues and goods that a community prizes. It also includes the habitualities, customs, social practices, and law that Hegel regards as the medium for concrete freedom as contradistinguished from the abstract morality, the purely subjective inner freedom, which one may pursue in opposition to, or away from, concrete, objective freedom. We have no need here of the Hegelian systematic concepts of “spirit,” “history,” and dialectic. It is enough for our present purpose to regard the doctrine of dharma as constituting the Hindu Sittlichkeit whose origins lie shrouded in the impenetrable past, which is not a static, self-complete, unchangeable identity, but that has continued to change, to permit new interpretations while still preserving a sense of identity.107

It is in this sense that one can say that the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata offer narrative and didactic interpretations of dharma. Ritual is but one element of this concrete ethical system, but each epic offers its own philosophy of ritual, each responding to the direct relation of Vedic ritualism to the tradition of dharma. While these accounts are often characterized as pluralistic, because they often leave open the question of what should be done in particular situations, they do nonetheless provide unique insight into the moral dimension of ritual performance.

The Bhagavadgītā, one section of the voluminous Mahābhārata, is a valuable text for the present inquiry because it offers the most direct treatment of ritual dharma to be found in the epics. And, as mentioned, it offers an ethics that is strikingly similar to Kantian ethics, although I will also argue that there are ultimately major tensions between them. The comparison of these two understandings of ritual morality will be used to develop philosophical questions and themes for interpreting the ethical dimension of religious ritual, a dimension that will play a major role in my final chapter’s conclusions about religious ritual.

The Bhagavadgītā centers upon the ethical dilemma of the character Arjuna, a dilemma that proves useful in disclosing further the morality of religious ritual. Consider Arjuna’s dilemma: it is Arjuna’s duty as a ruling warrior of the kṣatriya class to fight when the sovereign

107 Mohanty, Classical Indian Philosophy, 109.
deems it is appropriate and necessary. Arjuna, about to enter a battle against an army composed of many of his lifelong companions, nonetheless finds it impossible to go forward as he comes face-to-face with the reality of preparing to kill his friends and relatives. In despair, Arjuna collapses at the feet of Krishna (his divine charioteer), proclaiming that he is unable to move further in such circumstances, preferring instead to allow the army to trample his unwilling body. Krishna, showing outward disdain toward Arjuna’s retreat, then demands that Arjuna perform his duty. Unable to do so without understanding why, Arjuna demands explanation and ultimately justification for Krishna’s command to fight. The text then moves into eighteen chapters discussing reasons why Arjuna should perform his moral duty as a kṣatriya. And, many of the examples used to teach Arjuna about his dharma involve a direct discussion of the moral dimensions of Vedic religious ritual, which serves as an ethically paradigmatic, duty-bound act.

The theme of ritual performance in the Gita presents a distinct interpretation of the philosophy of the Mīmāṃsā school of Vedic ritual hermeneutics. While the first chapter in this investigation is devoted to this school and its internal disagreements about the nature of Vedic ritual rule-following, the present chapter’s investigation of the Gita will nonetheless indirectly invoke themes from the early Mīmāṃsakas as represented by Krishna’s teachings to Arjuna. Importantly, according to Mīmāṃsā rituals are not performed because the ritualist aims to obey the command of gods, or the one and only God (as is the case with Islam), but instead the act is performed simply because the Vedic scriptural injunctions themselves command such a performance. What makes this theory of religious ritual morality difficult to understand is primarily that the Vedic scriptures are traditionally understood to be authorless (apauruṣeya) and

108 It is important to note here that Arjuna’s struggle is closely analogous to the theme of “greater jihād” in the Qur’ān, namely the struggle of a Muslim to live in accord with the will and commands of Allah. While the present chapter does not aim to develop this comparison, and the significance of the differences between the two, such an investigation would no doubt be invaluable for future studies of religious ritual morality.
not the language of a deity. Therefore Vedic commands are better understood as the commands of an inherited religious tradition, not of some heavenly author external to the empirical human world. In the Gita we find Krishna undertaking the task of unpacking how religious ritual acts fulfill a distinctly moral form of obligation in the religious tradition. And, Krishna even goes a step further; Krishna argues that the morality of religious rituals points to a deeper truth, namely that all work, even all life, can be regarded as a moral form of religious ritual action if it is lived as a sacrifice (vājña).

Krishna’s arguments to Arjuna are complex and highly debated by commentators, but it is important to notice the foreshadowing question, directly stated to Krishna by Arjuna, which begins the discussion. “With whom must I fight in undertaking this battle?” (I.22). Arjuna proceeds, at first, to notice that he faces those who bear intimate connections to him, but the question ultimately leads Krishna to direct Arjuna toward a deeper realization. Krishna demands, “Kill the enemy, O Arjuna, which has the form of desire and is difficult to conquer” (III.43). Krishna directs him toward realizing that the ultimate fight, now that he has lost the resolve to perform his moral duty, is a fight within himself, a battle between his duty and his conflicting feelings about that duty.

Krishna consistently argues that Arjuna’s duty must be done because “anything superior to righteous battle does not exist for the kṣatriya …Now, if you will not undertake this righteous war, thereupon, having avoided your own duty and glory, you shall incur evil” (II.31, 33). Thus, even in such horrific battles, the traditionally Hindu virtue of equanimity towards extremes should be practiced. Equanimity towards extremes allows Arjuna to act as one whose mind is tranquil (prasanna), a virtue embodied by those who follow their dharma for the sake of duty alone. But Arjuna is confused at this conventional recommendation; Arjuna is confused
specifically about how he should act. He responds to Krishna’s demand saying, “You confuse my intelligence [buddhi, “discrimination”]…How should I attain the highest good?” (III.2).

The wisdom of equanimity only tells him how psychologically to regard the actions required of him; they do not tell him how to go about performing such actions.

Responding, Krishna addresses the morality of acting according to dharma directly in terms of the concept of yajña (“sacrifice”), a term that refers to the earliest concept of ritual discussed in the Vedas, which Krishna develops to show that behind such action is a kind of morality. “Perform action for the purpose of sacrifice (yajña), Arjuna, free from attachment” (III.9). The virtue of sacrifice is then explained by Krishna in terms of the Vedic concept of ritual “remainder” (śiṣṭa)109. “The good, who eat the remainder of the sacrifice (yajñaśiṣṭa), are released from all evils; but the wicked, who cook only for their own sake, eat their own impurity” (III.13). The Vedic concept of “remainder” is one of the most philosophically distinctive concepts associated with Vedic ritualism, a concept carefully explored in Charles Malamoud’s book *Cooking the World: Ritual & Thought in Ancient India*.110 There Malamoud explains,

> The notion of a residue, of an outstanding balance, plays a foundational role in the ceaseless re-firing of the motor of karman [action]…. This residue remains attached to the soul of the individual even as he passes through (divine or animal) existences, during which he accumulates no karman. This explains, moreover, how it is impossible for an earthly existence – in which one enjoys or suffers an existence in a wholly passive manner – to ever be one’s final rebirth…. The sacrifice, inasmuch as it consists of the destruction, by fire, of sacrificial materials, abolishes itself at that very moment in which it comes to an end. This cause, even though it is perishable, nevertheless establishes a distant effect… This

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109 It is important to note that “śiṣṭa” has two primary usages. “Remainder,” as I develop it above, is one. The second usage, closely related to the first, is “a morally well-trained person.” This parallel illustrates indirectly the moral implications raised by the usage of “śiṣṭa” as “remainder.”

is because a trace of the sacrifice remains: this is called the *apūrva*, ‘a particular tendency, established by an ongoing sacrifice, which is expected to bear fruit at a later time.’ (CW, 19-21)

It is thus important to realize that the concept of *karma*, according to which “actions produce like moral results,” underlies the concept of the remainder mentioned by Krishna to Arjuna. The remainder of a ritual act is in this way understood to leave an indirect moral mark on the character of the performer.

Additionally, according to Malamoud the metaphysical concepts of *karma* and rebirth imply a more general philosophical schema implicit in the nature of Vedic ritual.

According to this schema, a body of matter or of acts is, normally, never wholly consumed (in either sense of the term), and the procedures by which these are treated never arrive at any definitive, exhaustive result. There always remains a residue which, while ambiguous, is nevertheless always possessed of an active, rather than an inert, character. (CW, 22)

Malamoud argues that such thinking amounts to a kind of “meditation on sacrificial ‘remains’ as the symbol of remains *per se*” (CW, 22). In other words, the paradigm of Vedic ritual performance incorporates a reflection on the concept of remainder as a general moral concept. This is why, taking up the theme of an *inevitable moral remainder*, Krishna, later in the Gita, remarks that, “embodied beings are not able to abandon actions entirely; he, then who abandons the fruit of action, is called a man of renunciation” (XVIII.11). The fruits of the action may be abandoned, but not actions themselves, nor their moral remainder.\(^\text{111}\)

The aim to “perform action while abandoning the fruit of action” is the core teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Recognizing that all actions produce *śiṣṭa*, Krishna, in the later sections of the Gita, classifies ritual acts into three kinds, each reflecting a different quality of *śiṣṭa*. The

\(^{111}\) Note that, by contrast, for al-Ghazālī actions are said to be best undertaken on the basis of one’s own knowledge about the fruits of those actions. Nonetheless, this concept of “remainder” bears resemblance to some reasons given by al-Ghazālī for his interest in Ṣūfī ritual praxis. His interest to use Ṣūfism as a way to practice “upon oneself” could be further elucidated, at least in part, via a notion like *śiṣṭa*. 

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theory of *karma* utilized in the Gita is influenced heavily by the *Sāṃkhya* school of philosophy and its tripartite theory of material nature, which holds that the material world is the effect of the interaction of three types of material forces (the three “*guṇas*”), namely *sattva* (truth-revealing force), *rajas* (quickening force), and *tamasa* (inertial force). Krishna frequently remarks to Arjuna that “one acts according to one’s own material nature. Even the wise man does so.” (III.33). An individual’s material nature, thus, is the result of the unique interaction of these three forces in an individual. And, in each individual act there will always be a dominant force.

With this metaphysical background from *Sāṃkhya* in mind, Krishna explains that there is a corresponding hierarchy of three forms of sacrifice.

Sacrifice which is offered, observing the scriptures, by those who do not desire the fruit, concentrating the mind only on the thought “this is to be sacrificed”; that sacrifice is *sattvic*.

But sacrifice which is offered with a view to the fruit, Arjuna, and also for the purpose of ostentation; know that to be *rajasic*.

Sacrifice devoid of faith, contrary to the scriptural ordinances, with no food offered, without mantras and without gifts (to the presiding priest), they regard as *tamasic*. (XVII.11-13)

The essential thing to notice about this hierarchy is that, in the context of the Gita, it is a moral hierarchy for classifying sacrificial acts. Additionally, Krishna does use the *guṇa* framework to classify the moral worth of other forms of acts, attitudes, and thinking. Even everyday secular acts, such as gift-giving, are ranked according to this hierarchy. Much more would need to be said in order to clarify precisely the role of *Sāṃkhya* metaphysics in this framework, but for the present purposes I will confine my comments to the implications of this hierarchy for understanding the Gita’s presentation of the morality of religious ritual acts.
Before considering at further depth the Gita’s moral framework for interpreting ritual performance, it helps to keep in mind how the lower end of this psychological or temperamental spectrum is defined. Moral failure regarding ritual performance is described as a result of abandoning, partially or entirely, the traditionally required elements of ritual as well as abandoning personal commitment toward the duties of sacrifice. The Gita, by considering the moral implications of totally abandoning religious ritual duties, not only indirectly develops its own ideal model of ritual morality but also its own descriptive account of the consequences of abandoning such ritual, as is the case with those people Krishna refers to as “demoniacal” (āsura). “Demoniacal men do not understand when to act and when to refrain from action” (XVI.7). They are led to such confusion by what is referred to as the “threefold gate of hell,” a morally reprehensible combination of “desire, anger, and greed” (XVI.21). In short, via this negative extreme, Krishna presents Arjuna with a dilemma: to follow one’s duty or to abandon one’s own culture, for the demoniacal person has done exactly that by allowing “desire, anger, and greed” (one’s own personal feelings and immediate interests) to govern action, “Clinging to immeasurable anxiety, ending only in death, with gratification of desires as their highest aim, convinced that this is all” (XVI.11). For such a person no higher aim can exist than to fulfill personal interests. What the demoniacal person has failed to realized is essentially that,

He who acts under the impulse of desire, casting aside the injunctions of the scriptures, does not attain perfection, nor happiness, nor the highest goal. Therefore, determining your standard by the scriptures, as to what is and what is not to be done, knowing the scriptural injunction prescribed, you should perform action here in this world. (XVI.23)

The failure of the demoniacal is a failure to realize that even the achievement of personal happiness requires a social world of traditional norms for action.
This is why Krishna’s consistent moral command to Arjuna is: “For the maintenance (saṃgraham, lit. “holding together”) of the world, you should act” (III.20). This command phrases an important insight into the morality of religious ritual. The moral importance of such ritual extends to the “holding together” of the social world. This concept of “holding together a world by way of a duty-bound act” will be developed further in the next chapter as a guiding theoretical concept for interpreting religious ritual acts in general. For now, however, it is important to notice that the Gita directly argues that without such actions to bind together a social world (consider that the term “dharma” stems from the literal meaning of the root dhṛ, “to hold together”), even one’s own personal happiness is impossible. This points to a fundamental aspect of ritual sacrifice as presented in the Gita, namely that such religious ritual operates as a paradigmatic example of a fundamentally different kind of act than most other acts within the social world, primarily because such acts work directly upon the world itself rather than simply working toward individual ends within that world. Sacrificial action, action without an eye toward the fruit of action, of which religious ritual is a prime example, is undertaken in order to maintain and support structures of traditional social identity, and, according to the Gita, without these no other ends could be reasonably sought.

Sacrificial actions serve another moral role according to Krishna; they draw others, by way of socio-moral duties, toward a greater truth about reality. Since the social world is regarded as the source of moral traditions, there must be something beyond society (because it must be maintained) that is beyond morality. It is in this context that Krishna calls upon the thinking of the Upaniṣads, foreshadowing the eventual historical development of Uttarā Mīmāṃsā (or Vedanta) schools of philosophy. Echoing the earliest treatment of yajña in the Rg Veda, Krishna states in Upaniṣadic language, “Brahman [ultimate reality] is the offering,
Brahman is the oblation poured out by Brahman into the fire of Brahman, Brahman is to be attained by him who always sees Brahman in action” (IV.24). In terms of ultimate reality, each and every element involved in the performance of sacrifice is Brahman, and so is, in this metaphysical respect, not of the world of conventional distinctions between acts. Such religious rituals, thus, by not aiming to serve the ends of any individual being, lead beyond the social world to the supra-moral nature of existence. This not only incorporates the Upaniṣadic urge toward mokṣa as a form of religious salvation beyond the fulfillment of the duties of the ordinary social world; it also indirectly serves to support the prior claim that sacrificial action is morally required as a basis for upholding the (contingent) reality of the social world. Without action performed solely for the sake of duty, nothing would maintain the ordinary world, which is required for the pursuit of religious salvation.

It is thus in an Upaniṣadic sense that Krishna, regarded by Arjuna as the avatar of the divine cosmos, routinely speaks of the reality of Brahman as one with himself. “I am the ritual, I am the sacrifice, I am the offering, I am the medicinal herb, I am the sacred text, I am also the clarified butter, I am the fire, and I am the pouring out of the oblation” (IX.16). “Actions do not taint Me; I have no desire for the fruit of action; thus he who comprehends Me is not bound by actions. Having known this, the ancients, seeking release, also performed action. Therefore perform action as it was earlier performed by the ancients” (IV.14-15). One, however, should not take such imperatives toward traditional action as commands that eventually lead to cultural isolationism and blindly following tradition. Krishna repeatedly insists that other forms of sacrifice may play the same role, even those grounded in other religious traditions. “Even those who worship other gods with faith, also worship Me, Arjuna” (IX.23). Elaborating, Krishna states,
Some yogins perform sacrifice to the gods; others offer sacrifice, by sacrifice itself, in the fire of Brahman. Others offer senses like hearing in the fire of restraint; still others offer sound and other objects of the senses in the fire of the senses. Others offer all actions of the senses and actions of the vital breath in the fire of the yoga of self-restraint, which is kindled by knowledge….All these are knowers of sacrifice, and their evils have been destroyed through sacrifice… Thus sacrifices are of many kinds, spread out before Brahman. Know them all to be born of action. Thus knowing, you shall be released…. As the kindled fire reduces firewood to ashes, Arjuna, so the fire of knowledge reduces all actions to ashes….Action does not bind him who has renounced action through yoga, whose doubt is cut away by knowledge, and who is possessed of the Self, Arjuna. (IV.25-42)

The moral performer of sacrifice is not simply blindly following tradition. Such a person is paradoxically bound by duty but is yet freed by knowledge of the nature of such an action. Because sacrificial action points beyond the social world to Brahman, performing such action with proper understanding provides the philosophical insight that, ultimately, by acting according to ritualized duty one is acting simultaneously as the paradigm of a kind of freedom, in that one who acts ritually acts as an extension of one’s own rational conviction to tradition, rather than being bound by attachment to the fruits of the world by one’s desires, a theme that will be shown to resonate closely with Kant’s ethical philosophy. It is this “knowledge” that “cuts away” the doubts Arjuna faces. Arjuna doubts whether he should perform his duty despite his conflicting feelings, and Krishna responds by arguing that such doubt is impossible if one possesses a proper understanding of the nature of such actions and their relation to reality in general.

The Gita provides still further reason to regard the practice of religious rituals as moral action, namely because they are self-transformative acts. Krishna at one point tells Arjuna that his duty should also be performed because “He [who strives toward performance of duty] is carried on, even against his own will [my italics], by prior practice” (VI.44). Diligent practice of
one’s *dharma*, according to Krishna, creates in an individual a will of its own, so to speak, which Malamoud might regard as another form of indirect “remainder” created by ritual performance. Disciplined sacrificial action, performed routinely without regard for personal interests, transforms the will of the performer such that the enactment of the practice becomes, to some extent, capable of maintaining itself through the cultivated will of the performer. The Gita here anticipates a theme taken up in greater depth in the previous chapter, and in the next chapter, namely that religious rituals may be said to transform radically the will, social identity, and social world of individuals. For the present purposes, however, it suffices to note that Krishna has singled out this element of religious ritual performance as one of the distinctive marks of moral “sacrificial” action.

4.3 Kantian Morality and Ritualized Religion

In today’s secular communities it may hardly seem plausible to attribute moral importance to ritual performance. Rituals are widely regarded in the postmodern world as personal, subjective indulgences, having little bearing upon the lives of others or moral obligations. Is there any way for a non-religious person of the modern world to acknowledge a religious ritual as bearing serious moral significance for the traditions within which they are practiced? The aim of this chapter is to argue precisely that even the non-religious can do this today. To support this position, I draw next upon the ethical and aesthetic philosophy of Immanuel Kant, a philosopher who held a similarly low regard for religious rituals. Certain aspects of religious ritual performances, like those described in the Gita, bear a striking relation to what Kant means by “*Moralität*” (rational morality). This argument will thus not entail a simple association of ritual performance with Kant’s notion of *Sittlichkeit* (social normative
custom). I will develop a philosophical standpoint, grounded in Kant, according to which religious ritual performance may be regarded as, to some extent, rationally moral. In light of this application of Kant, and a subsequent comparison of it with the ritual morality of the Gita, I will after conclude with my own response to these strategies for interpreting religious rituals as moral acts.

The intersection of Kant’s ethics and aesthetics is especially useful in this investigation, partly because the moral importance of religious ritual, in my estimation, has been largely underestimated by Kant in his major works on religion. For instance, consider his complaint in the concluding general observations of his primary work of philosophy of religion, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*.¹¹² In that text he classifies ritual performances, such as attending church ceremonies, as primarily an example of an “illusory faith” in religion, which commits the moral error of “overstepping the bounds of our reason in the direction of the supernatural (which is not, according to the laws of reason, an object of either theoretical or practical [and thus moral] use” (RL, 182). For Kant, to consider ritual acts as furthering moral ends

is an illusion which does, indeed, well comport with the cast of mind of a good citizen in a political commonwealth, and with external propriety, yet which not only contributes nothing to the character of such a man…but rather debases it, and serves, by means of a deceptive veneer, to conceal the bad moral content of his disposition from the eyes of others, and even from his own eyes. (RL, 187)

Kant, in that section, and in other works, would even go so far as to characterize “Clericalism in general” as “the dominion of the clergy over men’s hearts” (RL, 188). However, despite this dismissal, one can still find reason in other parts of Kant’s works to take the morality of ritual

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seriously. And yet, even upon recognizing this, it will also prove important to notice why Kant nonetheless often underestimates the moral dimension of religious ritual so generally.

First and foremost, it should be noticed Kantian morality is primarily understood in terms of *rational obligations*, which on the surface are sharply distinguished from obligations that are contingent upon social customs. For Kant the morality of any decision becomes suspect the moment any individual interest or contingent perspective becomes involved. Kant thereby develops a moral psychology based upon his well-known emphasis on categorical imperatives (those imperatives which must be upheld unconditionally) rather than hypothetical imperatives (those imperatives which are only to be upheld conditionally). In other words, he promoted that objective moral requirements should hold regardless of the individuals involved. He supported this moral universality based on the assumed universality of reason among rational agents. Kant thereby based his concept of categorical moral obligation upon a framework that sought (1) to rise above subjective contingency and (2) to ground morality in strict individual rationality.

It is important to notice that for Kant categorical imperatives cannot be based on either individual interests or on empirical observations, for neither can provide a basis for strict universality. Kant argues in his *Critique of Practical Reason*\(^{113}\) that there is one fundamental rational law that operates as the guiding principle of moral reason: “[A]ct so that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law” (CP, 30). In other words, a willed action is moral *if and only if that action, if it were to operate as a natural law, would be possible to will.* To clarify, Kant famously illustrates the moral law in the following way:

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If everyone permitted himself to deceive when he believed it to be to his advantage, or considered himself authorized to shorten his life as soon as he was thoroughly weary of it, or looked with complete indifference on the need of others, and if you belonged to such an order of things, would you be in it with the assent of your will? …Such a law is…a type for the appraisal of maxims in accordance with moral principles. If the maxim of the action is not so constituted that it can stand the test as to the form of a law of nature in general, then it is morally impossible. (CP, 69)

Now, under this understanding, it is certainly not the case for Kant that any particular ritual could be universalized by the above principle. If everyone were to avoid the performance of șalăt or agnihotra, it is likely that many rational agents would be entirely happy with assenting to such a possibility. At any rate, as it stands, each of the examples given above as universalizable maxims (not lying, not committing suicide, not being indifferent to the needs of others) hardly amount to specific positive moral obligations (such as the moral obligation to perform a specific ritual); instead they amount to negative obligations, acts to be avoided. Many rituals do involve prohibition as an element of ritual, but the element of repeated action inherent in ritual demands that some positive obligation be involved. Under such a strict conception of morality, how could one begin to make a parallel between religious ritual obligations and Kantian moral obligations?

My second chapter’s attempt to distance the performance of religious ritual from instrumental activity is useful here. For Kant, the instrumental mode of reasoning is identified as a kind of hypothetical imperative, but it is yet distinctly involved in the pursuit of morality. While instrumental reasoning is not regarded as the means of determining moral ends, once those ends are determined (as categorical imperatives), the duty to act accordingly may be realized in differing ways, and this is where practical instrumental reasoning plays an important role in Kantian morality, namely as a “means” for realizing what reason has determined categorically.
must be avoided or promoted. How one goes about realizing moral ends is largely left to instrumental reasoning.

This division between instrumentality and morality in Kant is grounded in an underlying conception of reason. Whether reasoning is hypothetical or categorical, for Kant reason in general is understood in terms of autonomy. One who “reasons” is one who decides for oneself, regardless of external restrictions on one’s actions. One thus guides oneself autonomously by adhering to the principles of reason, not being motivated in terms of external advantages or disadvantages. Thus, what makes instrumental or moral reasoning a form of “reasoning” as such is that it is determined internally by the will of an individual rather than being contingent upon external motivating factors.

This capacity for “internal” determination is what Kant calls “freedom,” the capacity of a living being that Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* describes as allowing an individual to “be efficient independently of alien causes determining it, just as natural necessity is the property of the causality of all nonrational beings to be determined to activity by the influence of alien causes” (GM, 446). He divides freedom into two types: negative and positive. A negative freedom stems directly from the basic concept of freedom in the above definition as the “negative” absence of “alien causes.” The positive concept of freedom, however, is said to be the “essence” of the negative concept, in the sense that the negative concept implies

> a positive concept of freedom, which is so much the richer and more fruitful. Since the concept of causality brings with it that of laws in accordance with which, by something that we call a cause, something else, namely an effect, must

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114 The specific maxims that are to be universalized in Kantian morality are widely debated, as is the specific relation between negative and positive moral obligations. It is not my aim in this chapter to add to this debate; instead I will only discuss how the normativity of religious ritual would fit into a Kantian ethical scheme.

be posited, so freedom, although it is not a property of the will in accordance with
natural laws, is not for that reason lawless but must instead be a causality in
accordance with immutable laws but of a special kind...what, then, can freedom
of the will be other than autonomy, that is the will’s property of being a law to
itself [my italics]?... [This] indicates only the principle, to act on no other maxim
other than that which can also have as object itself as a universal law. This,
however, is precisely the formula of the categorical imperative and is the principle
of morality; hence a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same.
(GM, 446-7)

Reason is thereby grounded in terms of internal lawful necessity given by the will unto itself.

Positive freedom is, in this sense, the essential capacity of a rational agent to “be a law to itself.”

This distinction between negative freedom and positive freedom provides promising
ground for contemplating the morality of religious ritual. As we have seen, religious rituals, like
moral reasoning, often are distanced from subjective interests in external ends, and thus, I am
arguing, religious rituals aim at actualizing something very much like a negative sense of
freedom. One might argue that the obligation to perform ritual, because it is not an instrumental
“means-ends” act, stems from “alien causes” that originate in a community of tradition.

However, as I understand Kant, “alien” causes are causes that are alien to the will of the subject.
The emphasis toward duty-bound performance in religious ritual does not arise for the ritual
agent as an alien cause, but, due to the non-instrumental quality of established ritual, the
motivation arises as if it were given directly by one’s own will. It is true that the cultivation
required to achieve this sense of will originates externally, but, for the religious ritualist, the
motivation to perform ritual originates internally, without any direct regard for external aims. It
is as if the cultivated motivation to perform religious ritual becomes its own “law to itself,” a
concept echoed in Krishna’s claim that practice can develop a will of its own. And so, if the
hallmark of reason, for Kant, is autonomy, then religious ritual can be said, in a unique way, to
significantly resemble this achievement. The internal determination to perform a religious ritual
“regardless of one’s own interests” bears a striking similarity to Kantian moral reasoning in that both aim toward a state of internal and lawful self-governance. It is also important, however, to recognize that this form of duty is not exactly what Kant has directly in mind in his ethical philosophy.

Most importantly, the “positive” source of a decision to perform a ritual cannot be traced to the same origin to which Kant traces positive freedom, for the laws of Kant’s concept of reason are said to be immutable as an objective component of the subject’s will, whereas those of social cultivation clearly are not. It proves useful, in this regard, to supplement Kant’s distinction between hypothetical reasoning and categorical reasoning. “Ritual reasoning,” as a distinct form of reasoning, guides decisions to act in accordance with “ritualizable” (and thus to some extent mutable) laws of the will. Such reasoning should be distinguished from hypothetical and categorical reasoning in order to give a more precisely phenomenological account of specific modes of normativity involved in reasoning in general and, more particularly, in religious actions. Why then does Kant undervalue the moral rationality implicit in religious ritual? This omission in Kant, as I understand it, is partly due to his general lack of a concept of “embodied normativity,” which is perhaps best developed by Pierre Bourdieu, as discussed in the last chapter.

Another important difference between ritual reasoning and categorical reasoning regarding morality is that the Kantian categorical imperative construes moral duty as that which one would do if one were entirely rational; ritual reasoning regarding morality never understands itself to be fully rational in a strictly individual sense, for ritual reasoning acknowledges an authority beyond individual reason, namely social normativity. While this social normativity is directly legislated upon the ritualist by the ritualist’s own cultivated yet originally rational drive
to fulfill a social duty regardless of subjective interests in external influences, ritual reason’s
injunction to perform a ritual is also regarded as a command that simultaneously legislates over
others in the community, others for whom the same ritual duty applies. Thereby, the law that is
legislated by the will of the ritualist regards the ritualist not as a strictly unique individual;
instead the ritualist is regarded as fulfilling a social role.

Finding, or making, space for the socially-constituted aspect of personal identity in
Kant’s ethical philosophy has, of course, been a major element of commentarial debate. Christine
Korsgaard, for example, is perhaps best known for her *The Sources of Normativity*\(^{116}\), in which
she presents a theory of morality that “derives its main inspiration from Kant” (SN, 91), but one
that nonetheless takes seriously the role of social elements in producing personal identity. As
she argues, “Kant…thinks that morality is grounded in human nature, and that moral properties
are projections of human dispositions” (SN, 91). This is meant in the sense that, within Kantian
morality, “we move from concept to conception by taking up the standpoint of a legislative
Citizen in the Kingdom of Ends [the kingdom of rational agents], and asking what laws that kind
of citizen has reason to adopt… Citizen of the Kingdom of Ends is a conception of practical
identity which leads in turn to a conception of the right” (SN, 115). It is human nature to make
moral laws to regulate human dispositions. But “practical identity” here is a complex notion,
part Korsgaardian and part Kantian.

The conception of one’s [practical] identity in question here is not a theoretical
one…It is better understood as a description under which you value yourself, a
description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to
be worth undertaking…Practical identity is a complex matter and for the average
person there will be a jumble of such conceptions. You are a human being, a
woman or a man, an adherent to a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a

\(^{116}\) Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), (hereafter cited in
the text as SN).
member of a certain profession, someone’s lover or friend, and so on. And all of these identities give rise to reasons and obligations. Your reasons express your identity, your nature; your obligations spring from what that identity forbids. (SN, 101)

While Kant would likely have argued that the true “lawgiver” in morality is reason itself and not the individual will, Korsgaard recognizes that the Kantian moral law nonetheless must be given by oneself to oneself, and this requires that the moral law, at least in some way, acknowledge the “thick,” socially-rich ways that humans conceive of themselves as identities within real societies.

4.4 Kant’s Aesthetics and Ritual Morality

Having briefly covered how Kantian ethical theory applies (and does not apply) to religious ritual performance, we can now turn to the relation of Kant’s aesthetic theory to his understanding of ethics. This relationship will show a more direct way to consider the relation between morality and religious ritual according to Kant’s philosophy. A Kantian interest in aesthetic beauty plays an important role in Kantian ethics, for the interest in beauty is said to make possible the disposition toward morality. As Kant emphasizes throughout his Critique of Judgment, beauty is “a symbol of the good.” It is important to notice that this does not mean that the beautiful is in any way a direct part of what it means to be moral; this simply means that an interest in the beautiful somehow prepares a rational agent for morality. But how does this work?

To best understand Kant, it helps to begin with a sketch of Kant’s treatment of natural beautiful objects before considering the relation of morality to artistically produced beautiful objects. In Kantian aesthetics, aesthetic judgments such as “That is beautiful” are said to reflect

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upon the form of a natural object of sensible attraction. The attraction is said to bring about a “higher” feeling when the representation of the natural sensible object of attraction in judgment brings about a “pure” judgment. The judgment is said to be “pure” in the sense that the material existence of the object in question is regarded indifferently by the judgment. Thus the judgment is said to be “disinterested.” Instead, the object of an aesthetic judgment is the pure form of the sensible object as represented in the imagination. Form, in this sense, is derived from some element of the composition or design of the sensible attraction, which brings about in the observer formal reflection, reflection that is undertaken independently of a direct interest in the external (and thus “alien”) material existence of the sensible object. Therefore, strictly speaking, the aesthetic judgment is not a judgment over the sensible object, but over a certain universality of form derived from reflection upon that object. In this way, aesthetic judgment bears a crucial relation to moral judgment because it aims toward a higher degree of objectivity and necessity in the judgment than does simple interest in a material object. Because the object is purely formal, it must be presented according to the laws of reason, thereby granting beauty its “higher” status of feeling through the medium of rational reflection.

This higher feeling, a rational pleasure, resulting from contemplation of the beautiful object, because of its form, is thereby subjectively regarded as rationally communicable to others, and thus universal for anyone. This formal representation of the beautiful object is peculiar if compared with the universality of the categorical imperative. A beautiful object’s universality is not derived from a concept but from the extraction of specific concepts from sensory interaction with an external object. Thus, the universality of the aesthetic judgment, even though it is held as if universal and objective, is ultimately bound to subjective interaction with the empirical world. The imagination simply reflects an empirically determined, and thus
limited, view of the object in terms of represented form. The concepts of the understanding
taken to represent the imagined object can never fully be taken to represent the empirical object.
This is why Kant says that aesthetic judgment relates the representation of form to
“indeterminate” concepts of the understanding due to the freedom of the imagination for
“playing, as it were, while it contemplates the shape” (CJ, 230). The imagination, via this play,
spontaneously produces “such a multiplicity of partial presentations that no expression that
stands for a determinate concept can be found for it,” and this multiplicity is produced based
upon contemplation of the elements of the empirical object (CJ, 316). A harmony thus develops
between indeterminate use of the concepts of the understanding and the freedom of the
imagination to represent objects in thought. It is this accord between the two that Kant refers to
as aesthetic “common sense,” for the pleasure derived is supposed subjectively to be
communicable and valid for others, although it is a commonality that can only be felt
subjectively because it defies intellectual determination by the categories of the understanding.
This “common sense” involved in aesthetic judgments, however, in that it aims toward a
universally valid judgment, is precisely why the beautiful is said to operate as a symbol of
morality. Morality aims toward objectively universal norms, whereas the universality of
aesthetic common sense may be regarded as possessing only a symbolic resemblance to moral
judgments, for their universality is only a subjective presentation. It is precisely in this sense that
beauty is understood by Kant to be “a symbol of the good.”

Seeing more clearly the relation between the beautiful and the moral in Kant, it is crucial
to notice, however, that Kant says that the beautiful is a symbol of morality specifically in
relation to natural beauty. Natural beauty provides the most direct relation to morality because
natural beauty is produced independently of human aims, which makes a disinterested
appreciation more likely due to nature’s assumed “lack of interest” in producing such objects. It should not be assumed, however, that the beautiful in art bears no symbolic relation to morality.

For Kant a specific form of innate subjective disposition, which he terms “genius,” is said to make possible the cultivation of morality in relation to aesthetic judgments about fine art. Human genius is said to provide a natural basis for understanding the beauty of fine art. Genius is a natural force that produces fine art, and so it plays the role of linking artistic beauty with natural beauty such that the moral importance of sensible natural beauty can be extended to art objects. Kant defines genius as “the ability to exhibit aesthetic ideas,” a faculty that works with imaginatively produced intuitions of objects that are not fully determined by concepts (CJ, 344). Genius may thus imaginatively produce the design of a beautiful object, which by extension gives the imagined object its own “natural” status. Genius in this way serves to bring about a free and harmonious play between the understanding and the imagination that accomplishes the same symbolic relation to morality as natural beauty.

Fine art for Kant then should, via genius, seem like nature; it should seem as if it were produced independently of determinate human interests. As Kant says,

In dealing with a product of fine art we must become conscious that it is art rather than nature, and yet the purposiveness [not a determinate purpose] of its form [produced by the harmony of the imagination with the understanding] must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature… Nature, we say, is beautiful if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature. (CJ, 306)

It is this concept of “looking like nature” that provides a promising parallel between the moral significance of fine art and the moral significance of ritual performance, because it is precisely the capacity of the beautiful to bring about disinterested contemplation that makes it function as a “symbol of morality.”
Fine art, being artificial, may take any sensible form provided it bears the mark of genius to stimulate the disinterested play of the imagination, and so the possibility of fine performance art is clearly left available in Kant. Fine art is able to stimulate an interest in morality because it may be contemplated as an object that is not determined by human conceptual ends, thus allowing for disinterested contemplation. Religious rituals, as argued in my second chapter, also resist being characterized as a direct means-end form of action, and religious rituals, as I will argue in my next chapter, in most cases directly utilize the symbolic artistry of a religion, which allows for a similar play of the imagination in harmony with the understanding. Religious rituals, however, unlike the creation of fine art, also reflect a form of rationally determined autonomy in the decision to perform one’s ritual duty. Religious ritual, then, according to Kant’s aesthetics, bears a unique position as a symbol of morality. Such acts not only may qualify as fine art, but they also represent a form of duty-based action that closely resembles the categorical imperative.

Perhaps more important is the way that religious rituals manage to “look like nature.” Religious rituals, for someone who performs them routinely, do not manifest as instrumental acts, and thereby the embodied rational concern to perform them arises as if spontaneously produced by the cultivated will of the performer. Religious ritual, when performed by one whose will has been transformed by an embodied social scheme of normative actions, appears as natural in largely the same sense as when Kant speaks of fine art. In one sense, the ritualist is conscious that the ritual act is constructed by individuals, but the ritual act is yet not regarded as instrumental, unlike other constructed acts; religious rituals, when they function appropriately, are, like fine art, regarded as actions that arise in a “natural” fashion. And so, such rituals
likewise may be said to foster disinterested appreciation in participants or observers, thereby further qualifying them as symbols of morality.

Now, to understand Kant strictly, one must notice that an act that operates as a symbol of morality does not yet qualify as a strictly moral act, for reasons already discussed. Some passages in Kant’s reflections on religion, however, suggest an indirect (and perhaps not strictly “Kantian”) way to regard the morality of religious rituals in light of his broader ethical and aesthetic philosophy. In his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, the same text shown earlier to devalue religious rituals, Kant argues,

> The true (moral) service of God…can consist solely in the disposition of obedience to all true duties as divine commands, not in actions directed exclusively to God. Yet for man the invisible needs to be represented through the visible (the sensuous); yea, what is more, it needs to be accompanied by the visible in the interest of practicability and, though it is intellectual, must be made, as it were (according to a certain analogy), perceptual. This is a means of simply picturing to ourselves our duty in the service of God, a means which, although really indispensable, is extremely liable to the danger of misconstruction; for, though an illusion steals over us, it is easily held to be the service of God itself, and is, indeed, commonly thus spoken of. (RL, 180)

Remember that for Kant God represents the unity of all ideals, and thus represents the totality of rational moral imperatives. But it seems that Kant is here indirectly referring to an additional imperative, one that is easily misconstrued. Since God “needs to be represented through the visible,” and since God “needs to be accompanied by the visible in the interest of practicability,” there seems to be an implicit categorical imperative in Kant’s ethics, namely that *one must represent the moral visibly in the interest of furthering practicability*. Admittedly, actions other than ritual could fulfill this requirement, and the tendency of some ritualists to produce illusions, associated in an earlier passage with “clericalism,” represents a need for careful qualification in construing this imperative. Nonetheless, the imperative is still regarded by Kant as
“indispensable.” So, how exactly would this imperative apply to religious ritual according to Kant?

My conclusion regarding this question requires looking into Kant’s less dismissive comments on religious ritual. It is revealing that, immediately after the above passage, Kant’s thinking moves directly to a consideration of religious ritual, in which he concludes that four Christian ritual observances (prayer, church-going, baptism, and communion) are “useful means for sensuously awakening and sustaining our attention to the true service of God. They base themselves, one and all, upon the intention to further the morally good” (RL, 181). Now, clearly, recognizing a particular “useful means” does not amount to a categorical imperative to perform that means, but Kant does provide in this account a means for distinguishing between “illusory” religious ritual and religious ritual that serves to foster the development of morality. And, notably, some recent commentators on Kant’s philosophy of religion have begun to feature this aspect of his thinking. Kant’s understanding of religious ritual is clearly more complex than a simple rejection. Stephen Palmquist, for instance, in his 2006 critical anthology *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*¹¹⁸, supports my assessment when he concludes that Kant “finds any religious belief or ritual to be rationally acceptable, even if it has no direct or literal moral meaning, provided it has the effect of encouraging or enlivening a person’s underlying moral disposition” (PS, 252, fn.27). Clearly, religion “bound” by reason still has reason to find ethical value in the world of religious rituals.

And so it seems that, given Kant’s remarks in these sections, one can argue further, with Kant, that,

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1. If a given religious ritual observance in one’s own religious society is useful for furthering morality, and...

2. If a rational moral agent in that society is obligated to put forth an effort to make morality practicable in one’s society through sensuous presentations, and...

3. If true religion is, unconditionally, precisely this attempt to make the moral “visible,” and...

4. If non-illusory religious rituals do represent, as I have argued in connection with Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic “naturalization,” an ideal form of sensuous representation of morality,...

5. Therefore, a rational moral agent in that society has an obligation to maintain some form of that religious ritual due to his moral obligation to further the moral development of others in that society.

Notice that this obligation does not amount to the obligation to perform a specific ritual, but in some religious societies it would amount to an obligation to perform some form of a religious ritual act (according to Kant’s understanding of religion) that bears a pedagogical and symbolic relation to moral acts. It is, thereby, my argument (supported by Kant’s philosophy) that “non-illusory” religious rituals are the ideal kind of act for fulfilling a Kantian obligation to further the development of morality in religious societies. In this way, one may fairly conclude that Kantian morality cannot be said to regard non-illusory religious rituals as moral imperatives in themselves, but they do satisfy the imperative to cultivate morality in others.

4.5 Concluding Reflections on Religious Ritual as Moral Action

As mentioned earlier, Krishna’s command to Arjuna, “For the mere maintenance (saîṃgraḥam, lit. “holding together”) of the world, you should act,” (III.20) phrases an important insight into the morality of religious ritual and into the nature of religious ritual in general. For Kant, however, religious rituals are not regarded in this way. Kant can only offer two related claims for supporting the moral importance of religious ritual performance, which are (1) the command of reason to work with others in the pursuit of some moral cultivation, which may
amount to a moral imperative to perform *some* religious rituals provided one’s present society traditionally requires such actions, and (2) an argument for the performance of religious rituals as acts that cultivate the aesthetic imagination toward an understanding of morality. I have suggested that this is primarily because Kant does not distinguish the kind of rationality involved in ritual performance from instrumental rationality. Thus he regards much religious ritual as the attempt by a clerical class to perform, *instrumentally*, some illusion “upon the hearts of men.” He does not develop an understanding of the implicit relationship between religious ritual performance and the cultivation of the body as a social identity, which would further develop his distinction between illusory religious rituals and those that are, in a given society, “useful” for aiming toward the cultivation of morality.

The Gita’s account of ritual morality, however, is not without its difficulties. The Gita determines ritual moral duties according to the Vedic *varna* system, a system that has long received critical attention. Krishna, clarifying how Arjuna will know his duty, says, “The duties of the brahmins, the kshatriyas, the vaishyas, and of the shudras, Arjuna, are distributed according to the qualities which arise from their own nature” (XVIII.41). This account presumes that the *varna* that determines one’s duties will be determined by one’s own innate material nature, which has been determined according to one’s *karma* in past lives. Kant’s philosophy has no place for the concept of rebirth according to past moral action, and so his account of ritual duties would have to be grounded solely in the present society of the individuals involved. This is preferable for my project because it does not require seeking a metaphysical justification for religious duties. As in Islam, many ritualists do justify their claims to moral ritual action according to divine command theory or other metaphysical arguments, but here I am primarily concerned to take steps in the direction of clarifying a non-metaphysically-speculative
foundation for understanding the morality of religious rituals. This account is yet not meant to rule out the involvement of metaphysical accounts; it simply provides a basis for understanding ritual morality at the level of empirical social action, which is involved in all religious rituals.

Despite their limitations, both the Gita and Kant serve to highlight many of the same dimensions of ritual morality. Most importantly, in both cases one finds philosophical resources for identifying that the relation of ritual to morality is not simply a matter of how a ritual act may be understood as a duty-bound moral act; both accounts also notice that rituals are frequently used to cultivate morality, and to do this they must simultaneously invoke other features, such as thinking that allows for precise rule-following, social aesthetic themes, and the awareness of a ritual act as an act that transforms social identities. The question of the morality of ritual thereby raises two main concerns, both about ritual as a direct moral act and also about ritual as an act seeking indirect or ambiguously delayed results. My conclusions in this chapter regarding the second concern have been straightforward. It is clear that religious rituals should be understood as acts that aim to cultivate an indirect form of moral reasoning and acting. The more difficult point, however, has to do with clarifying whether or not a religious ritual may be said to be a moral act in and of itself.

When addressing this question it helps to highlight the peculiarity of religious ritual morality in relation to more common ethical terminology, should one accept such morality as true morality. Religious ritual morality, as it has been developed here, clearly would not neatly fit into traditional ethical categories. On one way of looking at it, the claim to the morality of ritual action seems to rely upon an implicitly social and consequentialist foundation, such that the morality of ritual is understood to be that of an action that is recognized as “good” or “ethical” based upon the consequent fulfillment of a social expectation to perform one’s duty. On
another way of looking at it, the claim to the morality of ritual action seems to rely upon an implicitly deontological perspective towards consistency in duty-bound action, such that the morality of ritual is understood to be that of an action that is recognized as “good” or “ethical” based upon epistemological strictness or systematicity in carrying out one’s duty. Yet, there are good reasons why these two conditions of religious ritual, formal, rational repetition and the serving of social needs and expectations, can be combined in a ritual performance, and the difficulty for interpretation of religious ritual morality lies precisely in negotiating formalism’s relation to the social environment.

The morality of a religious ritual is clearly like deontological ethics because it requires an imperative that is regarded as moral because it is performed regardless of interest. However, the moral element of the imperative does not require that any particular ritual action be performed, but only that ritual that is invested with social importance for cultivating morality be performed. Religious ritual morality is clearly like a consequentialist ethics because it is regarded as moral in connection with collective interest in maintaining collective identity and values. However, this sense of interest is not a matter of taking into account any strictly individual interests. One might also characterize religious ritual morality as a situationalist, particularist, or even relativist ethics, because the moral value of the action is determined in terms of a particular community in a particular situation, which in turn determines the ritual’s morality. However, some features of ritual moral action are generalizable beyond the details of particular situations, as is represented by the themes of each chapter in this project.

I argue in my concluding chapter that each dimension of the nature of religious ritual is required for unpacking the others, and so I will return to this issue to give a more general response to the question, “Is a religious ritual performance a moral action?” This will, of course,
depend on the world that it raises. Provided that world is morally constructive and not deceptive, such action does seem a likely candidate, in that they involve care for supporting the identities of others. The present chapter, however, serves to highlight the uniqueness of religious rituals when regarded as moral acts. It is thus central here to end this chapter with a few general observations about developing concepts of ritual morality.

Consider: a person is told that the ethical thing is “to simply do what we do.” As part of a collective identity, one must perform certain ritual actions that are done by the group. It is important for understanding such morality to distinguish between two ways of regarding what may seem to be the same act:

1. It is ethical to perform ritual x because “that is what we do.”
2. It is ethical to perform ritual x because “you will then be identified as part of our group.”

Clearly, these two alternatives highlight the fact that tied up in the question of the morality of ritual is the question of what it means to be and to become part of a social group. Injunction 1 commands someone who is already understood to be part of the group, and there is no attempt to link explicitly ritual performance with a stated end. “Do x because x is what we do” might be said to operate as a logically circular command, commanding one to do what one already does, but, in the case of ritual, logical circularity does not capture the full sense of the injunction. A ritual injunction, according to my understanding, invokes a moral imperative like Injunction 1, namely to “do what we do,” especially because “what we do” is based primarily on what one already does as part of a society. Injunction 2 is more directly instrumental and does not imply that the recipient of the injunction is already part of the group in question. Clearly, given my arguments in the second chapter against regarding religious rituals as primarily instrumental
actions, this kind of injunction cannot be regarded as a clear case of ritual performance. It too easily falls into an instrumental analysis.

Thereby, an injunction to perform a fully established ritual does not call upon direct instrumental thinking about the act commanded. A ritual injunction calls a person to enact pre-existent (prior to the injunction) capacities that are presupposed in the injunction by virtue of such acts being part and parcel of the regular practices of a group and its included practical identities. A religious ritual, in this way, would both enact a ritual injunction and also indirectly enact an embodied way of life. The ethical quality of the action therefore does not derive from a person's ability to act in accord with an explicit conceptual end (aside from the goal to do whatever must be done); instead it derives from a person's pre-established capacities as a member of a community. The act thus must be in accord with the implicit expectations of a community. The more the action is explicitly connected to a purpose, the more likely its spontaneity, and corresponding moral value, is to fail.

Ultimately, these tensions cannot be cleared up until the individual and social dimensions of ritual reasoning are more fully understood in relation to each other. This will lead to the more fundamental question: is acting in order to embody the non-illusory, ritualized moral expectations of a religious society truly ethical? I will, however, close by noting that there is reason at least to consider that the answer should be “yes.” Consider, for instance, the role that concepts of “care” have played in recent ethical theory. Does not caring for another person frequently require a “sacrifice” of attachment to the fruits of one’s actions based upon a will to perform an act of duty regardless of one’s personal ends? Does not religious ritual embody such action in that religious rituals are actions performed primarily because socially embodied rationality deems such acts to be fundamental requirements for the maintenance of that social
world? And, today, when even ethical acts are so frequently regarded as culture-specific or as largely subjective matters of choosing ‘personal’ standards, how can it not seem plausible to regard the performance of a society’s religious rituals at the sacrifice of one’s own personal interests as a profound, if not profoundly ethical, act?
Chapter 5:  
Religious Ritual as Aesthetic Performance

5.1 The Question of Religious Ritual as Aesthetic Performance

While the previous chapters single out a major hermeneutic theme frequently used as theoretical grounds for interpreting religious rituals, this final chapter brings in an additional dimension. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to argue that the aesthetic dimension of religious ritual is paramount for connecting the issue-specific hermeneutic conclusions of the prior chapters into a coherent theoretical unity. To begin this argument, it is first necessary to address a few of the broader reasons why aesthetics might seem like an unexpected place to find this conceptual center. If one surveys recent general anthologies in the philosophy of aesthetics, it becomes apparent that the majority of articles address the nature of the aesthetic either in terms of a general theory of the aesthetic or in terms of various types of art. Only basic attention has been provided to somatic or performative aesthetics\textsuperscript{119}, which involves those human activities that primarily involve bodily enactment. The reasons for this seems to have something to do with the fact that for many thinkers the term “aesthetics” typically calls to mind art museums or art galleries, and their tendency to focus upon static art objects. While it is true that other topics such as literature, film, and music do occasionally make their way into these anthologies, there is also clearly a need to engage in further consideration of the distinct roles that bodily enactment may play in aesthetics. After all, it is commonly agreed that some activities such as dance, singing,

\textsuperscript{119} In fact, other recent writers have acknowledged the general lack of attention paid to the body in most of philosophy. Perhaps most recently and most pronounced is Richard Shusterman’s proposal of the field of “somaesthetics” and his argument for the broader consideration of the body in philosophy. See Schusterman’s article “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal” in Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 57, no. 3, 299-313, 1998. As he notes there, “If self-knowledge (rather than mere knowledge of worldly facts) is philosophy’s prime cognitive aim, then knowledge of one’s bodily dimension must not be ignored. Concerned not simply with the body’s external form or representation but also with its lived experience, somaesthetics also works at improving awareness of our bodily states and feelings, thus providing greater insight into both our passing modes and lasting attitudes.”
and other performances deserve to be celebrated and identified as “aesthetic” phenomena. This chapter, in response to this shortage of attention to the somatic, partly aims to expand further the issues considered in the philosophy of aesthetics by developing an aesthetics of ritual performance. It may seem unexpected to move to aesthetics of ritual to broaden the appreciation of somatic aesthetics, especially considering that the aesthetic dimensions of ritual are not limited to the somatic. Also, ritual is not typically considered to be an “art,” due to the fact that it is most often associated with the complexities of religion. Nonetheless, this chapter will argue that a study of ritual’s performative aesthetics will not only critically enlighten theoretical inquiry into the nature of ritual, but also aesthetic theory in general.

To further explicate how problems in ritual aesthetics first led to this project, this chapter will detail an example of a widely practiced form of ritual that the present author repeatedly encountered in field studies of religion in India, undertaken as thesis research for a Master of Arts degree in Religious Studies. That project focused on a Hindu pūjā (a ritualized form of worship) known as the rudrābhiṣeka. This example will illustrate how at least two distinct dimensions are involved in the aesthetics of ritual actions. The first, and primary, dimension is participation, which includes a wide range of possible roles within it, for it determines a polarity between direct participation in a “formally defined” ritual and the usually “less formally defined” audience involvement. Although it is important to note that audience members often become direct participants, this spectrum should nonetheless be kept in mind due to the direct incorporation of the distinction between direct participant and audience in many rituals. There are thereby many ways to participate in a ritual, and so a variety of intermediate positions must be anticipated. Secondly, the other major dimension to acknowledge is the environment of the ritual, which involves elements such as geography, location, and architecture in the performance.
of a ritual. Such elements co-constitute the aesthetic experience of ritual along with the participants. In order to examine these two dimensions, and to inform a philosophical response to them, aesthetic theories dealing with the somatic and other closely related aesthetic fields will be considered later in this chapter to place this initial consideration of ritual into the context of other closely related aspects of aesthetic theory.

To clarify from the start the phrase “aesthetics of ritual performance,” it should not be understood that rituals are here interpreted solely in terms of aesthetics. Ritual, as the prior chapters have argued, is a complex dimension of human experience that must be understood on multiple levels. This assumption, however, is not obvious to all scholars who have studied the nature of ritual. Frits Staal, a widely influential scholar of philosophy and religious ritual, is perhaps the most well-known example of a philosopher who sought to understand ritual by limiting its essential nature to one dimension, namely that of rule-bound activity. This is best embodied in his provocative yet misleading argument that, because in ritual “the rules count, not the result,” therefore we can conclude, “ritual is for its own sake,” meaning “it is meaningless, without function, aim or goal.” I will shortly return to Staal’s thesis, for, although it was denied in my first chapter that this limited yet provocative portrayal of ritual as non-semantic patterned behavior is the end of the story, his conclusions do, perhaps surprisingly, serve to reveal more about the aesthetics of ritual. At this point, Staal simply should serve as a reminder that one must be careful to distinguish a study of the structure of ritual from a study of the larger nature of ritual.

It is also important to bear in mind that, within and outside of religious traditions, religious rituals are frequently interpreted and evaluated as aesthetic phenomena. This fact

indirectly raises another preliminary problem that should be addressed before moving into the
details of this chapter, namely that to regard religious rituals as aesthetic phenomena often raises
controversy about what makes a religious ritual “religious,” partly because the aesthetic in
general is frequently regarded with suspicion by religions, especially those emphasizing
detachment toward the everyday world of sensations. Although mere aesthetic appreciation may
seem to reduce the sacred to the secular, religious traditions themselves do often use aesthetic
categories to discuss the significance of their rituals, usually as long as the interpretation comes
from an exegete committed to the faith. Islam and Vedic Hinduism, and their related
philosophical traditions, include a remarkable variety of theoretical reflections on the relation of
aesthetics to religious living.

To explore the intricacies of religious ritual aesthetics, this chapter examines further two
Muslim philosophers, al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-‘Arabī, whose writings directly address the role of
aesthetics in Islamic ritual prayer (ṣalāt). Both figures uniquely feature the role played by
imagination (khayāl) and aesthetic sensibility (dhawq). The visions of ritual prayer laid out by
al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-‘Arabī are then reconsidered and enriched in light of modern and
contemporary Western writings that inform performance aesthetics, such as aesthetics of dance,
which uniquely suggests how a socially imagined world of aesthetic significance can emerge
from frequent cultural performances of ritualized bodily actions. Other examples of Vedic
Hindu and Islamic ritual are also briefly reconsidered in light of these theories. Finally, as a
conclusion to this chapter and my overall project, I develop my own theory of how the
imagination and the body are harmonized in religious ritual to bring about a world of experience

121 “Dhawq” literally means “taste.” Also, it should be noted that this term is widely used in the Şûfî
context to refer to the “tasting” of the immediate knowledge gained during religious experience. Because of this
immediacy, Corbin convincingly links dhawq with a kind of religious “aesthetic sensibility.”
for ritualists, one that unites the dimensions of ritual meaning detailed in the prior chapters.

That theory’s central concept of “ritual world” is framed as a response to debates over how an outside interpreter of religious ritual actions should theoretically ground any claims regarding the significance of religious ritual performance.

5.2 A Preliminary Case Study: The Rudrābhiṣeka

My previous research within the field of religious studies focused on a ritual commonly performed in northern India. “Rudrābhiṣeka,” a Sanskrit term referring to “the ritual bathing of Śiva (also known as mahārudra) for his pleasure alone,” denotes a ritual traditionally performed by worshippers of Śiva. It is a type of ritual known as a pūjā, which is a common religious ritual of worship. This is an everyday example from which general conclusions may be made about the broader phenomenon of ritual. In order to interpret the aesthetics of any particular ritual, it is first necessary, as I have been arguing in the prior chapters, to consider intimately the lived, traditional context in which a ritual arises in order to be attentive to how that ritual is performed and socially experienced by those engaged in the ritual. My primary concern in this case study is thereby to demonstrate how priestly performers and devout attendees in a rudrābhiṣeka commonly attest to experiencing a traditional form of ritual within a living context and in terms of an interaction between two aesthetic dimensions of ritual: participation and ritual environment.

The main concern in my earlier study was to show what changes occur when a ritual is performed outside of the familiar places of its origin. This study involved not only extensive observation in the original context (a variety of regions in northern India) and the diaspora context (Hawai‘i), but it also involved personally being trained by a variety of Vedic ritualists to recognize and to partially perform parts of the ritual (in a mock manner, for the purpose of study only). The diaspora context, which was my original interest, acted as a background against which the ritual in its traditional context strongly contrasted, thereby revealing much about what is regarded by participants as essential to the ritual. This contrast in diaspora raises many difficult questions about the nature of ritual, including those regarding the aesthetics of ritual, but for the purposes of this project it cannot be presented here.
Rituals within Vedic Hinduism occur within a tradition that to this day strongly resists change. Staal’s own studies were associated with part of the same tradition, and it is likely that the structural resilience of its ritual forms has much to do with his conclusions. For this reason, it should be acknowledged that the formal structure of Vedic ritual plays a large role in the aesthetics of ritual. However, a more comprehensive understanding of Vedic ritual in its aesthetic dimension requires the consideration of more of the constitutive dimensions of such ritual experience. This consideration must not only include those associated with the preservation and re-enactment of the structure of ritual, the “rules,” but also the broader ways by which traditional narratives enhance rituals.

The rudrābhiṣeka is performed in largely the same way as most Śaiva (worshippers of Śiva) pūjās, which are generally rituals of deity worship. A pūjā, although traditionally formalized, is also commonly described according to traditional narrative as the comforting and praising of a divine honored guest being welcomed into a home or a temple. In this case, for Śaivists, the primary ritual act involved in the rudrābhiṣeka is the linga-pūjā, during which Śiva is welcomed and worshipped in the form of a linga, which traditionally has the form of a largely non-anthropomorphic yet phallic stone. Just as when an important guest enters your home, there are certain stages in most pūjās that would be natural to such a welcoming. The priest or priests directly perform the formalized ritual for the deity, while other worshippers are also present to view the ritual and indirectly participate, such as by singing for the pleasure of the deity. In this way, the worshippers hope to engage in a darśana, or “seeing,” within which they understand themselves both “to see the god and to be seen by the god,” absorbed in a religious co-relation with the divine.
At the start of a performance of the *rudrābhīṣeka*, and most other Vedic *pūjās*, an invitation is expressed (known as the *āhavana*), by which the priests call to a deity to manifest in the *linga*, or in other cases an idol or another material symbol, nestled in the sanctum of a temple or shrine. Next, welcoming the deity, various “accompaniments” (*upacāras*) are offered; chants are sung, and the deity is bathed or cooled by water and other substances (such as ghee, curd, and honey) so that the deity may feel comfortable and be praised. In the *rudrābhīṣeka* Śiva is then clothed in fine, clean clothes and fragrant garlands, much like one would offer to a guest who traveled long and far to visit. Correspondingly, the deity is offered clean, fresh food. While being made comfortable, he is repeatedly praised by ritual chants directed by the presiding priests (the *pūjāri*). During this time, other devotees will also sing or chant, but in no strictly prescribed manner, usually offering commonly known devotional songs. After this, the priests illumine the entire temple with arrays of elegantly rotated candles at a stage of the ritual known as the *ārati* (lit. “complete adoration”), through which the blessings of the deity are shared, via the light, first with the priests. Brightening and accentuating the elaborate interior of the temple or shrine, the bright light is eventually passed to others or shown from the inner sanctum to the crowd beyond so that all worshippers present may encounter the blessings of the deity. Finally, such *pūjās* generally end as a visit with an honored guest would normally end; the visitor is appropriately bid farewell and the remaining food offering (referred to as “*prasāda*”) is shared by the rest in the temple. This general ritual form, centered on the narrative of welcoming and worshipping an honored divine guest, is not only a widely common form of worshipping Śiva, but this style of ritual is similarly performed for many other Hindu deities.

The precise details of such a ritual are generally taught to Hindu priests through a rigorously systematized ritual manual, known in Sanskrit as a “*paddhati,*” many of which were
examined for my field study. Such manuals, however, not only prescribe strict rules that must be followed, but they also explicitly open possibilities for deviation and elaboration depending upon many variables (as was explained at greater depth in Chapter 1), such as what time of year the ritual is performed, who requested the ritual, the number of priests available, or the significance of the occasion for those involved. Often the formal structure of a Vedic ritual includes many options that allow the priests, or those primarily funding the ritual (those in the role of “yajamāna”), to tailor the ritual to the occasion. Interestingly, yet another stage of pūjās, known as the kṣamāparādā, is included in the early stages of the ritual. In that phase the priest asks for forgiveness, or apologizes ahead of time, for any errors that might occur in the performance of the ritual. As this general description conveys, not only does a semantic dimension of ritual arise from the traditional narrative that guides the encounter, but also the structure of the ritual itself often requires engagement in that narrative.

The two aesthetic dimensions of participation and environment clearly co-constitute such rituals. The rudrābhīṣeka, and I suspect all ritual, may be understood, although not exclusively, as an aesthetic phenomenon from at least those two perspectives, namely for those involved, ranging from direct participants to the participating audience, and also in terms of the environment of the ritual, that which is external to the immediate performance yet remaining intimately related, such as with architecture and location. The distinction between these two dimensions is likewise interpretable according to the distinction between formal structure and narrativity in ritual. The inter-relation of these two distinctions thus serves as a conceptual framework within which to analyze the aesthetics of ritual, particularly in response to contemporary philosophers of aesthetics. Before moving to the contemporary theories,
however, the next section examines how two Muslim philosophers reflecting upon a commonplace example of Islamic ritual aesthetics develop similar theoretical themes.

5.3 Aesthetics in Islamic Ritual Prayer

As explained in Chapter 3, al-Ghazālī went through a radical shift at one point in his life, a time when his lifestyle changed drastically and quickly, resulting in a span of years during which he went into what he regarded as a period of “exile.” He renounced his worldly posts and wandered anonymously in lands barely known to him previously for the purpose of bringing himself closer to the living world of his religion; this claim is perhaps best supported by the fact that it was during this period that most of his famous multi-volume philosophical treatise on religion, *The Resuscitation of the Religious Sciences*, was written. What is important about this period of his life for the present purposes is not the exile itself, but the way that al-Ghazālī describes the aesthetics of this period of his life. In many of his writings, during and after his exile, he refers to his period of wandering as symbolically connected to the Islamic practices of pilgrimage, regarding his journey as an aesthetic performance of prayer.

Ebrahim Moosa, in a small section of *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* (MG), highlights how something like an aesthetics of religious ritual can be developed based on al-Ghazālī’s life and philosophy. Moosa argues that al-Ghazālī not only understood his exile to be part of an indirect aesthetic performance of the *Hajj*, the obligatory Islamic ritual of pilgrimage to Mecca (which actually was his official, public reason for an apparently abrupt disappearance from ordinary life as a leading legal scholar), but al-Ghazālī also seems to have envisioned his exile as a ritualized repetition of the exile of Abraham. Characterizing al-Ghazālī, Moosa writes,
One of the ritual goals of pilgrimage is to place the subject in a temporary state of liminality, away from the everyday rhythms and normality of life, in order to experience an abnormal state during which rehabilitation and healing take place. And so the irony should not be lost on us that, just as Abraham bequeathed the ritual of liminality to Islam, Ghazālī took liminality seriously....It is possible to think of Ghazālī’s exodus from Baghdad as an “event” – an act that transformed him and the equally transformative legacy he left behind. To view it as such is also to observe his capacity to transgress, to break out of boundaries, and to embrace innovative ideas and practices. (MG, 124-5)

What most intrigues me about Moosa’s account of al-Ghazālī’s exile is the aesthetic dimension of liminality. Religious rituals are frequently described by religious traditions as taking place in “a different world” or on “a different plane” when compared with ordinary life. This difference of “location” is frequently associated by religious traditions with the capacity of such rituals to transform the individuals performing them and the social worlds within which those individuals live.

Many of al-Ghazālī’s writings highlight an “aesthetics of ritual exile.” Moosa reconstructs a pattern from this account that closely resembles a logic of ritual commonly known among anthropologists of ritual, perhaps most famously acknowledged in the anthropological writings of Victor Turner, the so-called “rite of passage.” This “three part sequence experienced by the ritual subject” incorporates the aesthetic phases “separation, transition, and incorporation” (MG, 125).

[T]he first phase of Ghazālī’s ritual transformation was clearly his separation from routinized life in a big city. Separation changed the quality of his time as he began a life of renunciation that required extensive self-reflection and meditation. It was this qualitative change in time that was effective in transforming Ghazālī’s social status from scholar to ascetic (zāhid). (MG, 125)

Moosa notices a pattern common to many religious rituals in the period of transformation that al-Ghazālī later credits in his famous philosophical autobiography/epistemology, Deliverance from Error (DE), as the impetus for his shift to writing philosophical reflections on Islamic religious
practice. At the heart of al-Ghazâli’s exile is the realization that religious “ritualization” involves bringing about what Moosa refers to as a “mundus imaginalis,” an imaginary universe that, in the case of Islamic ritual prayer, is somehow connected to experiencing the divine from a “location” that is beyond the ordinary world of time and space.

The concept of an imagined world that somehow establishes a new ritualized time or space, thereby distancing itself from the ordinary world, is by no means unrelated to al-Ghazâli’s broader philosophical thinking. At the heart of much of al-Ghazâli’s philosophy is a recurring argument that our cognitive capacities for explicit rational inquiry are not sufficient for living a good life. Al-Ghazâli and Abraham are both interpreted by Moosa as being skeptical about asserting the universal applicability of rationality to all living. True happiness and religious felicity require also evaluating one’s life by what al-Ghazâli recurrently refers to as “the heart” (qalb). In Deliverance from Error he introduces the concept, explaining, “[B]y ‘heart’ I mean the essence of a man’s spirit which is the seat of the knowledge of God” (DE, 87). While this concept of “heart” does bear some similarity to the popular Western association of the heart with emotion, al-Ghazâli’s concept is significantly distinctive.

Elsewhere, in The Book of the Marvels of the Heart (part of the voluminous Resuscitation of the Religious Sciences, printed in translation as an appendix to DE), he explains the concept in more detail. Consistently he reveals the breadth of qalb, illustrating that the concept’s scope applies to more than just humanity. “[A] sheep sees a wolf with its eye and knows its hostility by its qalb and flees from it: that is interior perception" (DE, 317). The qalb of a species represents something that makes it what it is (its “essence” of spirit) by means of a distinct form of “interior perception.” This internal perception is not simply an emotional way of reacting to the world, which might seem to be true of the qalb of the sheep. Al-Ghazâli also writes, “But let us speak
of what is peculiar to a man’s heart and because of which he has an immense dignity and is worthy of closeness to God Most High. This comes down to knowledge and will” (DE, 317). In short, the qalb of a human is his ‘aql (intellectual capacity).

In The Book of Knowledge\(^{123}\) (another volume of Resuscitation of the Religious Sciences) he clarifies four primary senses of ‘aql. It “distinguishes man from the other animals and prepares him to understand and grasp the theoretical sciences” (BK, 226). Second, “the word ‘aql is applied to that knowledge which makes its appearance even in the infant,” “axiomatic knowledge,” (BK, 227) such as knowledge of basic possibilities and impossibilities. These first two aspects clarify the innate features of the human qalb. The third and fourth are developed during the course of a human life on the basis of the first two. In the third sense, ‘aql applies to “that knowledge which is acquired through experience,” empirical knowledge (BK, 227). And, in fourth sense, ‘aql refers to “the instinct [that] develops to such an extent that its owner will be able to tell what the end [of a considered course of action] will be, and consequently he will conquer and subdue his appetite which hankers for immediate pleasures” (BK, 228), a kind of self-controlling practical wisdom, which al-Ghazālī describes as “the final fruit and ultimate aim” of the human qalb (BK, 228).

While the qalb of humanity does, for al-Ghazālī, include modes of perception akin to a sheep sensing a wolf’s aggression, humanity’s own mode of “internal perception” is also shaped by elevated capacities of knowledge and will. Man’s knowledge and will reflect a wide range of experiences, ranging from animal desires to intellectual and religious concerns. The capacity to extend knowledge and will toward the intellectual and the religious, beyond mere sensory

memory and basic appetite, distinguishes the internal perception of the human. “Man is a rank between beasts and Angels. For man, in so far as he feeds and procreates, is a plant; and in so far as he senses and moves voluntarily, he is an animal; and with reference to his form and stature he is like a picture painted on a wall: but his special quality is simply the knowledge of the realities of things” (DE, 319). Al-Ghazālī, emphasizing this, yet does not simply argue that humanity should focus exclusively on intellectual knowledge, for humanity is not actually in a position to follow knowledge alone. The entire range of human experiences ideally is to be harmonized by the galb. Each level of human activity has its place, and knowledge cannot act as if it were the master capacity of the entirety.

Instead, al-Ghazālī argues that human “internal perception,” said to produce a higher knowledge than intellectual knowledge by its unification of human capacities, must be guided by yet another power, one that has the capacity to reproduce the full range of perceptions as a unified “inner world,” and for al-Ghazālī that capacity is the imagination.

I mean that in a man which perceives – in a heart which is in the midst of its kingdom like a king, it will make the imaginative power which is in the forefront of the brain act as its postmaster for the reports of the sensibles will be gathered with him. And it will make the conserving power which resides in the posterior part of the brain act as its treasurer, and it will make the tongue act as its interpreter, and it will make the moving members act as its secretaries [scribes], and it will make the five senses act as its spies….For they are entrusted with reports which gather [collect] from these worlds and convey [channel] to the imaginative faculty which is like the postmaster. (DE, 319-210)

For al-Ghazālī, then, ordinary cognition is said to be insufficient for producing what is necessary for leading a good life because it does not facilitate a unity of the various capacities of the human form. The imagination is the only means by which such divergent capacities are said to be connectable. The unique nature of man, then, is that of being a kind of creature capable of producing an imagined unity out of the full range of human experience.
For al-Ghazālī’s own life, producing that imagined unity required a dramatic and ritualized reenactment of Abraham’s own exile in terms of the ritual practices of his own traditional religious duties (hajj, ʿalāt, etc.). When interpreting al-Ghazālī’s understanding of ritualization, it is important to notice that the kind of unity produced by the imagination cannot be evaluated by solely cognitive or instrumental reasoning. The unity of authentically religious “internal perception” for al-Ghazālī is a physically enacted and fundamentally aesthetic unity. Moosa emphasizes this by highlighting al-Ghazālī’s insistence that religious living must be guided by dhawq (aesthetic sensibility), such that the institutions of religious life, with their emphasis upon orthodox authority and ritualized repetition, must be harmonized with a perceptual and performative creativity on the part of the religious practitioner – a creativity that, for many in al-Ghazālī’s own tradition, was at least initially controversial.

Viewed through the lenses of a nonliteralist contemporary hermeneutic that is also imbued with a sense of mysticism, his transitional phases and idiosyncratic views offer us opportunities to explore new possibilities of the imagination...In modern terms, some of Ghazālī’s views would be termed “subversive,” since he went against the grain of established legal practices... Yet, given his stature and reception by later generations, he does play a major role in validating these subversive moments within a juridical and normative idiom. Over the centuries, as Ghazālī’s thought gradually gained acceptance in traditionalist circles, the subversive narrative was recycled into the religious and cultural imaginations in different proportions, both reinvigorating and regenerating the social imagination. (MG, 137)

Even though al-Ghazālī’s ritualization of his exile was far from orthodox, because it was grounded in tradition his activity and ideas eventually became accepted as legitimate within Islam, as well as becoming highly esteemed within the Ṣūfī tradition.

It may seem that al-Ghazālī’s exile and ritualization involve a merely individual act of the imagination, making it difficult to understand how religious ritual, which I argue depends upon social groups for their meaning, might be the result of a personal act of thinking. It is, however,
not easy to explain reductively the role played by the imagination when one acts within a
“world” produced by ritualization. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s philosophy of the imagination, however,
nicely supplements al-Ghazālī’s thinking by aiming to clarify precisely how aesthetic
imagination works in religious ritual action. Henri Corbin, in his groundbreaking study Creative
Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī (CA), highlights how Ibn al-‘Arabī’s religious
philosophy centers upon a concept of “theophanic imagination,” a form of imagination by way of
which the divine is said to manifest in the ordinary world.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of “theophanic imagination” is first and foremost a concept that
should not be confused with the common concept of fantasy. Throughout Ibn al-‘Arabī’s
philosophy

we encounter the idea that the Godhead possesses the power of Imagination, and
that by imagining the universe God created it,… that there exists between the
universe of pure spirit and the sensible world an intermediate world which is the
idea of “Idea images” as the Sufis put it,… that in it the Imagination produces
effects so real that they can “mold” the imagining subject, and that the
Imagination “casts” man in the form (the mental body) that he has imagined. (CA, 181-2)

Ibn al-‘Arabī, far from conceiving of the imagination as fantasy, thought of “Imagination” as an
explicitly ontological/metaphysical concept thoroughly tied to the theistic problem of accounting
for God’s role in Creation. While the intricacies of this theology cannot adequately be discussed
here, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s application of this concept to ritual prayer does suggest promising avenues
for thought regarding the kind of imagined world involved in religious ritual.

Ibn al-‘Arabī relates a dynamic said to occur during “authentic” (sincere) ritual prayer, a
dynamic by which three ontological dimensions are brought into relation by the imagination (a
relation that directly resembles al-Ghazālī’s metaphorical association of the imagination with the
role of “postmaster”). True prayer is said to open a relation between that which is manifest
(zāhir), that which is manifesting (zuhūr), and that which is hidden (bāṭin). Qualifying the sense of this relation, Corbin explains, “[T]he revealed being (zāhir) is the manifestation (zuhūr) of the hidden (bāṭin); the two form an indissoluble unity; but this does not mean that they are existentially identical. For, existentially, the manifest is not hidden,…the human condition (nāsūt) is not the divine condition (lāhūt)” (CA, 246-7). Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writing expressed this theme through maxims, such as: “We have given Him to manifest Himself through us, whereas He has given us (to exist through Him)” and “If He has given us life and existence by His being, I also give Him life by knowing Him in my heart” (CA, 247). This concept of “theophanic imagination” thus implies that God and humans share a role in the manifestation of religious experience.

From this understanding it becomes clear that for ritual prayer it is “existentially” necessary for God to be productively (creatively) imagined by individuals. This is the basis of what Corbin refers to as Ibn al-‘Arabī’s “method of theophanic prayer.”

[P]rayer is not a request for something: it is the expression of a mode of being, a means of existing and of causing to exist, that is a means of causing the God who reveals Himself to appear, of “seeing” Him, not to be sure in His essence, but in the form which precisely He reveals by revealing Himself by and to that form. This view of prayer takes the ground from under the feet of those who, utterly ignorant of the nature of theophanic Imagination as Creation, argue that a God who is the “creation” of our Imagination can only be “unreal” and that there can be no purpose in praying to such a God. For it is precisely because He is a creation of the imagination that we pray to him, and that He exists. Prayer is the highest form, the supreme act of the Creative Imagination. (CA, 248)

So, according to this way of regarding ritual prayer, in order for the practice of ṣalāt to be appropriately performed, God must be “produced” by worshippers, not ontologically but existentially, by way of imagination such that the resulting “image” is appropriate for developing a relationship with God. This does not amount to saying that God Himself is produced by the
imagination, as if God is best regarded as a fiction in the minds of worshippers; Ibn al-‘Arabī is arguing that the authentic relationship a worshipper may have with God happens to require that worshippers co-constitute a way of imagining God, due to the impossibility of approaching God directly as a discrete object.

While it is true that many religious rituals are not performed in the same manner as ritualized worship of a deity, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s account of theophanic prayer does involve a principle that can assist in interpretation of other religious rituals. Religious rituals do not involve an imagined world solely produced by the fiat of an individual. Such a world imagined by a performer may require individual acts of imagination to become active, but that world is not understood firsthand by the performer as a product of mere fantasy. The imagined world, at the very least, is aesthetically experienced as involving a greater reality, in connection with other members of that society and, in many cases, in connection with a “higher” reality. Clarifying the kind of “ontological status” frequently attributed to the imagined world of a religious ritual is thereby an important task for any interpreter of such acts.

For Ibn al-‘Arabī the “reality of the imaginary” is explained by way of a theistic cosmology, but, for those unconcerned with such speculative metaphysics, it is important to notice that the existential side of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s dialogical account of prayer outlines how an imaginary world could be constructed based on a presupposed reality, and vice versa. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notion of the hidden reality of God, metaphysical arguments aside, is dependent upon his socially inherited conception of God as a necessary being. But the concept of transcendent reality is not enough to establish a religiously enacted relationship with such a being; the imagination is left to construct a world within which to produce its actions. Detailing this process, Ibn al-‘Arabī divides prayer into three stages: conversation, imagination, and
visualization. Initially the worshipper must place herself in the company of God by addressing Him or calling toward Him. Second, she must imagine God responding by facing toward her, and, in the final stage, she must initiate, “in the subtle center which is the heart,” a visualization (rūʿyā)\textsuperscript{124} of a world within which occurs the interaction between the two (CA, 251).

Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thinking on ritual prayer illustrates that ritual may be reasonably said to operate as a unique form of ‘world creation,’ a kind of creation dependent upon the imagination, which is simultaneously said to importantly resemble creation ex nihilo in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theology. As Corbin summarizes, “[I]n every instance [prayer] accomplishes its share of the Divine Being’s desire, of His aspiration to create the universe of beings, to reveal Himself in them in order to be known Himself…Each prayer, each instant in each prayer, then becomes a recurrence of Creation (tajdīd al-khalq)” (CA, 257). “[T]he ritual gestures of Prayer are likened to the acts of the Creation of the universe or macrocosm” (CA, 258). The bodily positions repeated during ʂalāt – standing straight (qiyām), deep incline (rukū’), prostration (sujūd) – are described by Ibn al-ʿArabī as repeating a pattern involved in God’s own form of world creation. Ritual prayer embraces three basic movements: descending, ascending, and horizontal; and these three movements are said to invoke three phases of creation-oriented thought or meaning: an intentional ‘descent’ toward the world, a conversion of that world such that it aims to ‘ascend’ toward a higher world, and lastly an aim to maintain ‘horizontally’ movements within each world in relation to the other world (CA, 260-1). Through such activity the ritual of ʂalāt brings about a world, not by mere fantasy, but by faithfully and imaginatively embodying a process traditionally associated with a conception of God’s creation of the universe.

\textsuperscript{124} Corbin’s translation of rūʿyā as “visualization” is carefully grounded in the Classical Islamic usage of the term, which trationally referred to a unique kind of dream, namely one that provided a revealing religious vision.
As we have seen, al-Ghazālī’s philosophy and his aesthetic ritualization of exile illustrates that establishing such a world requires more than intellectual rationality; there must be a way for the larger range of human capacities to be brought together as a world-producing whole. For al-Ghazālī, the qalb is said to do this by way of the imagination, a capacity that is unique by virtue of being active throughout the full range of human capacities. Ibn al-‘Arabī nicely supplements al-Ghazālī’s thinking by developing a more intricate account of the role of the creative imagination in the social praxis of Islamic prayer. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s account explains authentic Islamic prayer as a relationship between God (the recipient of prayer) and those praying, a relationship that requires the worshippers creatively and collectively to enact and to envision specific stages of bodily movement in terms of traditionally understood moments of God’s creativity. In both cases, we find that Islamic prayer requires more than intellectual contemplation to achieve the fullness of the ritual. The praying bodies and their imaginations together synthesize the entire range of practitioner experience into a new symbolic whole. And so, to continue this inquiry in the next section of this chapter, further consideration is given to the role played by embodied performance in the aesthetic worlds of religious rituals, particularly by considering how more recent works in the study of religious ritual and in performance aesthetics address this relationship between ritual performance and envisioned world.

5.4 Staal’s Challenge to Ritual Aesthetics

Frits Staal analyzes religious ritual (using the Vedic agnicayana as his primary example) according to what he argues is its primary distinguishing feature – rule-following. As mentioned, Staal is well-known for his striking conclusions, frequently asserting that in ritual “the rules count, not the result,” therefore “ritual is for its own sake,” thus “it is meaningless,
without function, aim or goal” (RM, 131). Although I disagree with his reductive account of the nature of ritual based on my arguments in Chapter 1, his conclusions do serve to reveal more about the aesthetics of ritual. A study of ritual syntax no doubt reveals something about how religious rituals are organized, performed, and preserved. A more comprehensive account, however, also requires an inquiry into other aesthetic dimensions of religious ritual. Moving beyond Staal, it should be asked: what distinguishes religious ritual aesthetics from the aesthetics of other similar kinds of performance? Responding to this question, it is essential to explore how ritualist performers and devout attendees commonly attest to experiencing traditional forms of religious ritual in terms of an interaction between at least three aesthetic dimensions of religious ritual, namely the syntactic dimension (aesthetic involvement with rules for action and their rearrangements), the affective dimension (aesthetic evocation of emotions), and the narrative dimension (aesthetic invocation of a traditional story). These three dimensions, I would argue, depend upon a distinct aesthetic relation between the two aesthetic “regions” mentioned earlier, that of embodied performance and that of ritualized environment, a relation that discloses much of what differentiates the aesthetics of religious ritual from other aesthetic phenomena, while also providing insights for developing further understanding of the imagined worlds described by al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-ʿArabī.

Before judging Staal too harshly, however, it is important to recognize that Vedic Hinduism is a ritual tradition that to this day manages to resist strongly changes within ritual performance. Staal’s studies were associated with part of that tradition, and it is likely that the structural resilience of its ritual forms has much to do with his conclusions. For this reason, Staal would not be mistaken to argue that the syntactic structure of ritual plays a primary role in the aesthetics of ritual. However, contrary to Staal, I will argue that a semantic (for Staal, non-
syntactic) dimension of religious ritual arises as traditional narratives and traditional emotional responses guide an aesthetic encounter with the rule-based acts of religious ritual performance. In fact, the rule-based structure of such ritual generally requires emotional engagement with a narrative. Religious rituals also manage to harmonize, via an aesthetic combination of syntactic, affective, and narrative dimensions, the two general “regions” of aesthetic experience, one experienced as embodied praxis, and another that involves the environment surrounding the practice.

When considering contemporary work in aesthetics it is important to recall that Alexander Baumgarten first used the term “aesthetics” in his 1735 doctoral thesis, the title of which has been translated from the Latin into English as “Reflections on Poetry.” After teaching a few classes on the subject, he published a longer version (available in Latin), Aesthetica, which has become widely known as the foundation of modern aesthetics. In that text he coined the term in coordination with his attempt to establish a new philosophical school with surprisingly far-reaching aims, a school he referred to as “science of sensory cognition,” which includes two key elements. First, it includes pursuit of theoretical understanding (referred to as “mathesis”) of the perfections (such as beauty) and any imperfections involved. The school also includes practical concern for refinement of sensory cognition (referred to as “askesis”). As Richard Shusterman and other philosophers of aesthetics have noted, the intersection of these two dimensions goes beyond “naturally developed faculties,” implying a further development or perfecting of human capacity. Baumgarten’s understanding of “aesthetics” also includes ways by which bodily action may cultivate aesthetic experience. Shusterman explains,

125 The doctoral thesis has been translated and edited by Karl Aschenbrenner and W.B. Hoeltther (University of California Press, 1954).
126 “Askesis” is a Greek term most frequently associated with Christian soteriological self-discipline. Baumgarten clearly uses the term more generally, but he still retains the self-transformative meaning of the term.
[Regarding *askesis*,] through repetitive drill of certain kinds of actions, one learns to instill harmony of mind with respect to a given theme of thought. Contrasting such aesthetic drill to the mechanical drill of soldiers, Baumgarten defines it as including also the systematic practicing of improvisation and even the playing of games, as well as exercises in the more erudite arts.\(^{127}\)

Thus, from its inception, aesthetics has implied the necessity to address the aesthetics of the body. And, the aesthetic experience of participants in religious ritual does engage in the instillation of “harmony of mind with respect to a given theme of thought,” as is illustrated, for example, by the fact that many acts of ritual worship involve the simultaneous enactment and re-enactment of welcoming a deity as an arriving honored guest, as in the *rudrābhīṣeka*. The “theme of thought” corresponds directly in religious ritual to what I refer to as the “narrative” dimension of ritual.

In other words, contra Staal, traditional understandings of religious ritual are not irrelevant to the study of the nature of ritual. They are essential to it, for the aesthetics of religious ritual results from a unity-producing interplay of varied dimensions of action and environment. The actions of religious ritualists simultaneously involve visualization of those actions as harmoniously occurring according to some prior, traditional narrative. And, frequently, but not always, the narrative involves relation with a transcendent being, a being that is often associated with some ultimate value for the participants. The harmonization of repetitive actions within the imagined narrative serves to heighten the aesthetic experience of those actions, especially if those actions establish a relation with an ultimate source of value.

Staal’s critique of any concept of ritual “meaning” is important here, since it offers an important challenge to those highlighting a narrative unity within religious rituals. Consider: what may be concluded if one agrees with Staal that religious rituals have no distinct semantic

content apart from what is arbitrarily (“non-meaningfully”) attributed by individuals? What if each individual associates a different meaning with the components of ritual? How can one then say that a ritual *itself* involves unified aesthetic significance? Could not ritual involve aesthetic experience without the semantic content? Actually, Staal indirectly seems to state this, although he does not seem interested to explain it in terms of aesthetic experience. Elaborating on his central claim about rituals, Staal writes, “To say that ritual is for its own sake is to say that it is meaningless, without function, aim or goal, or also that it constitutes its own aim or goal. It does not follow that it has no value: but whatever value it has is intrinsic value” (RM, 131-2). Such comments about intrinsic value are indeed rare within Staal’s work. But, what does the comment suggest or imply? Could it be that ritual is *intrinsically* aesthetic? If so, however, what would “aesthetic” then mean in the case of ritual action? Is a semantic component required for an aesthetic experience of religious ritual? Religious rituals often involve the use of symbols or symbolic actions when the historical context allows for the participants to understand such symbols, and it would clearly be correct to argue that a symbolic dimension would alter the aesthetics in fundamental ways. However, what would it mean to say that ritual could be an aesthetic event even if actions with no strict semantic content are all that constitutes ritual?

Staal, at least in his work on ritual, does not pursue an explanation of the intrinsic value that he mentions. His primary concern is to develop a definition of ritual that will allow for “scientific” study of ritual, and so he comes to the conclusion that it cannot be explained in terms of narrative traditions. He thereby denies that traditional context plays a significant role in the nature of ritual; he denies any strictly “well-formed” meaning in ritual because of the lack of a “one-to-one-correspondence” between individually attributed meanings and the elements of ritualized actions. I do not agree with Staal here because religious traditions, at least often, do
seem to provide a strong enough correspondence between actions and narrative understanding to allow for meaning to be attributed to entire rituals.

Consider the example of the *agnihotra*, a Vedic ritual considered at earlier sections in this project. Vedic ritualists, the same tradition studied by Staal, perform it daily. The ritual clearly illustrates the harmonizing of a traditional narrative dimension with rule-based performance of bodily actions. Just as al-Ghazālī’s re-embodiment of the narrative of Abraham’s exile reconfigured the landscape of al-Ghazālī’s world and actions, so to does the *agnihotra* reconfigure the Vedic ritualist and his world via its “significance.” Twice daily, at times associated with the rising and the setting of the sun, the *agnihotra* is performed by a brahmin offering milk ritually into a specially prepared fire. “The *agnihotra* ritual was correlated to the rising and setting of the sun, and among its other purposes, it was vital to the perpetual maintenance of the fire(s) (the “fire worship” or *agnyupasthāna*). With the daily *agnihotra*, the ritualist nurtures the continuity of fire, of sacrifice, and, in the mind of the ritualists, of life itself.”

As a *grhyayajña* (domestic sacrifice), the *agnihotra* is generally performed at the brahmin’s home. It is the simplest version of a set of rituals that recreate the *Rg Veda*’s story of Prajāpati performing the *agnihotra* to create the worlds of gods and men. Other more elaborate non-domestic expansions of the same Vedic ritual (*śrautayajñas*) are routinely offered by the larger religious community to reenact the same basic narrative at a larger scale. The *agnihotra* thus operates as the simplest and most direct means by which a Vedic ritualist maintains his daily connection to the larger symbolic actions of the religious community and to the scriptural narratives that link resemblances between a wide variety of structurally similar rituals. Also, the actions of the ritualist not only operate within the world of his tradition’s stories, but the rituals

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also reconfigure the symbolic meaning of the sun itself, as it rises and falls. Even the sun’s movements are existentially resignified within the world generated and maintained by the ritualist’s actions.

A solely syntactic view of ritual loses sight of the power of such symbolic parallels. However, Staal’s suggestion that such “non-meaningful action” would have “intrinsic value” does suggest a way to understand a distinct “region” of aesthetic experience involved in ritual, one that is essentially performative. Aesthetic experience for ritual participants is first and foremost bodily; it is essentially performative, and it most directly results from the rule-based re-enactment of traditionally prescribed actions. Even basic formalized performance alone could make the re-enactment aesthetically valuable for those participants. There is a distinct aesthetic harmony of body and rule achieved in the completion of a pre-established sequence of actions. A second aesthetic “region,” however, becomes possible on the basis of this merely “syntactic” aesthetic. A ritualized environment becomes possible once there is an association of ritualized actions with a narrative such that the imagination becomes creatively active, and the body is in this way understood to be acting in what I call “ritual world.” These two regions (bodily re-enactment and ritual world) rarely remain distinct in religious ritual. The self-contained performance according to the rules, in itself aesthetic, provides a “skeleton” of bodily actions upon which an emerging world reconfigures the ritualist’s way of regarding those same actions. A particularly well-performed ritual thus will arrive at a harmony between these two levels, such that the aesthetic experience of the participants occurs as an interchange harmonizing body and
narrative, allowing each to influence and transform the other as if the actions were taking place in a transformed world.\textsuperscript{129}

5.5 On the Emergence of Ritual Worlds in Embodied Performance

A parallel to the aesthetics of dance proves useful for illustrating the role of embodied performance in the emerging of ritual worlds. Francis Sparshott, in “Dance: Bodies in Motion, Bodies at Rest,” offers a theory of the somatic aesthetics of dance, in this case from the perspective of the onlooker. “Dances are characteristically meant to be seen.”\textsuperscript{130} Although those present to “view” a ritual often actually participate, even if intermittently, the same can be said of many religious rituals. Dances, like rituals, are generally done for the sake of an audience, even if that audience is just the performer herself or even “if only for God.”\textsuperscript{131} Plus, although there are some exceptions, formally defined rituals are generally performed on behalf of and before some community, especially in a religious context. Sparshott notices that dance is traditionally understood aesthetically according to the interaction of three major factors: expressiveness, beauty or other formal properties, and mimetic force.\textsuperscript{132} These three dimensions provide a good vocabulary through which dance may be meaningfully interpreted. He uses classical traditions of dance in India as a primary exemplification of how formal vocabularies of gesture may be developed via the incorporation of those dimensions. “[I]n the absence of such a vocabulary, the

\textsuperscript{129} The phrase “aesthetic experience,” a much-debated phrase, can be examined in light of these two regions of ritual aesthetics. For instance, Kant’s treatment of the aesthetic as the disinterested experience of the onlooker would need to be revised, to say the least. In religious ritual, and many other performances, aesthetic experience is not had solely by someone who, unengaged, contemplates an experience. Someone who simply does, someone who acts or performs creatively yet in accordance with traditional prescriptions, may also encounter aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience cannot be limited to the passivity of a mere witness, especially when considering the aesthetics of the body.


\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 280.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 279.
recognized gestures current in society at large afford a resource,” namely for interpretation of dance. Sparshott even argues that “simply moving” achieves meaning as “human beings doing things humanly,” in such a way that the broader context of ordinary human movement grants a sense to nearly any action taken. These factors suggest much about how a narrative and emotional dimension of a ritual might emerge from even simple formalized action.

The phrase “human beings doing things humanly” implies a distinct avenue for developing an aesthetic interpretation of religious ritual worlds. Sparshott applies phenomenological theory to develop this phrase.

[D]ancers put themselves in motion in the environment that sustains them, and thus implicitly realize and present for themselves and others the fundamental ways in which a human being (or the basic kind of human being they are, whatever that may be) exists in the world. Just how “the world” is to be construed here is itself a topic for investigation. Phenomenology is a broad and nowadays little cultivated territory, and the suggestions mooted here are not so much results of the philosophy of dance as domains for future philosophy of dance.[135]

This phenomenological notion of world (particularly as developed by Heideggerian phenomenology, as I shall soon argue) develops further how ritual world may be created by the performance of a ritual. Instead of viewing that world as mere fantasy, it can be understood as arising through the hermeneutic process, the process of the interpretation of phenomena in general. The most basic way that ritual or dance may give rise to a world is due to the fact that any human actions, however formalized, connect to familiarities shared with other humans. Even actions that seem independent of distinct semantic dimensions provide a ground for narrative or emotive significance solely due to the human capacities to act in ways that are

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[133] Ibid., 279.
[134] Ibid., 279.
[135] Ibid., 283.
recognizable as “human” and to interpret, perhaps inevitably, the actions of others according to those ways.

Religious rituals inevitably present an amalgamation of rule-bound action and a minimum level of semi-formalized vocabulary, largely sustained by familiar human actions and the breadth of tradition. The way in which a ritual world arises by means of rule-following action is directly analogous to the way in which a world emerges from mere matter in a work of art, as the latter is described by Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art.” He describes how a Greek temple may present a “world” to an appropriately prepared viewer. “The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it.” As long as the temple draws attention to itself in its functioning as a temple, “as long as the god has not fled from it,” it opens up a world for those who gaze upon it. ‘World’ in this sense is thereby not a mere collection of things, nor a merely imagined framework; but “the world worlds, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm.” In other words, this sense of “world” refers to a world as it is ‘lived-in’ by a common people, making that world “more fully in being” for them because it situates them in an overall sense of meaningful and domestic social environment. It is thus never an object that stands fully before one to be seen. Instead, it “holds open the Open of the world”; it “makes space for spaciousness.” By opening up a world, the work of art for Heidegger distinguishes itself from mere equipment or tools (objects known by their instrumental value) because a work of art causes itself to not be forgotten through use, as when we forget about the potential for aesthetic experience of a hammer because we use it

137 Ibid., 89.
138 Ibid., 90.
everyday. We tend to think of such tools in terms of their relation to explicit ends, rather than letting them “come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work’s world.”\textsuperscript{139} If a typical hammer were instead to become a work of art, it would draw attention to the world that it opens for the viewer by virtue of simply being \textit{that} hammer. It would not only draw attention to other things in its world as they relate to the hammer; it would also give to the viewer a new outlook on other things in that world as they relate to the uniqueness of the hammer as a work of art.

But this parallel to Heidegger’s conception of art has its limits. The question still remains whether or not religious ritual is related to as “art.” In one sense already mentioned, religious ritual should not be understood, precisely speaking, as a work of art, due to its frequent association with religious worship. The work of art, regardless of the degree to which the author’s intentions are involved in its aesthetic quality, commonly involves the assumption (by a viewer) of some artist’s or artists’ expressive or spontaneous involvement in its creation. Religious ritual, to be sure, does involve the creativity of the participants involved, according to the way they enact the ritual. Such ritual, however, also involves much of the seeming simplicity of re-enactment, which may call to mind a kind of repetition that, at least to many, hardly seems artistic or creative. The phrase “work of art” also is sometimes reserved for enduring objects produced from inanimate material predominantly for enjoyment or aesthetic encounter. Religious ritual, on the other hand, at least from the point of view of their religious traditions, would not be performed primarily for the sake of such an encounter. Religious ritual is often described by participants, not as a work of art, but rather as a form of communication or service in relation to a world of higher value.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 90.
Yet, regardless of the fact that Heidegger’s essay addresses more conventional works of art, it cannot be denied that a religious ritual can open a world in much the same way. Such rituals are largely forgotten in their instrumental value, as I argue in Chapter 2. For a priest performing the agnihotra or the rudrābhiṣeka on a regular basis, and certainly in the case of Islamic ṣalāt, the ritual becomes natural, almost non-cognitive. Rituals may, however, include a sense of instrumental value when a narrative and emotional component is successfully incorporated. Tradition and other narrative dimensions give significance and emotional value to the actions and objects involved, and they provide those involved with a way to encounter an emerging world. And, as suggested by Heidegger, even a temple alone may give rise to a world for a ritual performance. The environment of a ritual, especially in terms of architecture and sacred location, indicates again how a variety of elements may contribute to the world raised by a ritual.

A parallel to aesthetics of music also helps to reveal more about the relationship between the aesthetics of the structure of ritual and other dimensions. In aesthetics of music there is much debate about “musical formalism,” a theory initially made famous by Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick in his 1854 book Vom Musikalisch-Schönen (trans. On the Musically Beautiful, 1986). Hanslick’s theory, still influential today, promotes that the musically beautiful is an autonomous kind of beauty. He denies that music, in and of itself, may be said to arouse a narrative, or feelings or emotions, within a listener. Many today still debate whether or not a piece of music in itself can be said to be “melancholy” or “uplifting,” or even “about” something. Hanslick asserts that musical beauty is strictly a matter of tones and the formal relations that may
be established between them. This leads Hanslick to conclude that “the composed piece, regardless of whether it is performed or not, is the completed artwork.”\textsuperscript{140}

Although the instrumental value of simply “completing the piece” may cause a participant or listener to forget the aesthetic quality of a work, there is no denying that Hanslick’s claim has some weight. Music may be meaningfully said to be beautiful solely due to the formal relation between tones, just as, correspondingly, ritual may be meaningfully said to be beautiful or valuable due to the precise completion of formalized acts. Yet, many philosophers of aesthetics argue that such arguments neglect the wider variety of ways in which music is experienced. Susanne Langer, in her well-known philosophy of art, as presented in \textit{Feeling and Form}, argues that instrumental music, like all art, refers to a life of feeling or emotion, and not just pure form. She denies that an audience’s feelings when listening to music are those which the composer expresses, but instead she asserts that arts create what she refers to as “semblances” of familiar dimensions of emotional life. Religious ritual may also create such semblances in the midst of formalized action, particularly by utilizing human actions commonly associated with emotions, such as using a frown to invoke feelings of sadness or using attentive, caring action toward a deity to invoke feelings of devotion or love. Thus, a religious ritual need not be understood as expressive of a participant’s immediate emotions in order to involve emotional value, for, as Langer suggests about music, “[Music] bespeaks [the composer’s] imagination of feelings rather than his own emotional state, and expresses what he knows about the so-called ‘inner life’; and this may exceed his personal case because music is a symbolic form to him through which he may learn as well as utter ideas of human sensibility.”\textsuperscript{141}


\textsuperscript{141}Susanne Langer, \textit{Feeling and Form} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 28.
Langer’s description of the role of the composer may be applied to the role of the ritual participant. The participant enacts what he knows about the “inner-life” associated with his role in the ritual. The ritual thus, to the participant, is a form “through which he may learn as well as utter ideas of human sensibility.” Yet, the symbolic character that the participant brings to a ritual, unlike the composer in Langer’s view, not only allows for emotional meaning to become part of the ritual; the participant also may invoke more distinct forms of meaning than are available to the composer by interacting with traditional symbols or stories recognizable by those within a tradition. The world thus raised may reconfigure aesthetically the experience of all involved. So, the aesthetic world of a religious ritual may be understood to arise primarily as the result of the participants’ frequent embodied performances toward harmonization between rule-bound actions and those actions as symbols that may range from emotional meaning to distinct semantic content, depending upon the broader tradition and environment within which the ritual is situated.

5.6 Religious Ritual Worlds and Ritualized Environments

While active participants provide the most fundamental dimension of aesthetic value in religious rituals, a ritualized environment may also contribute significantly to the aesthetics of a ritual world. Rohan Bastin, in “The Hindu Temple and the Aesthetics of the Imaginary,” enriches inquiry into aesthetics of religion by “examining the relationship between humanity and divinity in contemporary Hinduism.”\(^{142}\) Drawing creatively from Mikel Dufrenne’s *The

Phenomenology of the Aesthetic Experience, Bastin articulates the aesthetic of the temple environment utilizing a phenomenological notion of “world,” in a way largely informed by Heidegger’s writings on phenomenology.

[T]he key to the temple is the manipulation of consciousness through aesthetics that brings consciousness into the world and the world into existence. By structuring unique spaces as temples to this manipulation of the imaginary, the temple succeeds in creating not a priest-king relation but a deity-king relation, whereby the person of the devotee (priest, king, or ordinary worshipper) is able to restate divinity through his or her devotional gaze that provides a mirror of consciousness bringing the deity into the world….The temple mirror is thus held up for all to see – deities as well as humans… [This is] evident in the Hindu temple, as the temple describes the cosmos and its genesis in order to describe divinity (and kingship and being) as a unique instance of an omnipresence.144

The temple indicates a kind of environment that is intimately connected to many religious rituals. Bastin, in the above passage, suggests a way by which environment may co-constitute the aesthetics of ritual along with the participants.

Ritual environments do not merely provide a formal structure or physical location within which to perform a ritual; the ritual environment also, like rituals themselves, incorporates the narrative and emotional dimensions of a tradition. The temple in the Hindu context brings about a relation between the deity and a king that suggests how the temple (or a ritual) may simultaneously refer to the actual world outside of the imagined world. Bastin argues that a Hindu temple establishes a parallel between the actual world of political relations and the imagined world of religious tradition. The deity is to his temple as the king is to his castle, and the actions taken up in response to each environment calls to mind the other in the traditional context. This argument alone suggests a fruitful path for philosophers of religion to develop alternative concepts of deity. Thus we find that many of the ritual actions performed for a deity,

143 Dufrenne’s text was translated into English by Edward S. Casey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989).
or the buildings built for a deity, reflect concepts of kingship, worldly power, and traditionally appropriate ways of responding to such authorities. Yet, the temple calls upon the imagination in ways that the castle does not, in that “the temple describes the cosmos and its genesis in order to describe divinity (and kingship and being) as a unique instance of an omnipresence.”¹⁴⁵ In other words, the temple may be seen as a model of the universe, exposing those present not only to a ritual world in relation to the deity and the participants in a ritual, but also to broader traditional views about the outside world.

In this way, the interaction of ritual and temple may enhance the aesthetic value encountered in a ritual performance, by situating the entire affair, for example, in a cosmic context, one that even draws the outside universe into the world framed by the ritual environment. Along this line of thought, Bastin remarks, “If gods are true, it is not only because they are desired and express the desire of mortals who construct temples and ‘images’ to them, but also because they are captured in this first text of the world where what will be discerned as real has not yet been distilled, but where truth is nevertheless experienced.”¹⁴⁶ The ritual environment can provide a context for narratives about the truth of the entire cosmos, and temples are often modeled upon it. This suggests a revealing relation between ritual performance and truth, a relation through which a ritual might even orient direct participants or an involved audience toward a more socially valuable or even a more accurate conception of the universe and one’s place in it.

Sacred buildings, however, are not the only form of religious ritual environment that participates in the raising of a ritual world. The geographical location of a ritual may also enhance the value of the ritual, especially if that location is considered sacred. In the

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 106.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 106.
performance some Hindu pūjās (including the rudrābhiṣeka), for instance, water is used to welcome a deity. Some water, however, is considered more valuable than regular water. If a rudrābhiṣeka is performed near the sacred river Gangā, understood traditionally as a goddess, the ritual may be altered to allow for water to be brought continually from the river to the site of the ritual. Sometimes the performance will be immediately near the river, which requires little change in the ritual, and at other times it will require a participant to trek to and from the river. This lengthens and changes the ritual and, for devotees, it adds a stronger sense of sacrifice to the meaning of the ritual due to the work required. The sacred location also adds intensity to the narrative dimension of the performance, especially if the location is directly involved in stories of the deity. Shiva, for example, is traditionally associated with the divinity of the river Gangā, since the river is said to emerge into the ordinary world after going through Shiva’s own hair. The presence of the Gangā in a ritual service for Shiva increases the complexity of narrative and emotional meanings of the ritual, and thus allows for a new dimension (associated with Gangā) to be added to the ritual world of worshipping Shiva. The ritualized actions performed, in this case, bear a constitutive relation to still another divine manifestation, present as the sacred location of the ritual.

While the role of ritual environment in the constitution of ritual world should not be underestimated, my primary interest in this chapter nonetheless is to highlight how such an environment may enhance the aesthetic value of the embodied performance of a religious ritual, the most essential element of any religious ritual. This is not to deny that the ritual environment may have aesthetic value independent of ritual performance. Other “objective” dimensions associated with religious ritual would also have to be considered for a full analysis of the aesthetics of a specific ritual or a temple, including the roles played by individual art objects.
The present focus, however, aims to reveal more about the role of performance aesthetics within religious rituals, and so this limited account of ritual environment should be taken as pointing in the direction of an even broader account of ritual aesthetics.

5.7 The Centrality of Aesthetic Unity in Accounts of Religious Ritual Meaning

The five hermeneutic themes discussed in this project (active rule-following, distanced instrumentalism, self/social transformation, moral significance, and aesthetic world) together highlight what is distinctive about the significance attributable to religious ritual performances. But why should aesthetics serve as the central force unifying these themes? The reliance of aesthetic ritual worlds upon traditionally cultivated bodily dispositions, dispositions that often sustain themselves subconsciously, provides the most dramatic indication that the unity of meaning achieved in religious ritual should be regarded as an aesthetic unity. Many aspects of religious ritual implicitly appeal to symbolic orders reproduced in human bodies by way of routine social training and sedimented habit, a range of human praxis that is generally not explicitly thematized and that may not be recognized fully by those participating. Because of this partly “subconscious” dimension of symbolic significance, the unity of meaning in a religious ritual must be grounded in a form of unity that would not inhibit the union of the inexplicit and explicit aspects of religious ritual experience. Aesthetic unities do not collapse due to a lack of fully explicated concepts; instead, by virtue of the creative power of the imagination, aesthetic unities produce a kind of symbolic cohesion where ordinary conceptual thinking would not.
Religious rituals are a unity of imagined practice that indicates a distinct form of human action, a process that I refer to as “ritualization.” Ritualization involves action that simultaneously invokes the following five hermeneutic themes:

- **Active repetition** (Ch.1) – a mode of practical repetition that is rule-based but simultaneously bound to occur intuitively and creatively, without a claim to strict identity or ‘sameness’ between actions
- **De-instrumentalization** (Ch.2) – a process of thinking and acting that gradually distances the significance of ritual action from association with explicit “ends in view”
- **Transformation of Self and Society** (Ch.3) – a process that naturalizes ‘resymbolization,’ which socially inscribes new social-identity traits upon individuals while simultaneously invoking social structure and tradition
- **Moral Significance** (Ch.4) – a form of significance that traditionally associates the performance of a ritual act with moral value or the lack of performance of a ritual act with moral transgression
- **Aesthetic World** (Ch.5) – a form of significance that seeks a harmony of ritualized elements by raising an aesthetic ritual world based primarily on the embodied practices and bodily constitution of those involved

Without the theme of aesthetic world, each of these hermeneutic themes alone is not enough to account for the distinct forms of meaning so often attributed to religious rituals by religious traditions. The aesthetic unity of religious ritual worlds does not reduce the significance generated by each dimension to explicit conceptual content; instead it relies upon the potency of imaginative play between an inexplicit variety of traditionalized meanings to achieve an indirect yet socially shared unity.

It is also crucial to notice that this argument for the centrality of aesthetic ritual world in an account of ritualized meaning also implies that if any of these five hermeneutic themes are lacking in an action, then that action would not be regarded as a form of ritualization. This implication of the argument is central. The lack of any dimension would result in a distinctly different form of action, an action that does not capture what fully developed religious rituals show themselves to be. Each theme represents something essential for ritualization to achieve a
form of significance that is distinct from other forms of meaningful representation, such as with words or sentences. Without the first theme, active rule-based repetition, a religious ritual would not exhibit the “sedimenting recurrence” associated with ritual action; also the immediate sensory and bodily basis for establishing the other dimensions would not obtain. And, without the second theme of distance from instrumental action a religious ritual would simply be subsumed into the more common forms of embodied praxis, making it such that “ritual” would become an inessential term. Without emphasizing the third theme, the power of religious ritual to transform and maintain self and society, the dependency of ritualization on socio-historical praxis would not be sufficiently explained and the power of ritual to preserve creatively tradition would be underemphasized. And, in the absence of the fourth theme, moral significance, a concept of religious ritual would not account for the social discouragement or punishment that deters one from abandoning a ritual, nor the kind of social reward that encourages the performance of a ritual. These four aspects are ultimately brought together by the fifth theme of aesthetic ritual world such that religious ritual may be understood as a distinct and unified form of action operating within a transformed way of regarding human experience; without framing each of these kinds of significance in imaginatively reconfigured yet socially grounded worlds those aspects of religious ritual might be regarded as a simple amalgamation of distinctly different actions.

Religious rituals in this manner produce a unique kind of aesthetic experience as a ritualist repeats traditionally prescribed actions that open access to a ritual world in which participants, even a relatively passive audience, may directly encounter a significance within a religious tradition. Even the traditional setting of a ritual, as Bastin argues, can enhance this experience, particularly via the capacity of sacred architecture or sacred location to co-constitute
the world that emerges in ritual performance. By recognizing how even simple rule-following actions may serve to facilitate aesthetic experience, it becomes clear that ritualized action can provide the ground from which to raise a world of meaning. As this chapter argues, human actions generally exhibit a basic level of “human” or “social” sensibility upon which more complex meanings may become inscribed. This also indicates how intimately performance is involved in the formation of aesthetic paradigms. Even art objects could be viewed as an indirect kind of performance, in that they are often encountered as objects ritually “placed” for others to encounter.

It is important to bear in mind that some scholars of ritual have attempted to distance themselves from “interpretation” of rituals, because, influenced by ideas like those in Staal’s writings on ritual, they can conceive of no appropriate way to attribute meaning to rituals. Their mistake, however, is missing that an aesthetic understanding of ritual can ground meaningful interpretation by highlighting how a variety of types of significance may be encountered as a single symbolic world, a unique kind of meaning. Aesthetic performances, such as music, dance, or ritual, call upon common semantic associations, even if they are derived from such diverse sources as simple biology, cultivated activity, or cultural narrative. The five hermeneutic themes presented in this project provide a way of understanding how religious ritual as a distinct form of human activity may give rise to a world of meaning by way of individual actions within a cultural tradition. The basic symbolic associations available to the performers of religious rituals may at first performance only limp after well-formed meaning. But, via repetition within traditional context, starting rituals frequently become aesthetic performances for which distinct meaning, even well-formed meaning, may be attributed. Not all rituals exhibit such coherence,
but many, especially those that rely upon long-standing traditions, achieve uncontroversial levels of meaning for the participants involved (especially those within highly orthopraxic religions).

The unique relation between these five hermeneutic themes shows that religious rituals should also be understood as distinct from other types of aesthetic performance. It is true that many other aesthetic forms incorporate aspects of ritualization. Religious ritual, however, is distinct in that it occupies a peculiar position; it is through and through aesthetic, and yet it is often understandably denied that religious ritual is “art” or that it is done for aesthetic purposes. This seemingly paradoxical intuition leads to a characterization of the aesthetics of religious ritual in general. Religious ritual is an aesthetic performance that aims to produce an intensive world-and-self-transforming harmony of formal rule-following actions and a symbolic, traditionally prior interpretation of those actions in their environment. This harmony produces a kind of meaning that reconfigures the symbolic significance and guiding values of a social world. The social reconfigurations incorporated, however, are typically where the raison d’être of religious ritual originates. In other words, the justification for the required performance of a religious ritual is usually not framed directly in terms of an apparently aesthetic context, but rather in terms a prior ritualized world. The reason for a religious ritual thereby lies outside of the ordinary world of diverging individual experiences. Inquiry into the active practice of religious ritual reveals this, for such inquiry discloses the emergence of a world that refers beyond everyday conceptual boundaries, through the kind of “omnipresence” indicated by Bastin. A religious ritual, therefore, is done for reasons that serve to extend and unify the world of common affairs, and those reasons invoke past tradition as well as a universe envisioned according to that tradition. This is perhaps the primary reason that they may be regarded as a distinct kind of moral action in themselves.
Emphasizing the distinctiveness of the aesthetic unity of religious ritual also helps to make sense of the fact that religious rituals do not frequently appeal to contemporary secular societies, partly because contemporary secular societies have centralized an individualistic pursuit of meaning and means-end, production-centered thinking. Religious ritual aesthetics may also be alien to secularists because ritual’s success as an aesthetic medium depends upon the capacity of actors to minimize immediate instrumental concerns, thereby allowing for the opening of a community-centered approach to human actions as a form embodied meaning. The commonplace secular ideal “that for every willed action one should have an explicit reason” also ignores the fact that much of our social and ethical living is done without being able to think explicitly about the reasons for acting. Everyday instrumental thinking may even require a cognitively prior aesthetic ‘embeddedness’ of ritualized meaning in order to maintain a sufficiently imagined world within which to ground instrumental thinking. The epistemological dominance of instrumental thinking cannot be maintained unceasingly, and, due to this, more implicit forms of aesthetic rationality may be required to sustain a broadly shared continuity of meaningful social actions, perhaps even those that are initiated directly as instrumental actions.

Adding to a major debate within philosophy of religion, the aesthetic unity of religious ritual worlds can also to some degree account for the frequency of claims by religious practitioners about the “ineffability” of religious experience. The ritualization process leads a performer into a pre-cognitive yet implicitly harmonized form of bodily praxis. This process reveals a symbolic dimension of human communication that is distinguishable from the functioning of ordinary words and sentences, and this makes it difficult for ordinary or technical language to account for the dynamics of meaning within religious rituals. To make matters worse, the distinct combination of the five hermeneutic themes involved in religious ritual praxis
makes it even more problematic for secular accounts to grasp its unique mode of meaning. Given that only an indirect vocabulary can address the meaning of such performative experience, interpretations of religious ritual experience understandably lead toward claims about the ineffability of the ritual worlds involved. A ritualized experience may then be said to be “ineffable” in a more literal sense, since an aesthetic ritual world cannot simply be stated; it must literally be done.

There is, of course, a line of thinking that argues that ritualization should not be so strongly distanced from everyday secular thinking, because denial of the “purpose-serving” quality of ritualization is to primitivize or belittle ritualization. But consider: which is more damning of religious ritual, to recognize it by its distance from conventional thinking or to regard it as a primitive or weak form of conventional thinking? Distancing ritualized action from everyday living seems to capture its uniqueness more adequately. Reduction of religious ritual to common secular understanding is also likely to lead to ignorance of the broader range of human experience and capacity. In this light, interpretation of religious rituals as embodied actions within aesthetic ritual worlds points toward the need in academic philosophy for a deeper consideration of ‘sedimented’ social behavior, the role of the ‘typically human’ in meaningful representation, and how a philosophy may exist as a ‘way of living’ that is distinct from explicitly rational decision making. Outlining the distinctiveness of the aesthetics of religious ritual is a critical step in this direction.

The arguments about religious ritual aesthetics presented in this chapter began by considering insights taken from the Islamic context. Consideration of the *rudrābhiṣeka* and the aesthetic reflections al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-ʿArabī on ṣalāt provided the first critical step toward disclosing the intricacies of religious ritual aesthetics by arguing that the ritualized relationship
of worship cannot be performed appropriately solely by means of a mindless repetitive act; the productive imagination must be involved, and in such a way that the products of the imagination are not regarded as mere fantasy. This insight led to the argument that in religious ritual the imagination serves to co-constitute a world of aesthetic experience grounded in everyday reality, but necessarily transformed by the ritualized embodiment of tradition into social action and individual experience. The chapter’s further focus on aesthetic embodiment and parallels to other modes of performance aesthetics developed further the original contributions of al-Ghazâlî and Ibn al-‘Arabî by stressing the process-oriented dimension of religious ritual praxis, particularly by indicating that what is most distinctive of religious ritual is an aesthetic process ("ritualization") of embodied becoming toward traditional religious significance as ritual world. With this final chapter’s considerations in mind, it is thus my conclusion that the aesthetic dimension of religious ritual performance allows one to see best how the other four hermeneutic themes emphasized in the prior chapters come together to produce a coherent vision of the meaning attributable to religious rituals.
Bibliography


