Practically Faithful: James's Religious Pragmatism as a Response to Hume

Moriah Ellenbogen

David Hume, who attracted more than enough negative attention for his religious skepticism in 18th-century Scotland, no doubt dressed some of his writings on religion in terms that catered to popular taste and preserved his reputation. It is therefore difficult to know exactly what his personal views on religion were, for his discussions of such topics are often left open-ended. But even if we cannot label Hume an "atheist" or "agnostic" with certainty, he puts forth a number of arguments against basing religious faith on reason, resulting in a fideist[1] perspective. Toward the end of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,*[2] he explicitly writes, "Our most holy religion is founded on Faith, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure" (*Enquiry* 89).

But this leaves us without a normative claim. If our beliefs in God cannot be rational in nature, is there reason to think that we are justified in maintaining those beliefs? In this essay, I consider religious pragmatism as a response to Hume because it offers the religiously-leaning individual some counsel in this area. I begin by offering a description of James's pragmatism as it relates to religious belief. I will then briefly highlight some reasons for thinking that Hume, given his thoughts on natural beliefs and mitigated skepticism, should be sympa-

Moriah Ellenbogen graduated in May 2014 from Denison University with a major in philosophy and a minor in psychology. She spent four years on the board of Episteme, and served as the Editor-in-Chief her senior year. Her main philosophical interests lie in Philosophy of Religion, Modern Philosophy, and Ethics. This particular paper is a condensed portion of her larger senior thesis project, entitled, "Practical Faith: James's Religious Pragmatism as a Response to Hume." Moriah hopes to return to school in a few years' time for a doctoral degree in philosophy, however she has also seriously considered pursuing a career in clinical therapy. As of now, she has decided to dedicate her time to the cynicism-inducing world of customer service and practice her skills requisite to being a self-sufficient 'adult.'

thetic to this view. In Section III, I consider Hume's discussions of three distinct versions of religious belief and show that he is, in effect, arguing that none of these beliefs can be pragmatically justified. Following these considerations, I identify the central point of contention between Hume and James, as well as the motivations behind this divergence in thought. I ultimately argue that while there are problems with Hume's views about religious belief, his overall point raises serious concerns about whether such belief can be pragmatically justified along Jamesian lines.

Section I. James's Brand of Religious Pragmatism

It is important to first provide a brief discussion of what, exactly, James's pragmatic picture looks like with regard to religion. In his lecture "What Pragmatism Means,"[3] James writes:

> The pragmatic method…is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. (*Pragmatism* 28)

The thought here is that lofty metaphysical concepts and disputes are only significant and/or intelligible insofar as they bring about some actual consequences in our lives.[4] According to James, a thing's meaning and its practicality are ultimately synonymous.

An important facet of James's pragmatism is the conception of truth it entails. Truth, on this account, is not an objective principle that we make attempts at grasping, but a subjective method of aligning, and realigning, our beliefs with incoming evidence. James maintains that "a new opinion counts as 'true' just in proportion as it gratifies the individual's desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock. It must both lean on old truth and grasp new fact; and its success…in doing this, is a matter for the individual's appreciation" (*Pragmatism* 36). A common objection brought against James regards his supposed advocacy of "wishful thinking;" however, it is important to recognize that to merely conflate truth with whatever offers one the most practical benefit is to misread James. Truth, on James's

account, is a subjective process, rather than an objective concept; however in order to verify x as 'being true,' x must align with one's experience, it must be verified by evidence.[5] The individual's role in making x true lies in his acting upon x, and choosing to verify x by experience. To put it another way, it is the individual who chooses which beliefs to question, and then align with his experience, but the character of that alignment is ultimately dictated by facts about the external world. James is adamant that this process entails that "the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons" (*Pragmatism* 42). Toward the end of "What Pragmatism Means," James writes:

> Now pragmatism, devoted tho she be to facts, has…no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere. Interested in no conclusions but those which our minds and our experiences work out together, she has no *a priori* prejudices against theology. *If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much.* (*Pragmatism* 41)

Theology, as a metaphysical concept, must accord with facts that one verifies through experience. But the *content* of one's religious beliefs—that is, the details of those convictions—is left open to interpretation, and should ultimately offer the believer practical benefits. Now whether, and which, theological ideas offer the believer practical benefits seems to be something that is determined on an individual basis. However, it is safe to say that James is extremely open-minded when it comes to accruing theological evidence.[6]

James published "The Will to Believe"[7] some 10 years before he delivered his lectures on pragmatism, however a broader understanding of the pragmatic approach helps to digest what James argues in the earlier work. In this seminal essay, he suggests that under specific circumstances, one has the right to believe certain things which may not be verifiable by evidence. We might point to two main points as motivating this claim.

Firstly, James stresses that although we may not acknowledge it to ourselves, our passions (and in fact a number of non-rational factors) always play a large role in our decision-making process. We like to think of ourselves as fully rational beings, but the truth of the matter is

that our belief sets are heavily influenced by our communities, friends and families, desires and fears, etc. This is specifically true in determining what hypotheses are for us "live" as opposed to "dead." The former, according to James's terminology, are those which we hold as potentially convincing; the latter, ones which hold no plausibility for us. The idea here is that certain beliefs may appear to be more or less plausible to different individuals; the belief set that each of us holds is extremely subjective, and is not ultimately predicated upon rational factors.

Secondly, James argues that although many people see attaining truth and avoiding error as two sides of the same coin, these are in fact two distinct principles (*WTB* 18). The choices that these respective aims motivate may or may not intersect. James maintains that "wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of gaining truth away, and at any rate save ourselves from…believing falsehood, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come" (*WTB* 19-20). But in the event of a momentous decision—that is, one which bears some significance on a person's life— James insists that it is better to believe *p* and risk being wrong, than it is to not take the risk, and lose out on the possibility of finding out that *p* is indeed true. This is directly related to James's point that in certain situations, a preliminary faith in *p* may actually facilitate *p* becoming true (*WTB* 25). In the case of religion, if I prize the avoidance of error over the attainment of truth, I might never actualize a potential relationship between myself and God. However, if I remain faithful to my religious convictions, it is possible that my faith will indeed lead me to discover this personal relationship.

Acknowledging the large role that our passions play in determining our beliefs, as well as the potential truths that certain beliefs might lead us to, James argues that in the event of a live, forced,[8] momentous hypothesis—what he calls a "genuine option"—we can choose to believe something based on our sentiments and awareness of practical benefits. That is to say, if there is not enough rational evidence to propel us toward one decision or another, we have a right to make this choice for ourselves, taking things like passion into consideration. Therefore, one does not need hard evidence in order to be justified in maintaining religious conviction; if he feels compelled by passion to believe, and finds religion beneficial,[9] that is sufficient.[10]

Section II. Hume's Pragmatic Side

Although the pragmatic philosophical tradition did not begin until the late nineteenth century, many of Hume's philosophical notions are not far off from pragmatist ideals. In his moral philosophy, for example, Hume devotes specific attention to the way the utility of an action contributes to its social approbation.[11] What I would like to draw particular attention to, though, is his treatment of natural beliefs—human beliefs about the world which, like religious beliefs, are not rooted in reason.

The most famous of these natural beliefs which Hume refers to is the notion of causality, which he claims is nothing more than the constant conjunction of two events, matched with an inference on the part of an observer. For Hume, many of the beliefs that we hold about the world are not actually rational. But these beliefs play an important role in everyday life. He therefore assumes a stance of mitigated skepticism, a position which remains cognizant of the fact that such knowledge claims are liable to falsehood, but also realizes that certain beliefs must be held for pragmatic reasons.[12] For our present purposes, one might liken religious beliefs to Hume's natural beliefs. Certainly, we can characterize each in a similar way. Natural beliefs, according to Hume, are human beliefs about the world which are not established rationally. Religious beliefs seem to share in this basic nature.[13]

For Hume, the non-rational nature of natural beliefs is ultimately outweighed by their contribution to human life—they are, in a word, pragmatic. His position of mitigated skepticism, then, essentially appears to be the pragmatic method in practice. Now it is certainly a reasonable position to hold that religious beliefs offer practical benefits as well. One might maintain that religion contributes to community building, offers solace from pain and suffering, acts as a source of purpose, etc. And if religion is taken as being beneficial—either in the private or public sphere—then it seems like Hume should sign off on the view that religious beliefs can also be justified via a pragmatic argument.

Section III. Parting Ways: Hume's and James's Disagreement

Yet, interestingly, Hume doesn't seem to think that religious beliefs can be justified on pragmatic grounds. Why he doesn't can be gleaned from his discussions of three types of religious beliefs in his writings: those stemming from enthusiasm, from superstition, and what he terms

in the *Dialogues,* "rationalistic theism."

Hume's discussion of religious belief rooted in enthusiasm is mainly contained in his essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,"[14] in which he details some of the societal effects that both superstition and enthusiasm—the "corruptions of true religion"—bring about. Enthusiastic religious belief, according to Hume, is that which results from sentiments of hope, pride, happiness, and the ensuing presumption that one is loved by a God. Although it may seem as though this points to a situation in which religious belief *does in fact* yield benefits, it is important to keep in mind that the positive cognitions that give rise to this religious conviction are not, in fact, effects *of* such belief, but rather *motivators* of such belief. Furthermore, Hume comments later in the essay: "Enthusiasm being founded on strong spirits, and a presumptuous boldness of character, it naturally begets the most extreme resolutions; especially after it rises to that height as to inspire the deluded fanatic with the opinion of Divine illuminations, and with a contempt for the common rules of reason, morality, and prudence" (*S&E* 87). He goes on to argue that religions stemming from enthusiasm are "furious and violent" and produce the "most cruel disorders in human society," though they generally fade away rather quickly (*S&E* 87). It seems safe to say that Hume does not see religious enthusiasm as being particularly beneficial to society.

Hume's treatment of superstitious religion spans a much wider breadth; while he discusses some of its societal effects in "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," he also discusses it in the *Dialogues*, and the *Natural History of Religion*, in which he often conflates it with "primitive, vulgar" faith. Superstitious religion, as opposed to enthusiastic religion, arises in situations where people are weak, fearful, or suffering, and therefore posit the existence of an 'object of terror.' What is interesting about Hume's account of superstitious religion is that he never suggests that this positing of a Godhead offers those who are suffering a sense of solace and comfort; rather, they actively fear this God, and act in ways that might bring about an end to the punishment that He is supposedly inflicting upon them. Hume argues that religious superstition is bad for civil liberty, but that it is good for "priestly power" and thus oppression of the general public. Superstitious religion, he writes, "steals in gradually and insensibly; renders men tame and submissive; is acceptable to the magistrate, and seems inoffensive to the people: till at last the priest, having firmly established his authority, becomes the tyrant and disturber of human society, by his endless

contentions, persecutions, and religious wars" (*S&E* 87).[15] Superstitious religion, according to Hume, fosters feelings of inadequacy and humility, which makes man especially susceptible to subjugation.[16]

In considering his writings, it seems that Hume does not think that religious belief stemming from superstition offers any worthwhile practical benefits. Even if it does for a handful of individuals, the overwhelming negative consequences that generally result from this sort of religious belief completely overshadow any such prospects.

It should be noted, at this interval, that James is as opposed to dogmatic religion as Hume is. He offers: "the general triumph of [pragmatism] would mean an enormous change in… the 'temperament' of philosophy. Teachers of the ultra-rationalistic type would be frozen out… Science and metaphysics would come much nearer together, would in fact work absolutely hand in hand" (*Pragmatism* 31). Indeed, James would likely agree with Hume in that the sorts of religious beliefs which may be characterized as "enthusiastic" and "superstitious"—both dogmatic religious traditions[17]—are more harmful than they are helpful. This is not a point of contention between the two philosophers, but a point of consensus: neither philosopher argues in favor of religious dogmatism.

Let us turn, now, to that "rational theism" that Hume speaks of in the *Dialogues,* which, unlike its predecessors, is non-dogmatic and empirical. After leveling a number of objections against the *a posteriori* religious argument from design, a stripped-down, modest observation is made in the twelfth and final section of the book. Philo, the skeptic in Hume's work, eventually concedes that "a purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker; and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems, as at all times to reject it," but this perception is not at all what the religious believer needs it to be (*Dialogues* 116). He offers:

> If the whole of natural theology…resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, as least undefined proposition, that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it afford no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther…what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more

than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition… (*Dialogues* 129)

Hume ultimately concludes that the debate between theists and atheists is merely a verbal one concerning degrees of analogy: "The theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The atheist allows, that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it" (*Dialogues* 120). But this mutual conclusion is a vacuous one. In the end, all we can say is that the order in the universe bears some remote analogy to human intelligence. Any statements beyond that are mere non-rational speculations.

What is particularly interesting about this is that Hume's comments here are completely in line with James's remarks on the pragmatic test put forth in "What Pragmatism Means." James writes:

> It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in concrete consequence upon that fact... (*Pragmatism* 30)

What matters for James is not the theological observation that the world resembles the product of a creator. Indeed, he would agree with Hume that this statement, on its own, is an empty one. What James *would* turn his attention to is the *content* of said belief. According to James, the practical benefits, and therefore pragmatic justification of, religious belief does not enter into the conversation at the theoretical level, but at the point at which one *acts on* his belief. This is the point at which Hume and James diverge in thinking, for Hume suggests that there is virtually no difference in the behavior of the rational theist and the atheist, and therefore, no great division between the two in terms of philosophical allegiance. He does not seem to acknowledge that the rational theist can have content-rich beliefs, and so the philosophical dispute that he and the atheist engage in does indeed "collapse." As Charles Echelbarger writes, "the only conclusion warranted by [Hume's version of] natural religion is so broad and general that it is actually consistent with atheism" (Echelbarger 31).

It seems, then, that the crucial point on which Hume and James

disagree is this: that non-dogmatic religious belief can significantly impact one's life. Both Hume and James are empiricists, and, as such, offer versions of religious faith which are rooted in empiricism. But whereas James wants to say that we are justified in moving *beyond* a basic theological theory, and assuming content-rich beliefs that bring about practical benefits, Hume does not appear to agree. The Humean believer is left without counsel at this juncture, for his rational theism, void of content, does not give him any reason to accept or reject his religious beliefs.[18] Insofar as the believer *does* move beyond rational theism, he seems to fall into dogmatism, which brings about more harm than not.[19] We can point to two reasons for this divide in thought.

First, a key discrepancy in the thinking of Hume and James is that the latter is concerned with justification as it pertains to *passional belief*, while it is unclear whether Hume recognizes this concept. James has a very specific audience in mind: his speech is directed toward those who are open to religious thinking, those for whom religion is a live hypothesis.[20] They are compelled to believe, and are searching not for a reason to believe, but for *justification* for their beliefs. Hume, though, does not seem to be one of these individuals.[21] He suggests that a rational individual cannot move beyond the simple recognition that the world resembles a product of creation, but there is no talk of the passional religious believer. The mitigated skepticism that Hume advocates in response to natural beliefs does not seem to apply to religious beliefs, for the former seems to be a necessary, inescapable facet of human cognition, while committing oneself to the latter resembles something of a *choice*. For James's target audience, though, religious belief is clearly *not* a choice.

Second, James and Hume seem to disagree that religious belief can yield practical benefits. The main reason for this division, I think, lies in the philosophers' respective areas of focus. James's discussion of religious belief is highly individualized; he is interested in the *personal* benefits that one might derive from religious belief. And the risk that is involved in religious belief is a personal one, as well: in choosing to commit oneself to his religious sentiments, one is running the risk of being wrong. In contrast, Hume's consideration of the consequences of religious belief is carried out nearly exclusively on a societal level.[22] He does not pay much (if any) attention to the personal benefits of religious belief. It might be said, then, that each philosopher's perspective is too narrow, albeit in different ways. Hume needs to acknowledge the effects of religion on one's own life, apart from society; while James's

notion that religion is confined to the individual sphere is perhaps na-
ïve.

Although there is reason to think that Hume should extend prag-
matic justification to religious belief, it is apparent from textual evi-
dence that this is not the case. We have considered the reasons for the
two philosophers' divergence in thought, and the remaining considera-
tion is an evaluative one: which perspective is better? James's position
seems to be an ideal middle-ground for the religiously-minded empiri-
cist: he can justify subscribing to his religious leanings, but also main-
tain a non-dogmatic, fallibilist attitude. Hume's believer,[23] in contrast,
is left stranded between his religious sentiments and his allegiance to
empiricism; there is nothing to propel him one way or the other, and
no obvious way to reconcile the two. It seems, at first glance, as though
James's position is the obviously preferable one, however Hume's re-
luctance to justify religious belief points to a deeper worry that James
seems blind to: is it possible to reap the benefits of religion while re-
maining non-dogmatic?

I do not doubt that there are *some* benefits that a non-dogmatic,
fallibilist believer might procure from his religious belief. For example,
one might acknowledge that his religious beliefs are subject to error,
and yet maintain membership in a supportive, sociable religious com-
munity. However, there are a handful of benefits which stem from re-
ligion—namely a sense of comfort in times of need, a profound sense of
purpose in life, and perhaps also moral strenuousness—which are nec-
essarily tied to a sense of *certainty*, and therefore at odds with a falli-
bilist religious perspective. In order to derive the sort of profound,
deep-seated solace that religious belief can yield, one must be entirely
committed to one's beliefs. He must not only think that they are the *best*
beliefs to hold, but that they are fundamentally *correct*. Maintaining a
non-dogmatic mindset—that is, preserving an awareness that one
might eventually accrue evidence which discredits one's religious be-
liefs—seems to entail an underlying doubt, an ever-present worry
(however small that worry may be) that one has adopted a falsehood as
truth. And this concern would be the sort of thing that would prevent
an individual from capitalizing on the reassurance and consolation that
religion might offer. Thus, while Hume may not be entirely fair in his
consideration of benefits one might derive from religion, he provides a
crucial insight: non-dogmatic religious belief may be limited in the
bearing that it can have on one's life.

Notes

1. Fideism is simply the position that "faith is in some sense independent of, if not outright adversarial toward, reason" (Amesbury, Richard. "Fideism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, 26 Sept. 2012. Web.)
2. Henceforth cited as *Enquiry*
3. Henceforth cited as *Pragmatism*
4. By this view, universal principles, such as "God," and the "absolute" are not to be considered as ends in themselves, or, as James calls them, "solving principles." Rather, "you must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed. Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest" (*Pragmatism* 31-2).
5. No chain of experience, according to James, can lead one to a false truth.
6. This is especially evident in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which James recounts a wide range of highly-subjective religious phenomenon.
7. Henceforth cited as *WTB*
8. A forced option, according to James, is one in which the agent has no choice but to make a decision. For James, the choice to adopt religious belief is a forced one. One can choose to adhere to his religious beliefs, or one can reject them. Remaining an "agnostic" is no way out of this dilemma— in practice, it leads one to a state that is effectively no different than atheism, and as such, is ultimately the same as choosing to abstain from religious belief.
9. And he has no specific evidence *against* religion
10. And James is certainly of the opinion that for some individuals, religion brings with it a number of practical benefits. Religion offers some a feeling of pure joy and ecstasy (see *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* esp. "The Religion of Healthy

-Mindedness"). It can provide an individual with peace of mind, solace from suffering, and a sense of purpose. As James writes toward the end of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life": "Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life's evils, is set free in those who have religious faith" (*Moral Philosopher* 213). In this same essay, James also suggests that any notion of a stable and systematic morality (which may be idealistic for some), depends on the existence of a God. Relatedly, he suggests that religious beliefs are necessary in bringing about the "strenuous mood" — a perspective which causes us to look beyond present ills and act in ways that bring about the best long-term benefits. He makes the claim that "in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power. Life, to be sure, is even in such a world a genuinely ethical symphony; but it is played in the compass of a couple of poor octaves, and the infinite scale of values fails to open up" (212). James ultimately sees religion as having the potential to introduce us to a plethora of benefits that we might not ever lay our hands on otherwise.

11. See *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, esp. Section V.

12. Hume writes at the end of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*: "The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of skepticism, is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools…But as soon as they leave the shade…they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as other mortals" (*Enquiry* 109-10).

13. Now, while a commonality undoubtedly exists between religious beliefs and natural beliefs, there are differences as well. Firstly, it seems as though everyone has natural beliefs, while only some people have a propensity towards religious beliefs. Secondly, it seems as though natural beliefs are inescap-

able—a naturally-functioning human being cannot shake them off. It is not clear that the same goes for religious beliefs. It might be true that a man of deep religious conviction cannot rid himself of his religious mindset, no matter how hard he tries. However, in less rigid cases—perhaps in the case of an individual who is sympathetic to religious sentiments but also harbors doubts—it is indeed plausible that religious beliefs, or in the very least conformity to traditionally religious lifestyles, are adopted by choice (this will be addressed further in Section III).

14. But even with these discrepancies in mind, the basic analogy between natural and religious beliefs remains noteworthy. Just as people cannot distance themselves from their beliefs in causal connections, it seems safe to say that some people find it difficult to distance themselves from their propensities toward religious belief, even after acknowledging that such conviction is not rational.

15. Henceforth cited as *S&E*

16. Even toward the end of the *Dialogues*, Hume spends some time discussing the all-too-common insincerity expressed by religious figures, and the corruption and general immorality that can arise from superstitious religious doctrines. Philo, the religious skeptic, who is generally taken to be Hume's own voice in the dialogues, asks: "How happens it…if vulgar superstition be so salutary to society, that all history abounds so much with accounts of its pernicious consequences on public affairs? Factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery; these are the dismal consequences which always attend its prevalency over the minds of men. If the religious spirit be ever mentioned in any historical narration, we are sure to meet afterwards with a detail of the miseries which attend it. And no period of time can be happier or more prosperous, than those in which it is never regarded, or heard of" (*Dialogues* 122).

17. This is directly tied to Hume's notion of the "monkish virtues," another negative effect that he sees as stemming from

religious belief. Discussed mainly in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, these traits include "celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude" (*Second Enquiry* 258). According to Hume, certain religious individuals hold these characteristics in high esteem; however, sensible men will regard them as vices, for they "serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment" (*Second Enquiry* 258). From Hume's point of view, if religion venerates qualities such as these, then it seems as though religion motivates a person to seek out discomfort and suffering. Certainly this does not bode well for a consideration of the positive effects of religion on the human psyche.

18. Whether enthusiastic religion may be characterized as dogmatic is not made as clear. Hume's discussion of the latter is much more extensive; however, I think that one is justified in attributing dogmatism to former as well. He writes: "[In enthusiastic religion] human reason, and even morality, are rejected as fallacious guides; and the fanatic madman delivers himself over, blindly and without reserve, to the supposed illapses of the Spirit" (*S&E* 82).

19. His best option, it seems, is to maintain an agnostic position. But agnosticism, according to James (and Hume, according to Philo's remarks on rational theism), is tantamount to atheism.

20. It is worth mentioning, at this point, that in the *Natural History of Religion,* Hume discusses what may be a superstitious, but non-dogmatic form of religion: polytheism. Ultimately, though, Hume has very little respect for such "vulgar" and "primitive" notions, and does not even consider them to be religious in the same sense as monotheistic traditions. He writes: "To any one, who considers justly of the matter, it will appear, that the gods of all polytheists are not better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors, and merit as little any

pious worship or veneration. These pretended religionists are really a kind of superstitious atheists, and acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity" (*Natural History* 145).

21. He writes in *The Will to Believe*: "It is evident that unless there be some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, the option offered to the will by Pascal is not a living option" (*WTB* 6).

22. One might even contend that for Hume, religion was a dead hypothesis.

23. Even the monkish virtues, which appear to be a highly individualized result of religion, are discussed within a larger societal framework: they facilitate the spread of dominance and oppression—specifically "priestly power"—within certain populations.

24. That is, a religious believer who seeks prescriptive advice from Humean works.

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