

The Utility of Religion: Mill, Nietzsche, and James

By

Copyright 2014

Brad Musil

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Philosophy and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Chairperson James Woelfel

Ben Eggleston

Thomas Tuozzo

Dale Dorsey

Sandra Zimdars-Swartz

Date Defended: May 16, 2014

The Dissertation Committee for Brad Musil
certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

The Utility of Religion: Mill, Nietzsche, and James

Chairperson James Woelfel

Date approved: May 16, 2014

ABSTRACT

In contrast to the truth of religion, the utility of religion has been a historically-underappreciated subject of philosophical scholarship and everyday discourse, and this dissertation aims to draw more attention to the fruits of religion in everyday life. The utility of religion is an expansive topic and, in the interest of offering a reasonable treatment of it, the dissertation focuses on outlining the insights offered by three nineteenth-century philosophers in particular, for whom the utility of religion was an important issue: John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and William James (1842-1910); this is accomplished by devoting a chapter to a text authored by each of these thinkers: 1) *Utility of Religion* (Mill), 2) *The Anti-Christ* (Nietzsche), and 3) *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James). In these works, Mill, Nietzsche, and James defend a variety of positions regarding the utility of religion, and they offer an illuminating survey of the many relevant issues (e.g. the relationship between religion and morality and the relationship between religion and happiness). The dissertation advances conclusions regarding the utility of religion in view of the textual analyses offered, and it highlights the significance of—and a vision for—future scholarship devoted to the topic in light of these conclusions. Specifically, it proposes that we have good reasons to question the moral advantages frequently ascribed to religion, but that religion is nonetheless vitally useful for some—and perhaps many—individuals who would otherwise never be able to find happiness. Although it is possible for some to experience lasting happiness without the aid of religion (contrary to what James suggests), others require religious salvation in order to find peace of mind (contrary to what Mill, to a lesser extent, and Nietzsche, to a greater extent, suggest).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this dissertation was one of the hardest things I have ever done, and it was a humbling learning experience, to say the least. However, I feel a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in having completed it. I owe many people thanks for seeing me through the process. First, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee: Ben Eggleston, Thomas Tuozzo, Dale Dorsey, Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, and, especially, my advisor, James Woelfel. Perhaps more than anyone else, Professor Woelfel's wisdom, guidance, and scholarly example have helped me mature as a scholar. Moreover, his patience with me and his feedback on the various drafts of this dissertation were invaluable. I would also like to thank Professor Gene Fendt and Professor Yōzan Mosig, who were particularly formidable in my early intellectual development as an undergraduate student at the University of Nebraska at Kearney; both helped kindle my interest in philosophy, and their authentic and passionate personalities inspired me to stay true to myself. I cannot neglect to mention a kind of historical debt of gratitude to John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, and William James, whose many insights regarding the utility of religion form the foundation of the dissertation that follows. Finally, I would like to thank my family (my wife, Paula; my children, Abigail, Jack, and Sophia; my parents, Steve and Jane; my sister, Brittany; my father-in-law, Paul; and my mother-in-law, Susan) and my closest friends (Josh Herian, Jamie Kramer, Daniel Davis, and Joseph Braun), who kept me grounded throughout the many years it took to complete this dissertation, and who have always encouraged me with an optimistic outlook when I needed it most.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
ACCEPTANCE PAGE	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: J.S. Mill and <i>Utility of Religion</i>	7
CHAPTER 2: Friedrich Nietzsche and <i>The Anti-Christ</i>	68
CHAPTER 3: William James and <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>	134
CONCLUSION	199
APPENDIX: Comprehensive Outline of Dissertation	210

INTRODUCTION

I can easily recall the first philosophy book I read—it was a book I stumbled upon early on in my high school years and that instantly ignited a passion for the philosophy of religion. That book was Bertrand Russell’s *Why I am Not a Christian*. The book was provocative for me at the time for a number of reasons. Chief among them was the fact that I had been growing up in an ultra-conservative and heavily Christian south-central portion of Nebraska; almost all of my peers were religious (in fact, not one comes to mind who was not), and by this I mean that they professed allegiance to some (very predominantly Christian) religion and attended regular religious events and ceremonies. To my knowledge, few if any of these acquaintances had ever thought of questioning their religion. Russell, on the other hand, did precisely this, questioning the value of something that has been, for the most part, universally embraced throughout the history of humankind. As time has passed, I have become very curious about a number of aspects regarding religion. What, for instance, explains the endurance and nearly-universal nature of religious belief? Why, when so much seems to change over time, does religion continue to exert as much influence as it did thousands of years ago? Does religion help to ensure the survival of our species (in which case its influence might be attributed to something like natural selection), or is it gradually tearing us apart through doctrinal differences and holy conflicts, as some scholars suggest?¹ More generally, is it useful—does it make us happy? What

¹ Consider, for example, the arguments advanced by Sam Harris, a contemporary American scholar, in his book, *The End of Faith*. One of Harris’s chief claims therein is that religion, if strictly adhered to, is inherently divisive, and he argues that there is a significant positive correlation between religiosity and violence. I will say much more about the relationship between religion and violence throughout the dissertation.

follows is the culmination of years of personal reflection on religion, ruminations that began with that fateful first book.

Specifically, I will examine key philosophical texts that address issues regarding the *utility* of religion. In doing so, I reflect on whether religion is *useful* for the individuals who subscribe to it and for society at large, not on whether there is any *truth* to the claims advanced in various religious doctrines. Admittedly, the subject matter at hand is highly complex, and I feel it is imperative that I be as clear as possible about what exactly it is that I intend to assess. As I have indicated, the concept of “utility” is essential here: there is a significant difference between an analysis of religion in terms of truth and an analysis of it in terms of utility. It is one thing to ask about the truth of various claims within the doctrines of a religion (e.g. “Jesus died for our sins”), and it is quite another to ask about the usefulness of the religions espousing such claims. In the following analysis, I distinguish the truth of religion from the utility of religion and examine the latter. Ultimately, what I desire to know is this: *does religion make us happy?*

Naturally, one might wonder why we ought to focus on the utility of religion to begin with—that is, why should we concern ourselves with this issue? The short answer lies in the fact that religion is so prevalent. According to recent estimates, roughly 84% percent of the world’s population is religious (in fact, over 50% of all people alive right now subscribe to either Christianity or Islam).² At the time of this writing, the world’s population is estimated to be 7,170,216,431,³ which means that, conservatively, six billion people across the globe consider themselves religious. The general point is that, while there are certainly a multitude of phenomena affecting the wellbeing of humanity, few are as widespread as religion. As a result,

² adherents.com, *Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents*, http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html (accessed 5 Nov. 2010).

³ U.S. Census Bureau, [www.census.gov, http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/popclockworld.html](http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/popclockworld.html) (accessed 3 June 2014).

this makes consideration of the usefulness of religion all the more worthwhile, since it is much more likely to affect humanity in significant and palpable ways.

In my experience, discussions within the philosophy of religion, both in common parlance and in academic settings, tend to revolve around the truth of religion, rather than around its usefulness. John Stuart Mill echoes this sentiment, as the first sentence of his essay *Utility of Religion* (which is the subject of Chapter 1) reads: “it has sometimes been remarked how much has been written, both by friends and enemies, concerning the truth of religion, and how little, at least in the way of discussion or controversy, concerning its usefulness.”⁴ Mill thinks that this can be explained by the fact that questions regarding religion’s utility seldom arise unless questions regarding its truth have already been raised, and, thus, because “so long...as men [accept] the teachings of their religion as positive facts, no more a matter of doubt than their own existence or the existence of the objects around them, to ask the use of believing it could not possibly occur to them.”⁵ Not surprisingly, then, “the utility of religion did not need to be asserted until the arguments for its truth had in a great measure ceased to convince.”⁶ As a result, Mill believes that we should not find it surprising that so little attention is paid to the question of religion’s usefulness, and I share this conviction.

It is worth noting that, in drawing attention to the distinction between the truth of religion and the utility of religion, and to the common tendency to emphasize the former, Mill has skeptics of religion (e.g. Jeremy Bentham and Auguste Comte)⁷ equally in mind. According to Mill, skeptics often seem to share the same predicament as their religious counterparts in that

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume X - Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, Introduction by F.E.L. Priestley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 403.

⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 403.

⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 403.

⁷ Mill says that these are the only two thinkers he is familiar with who posit doubts regarding religion’s usefulness (Mill, *Collected Works*, 406).

they are also preoccupied with the intellectual aspects of religion, specifically with the idea that religious doctrines are false, which then prevents them from duly considering the utility of religion. I will say more about this in Chapter 1, and, on this point, Mill's remarks no doubt seem justified. It is disappointing that notions regarding the truth of religion have the potential to prevent us from considering its usefulness. What's more, I believe that an investigation into the utility of religion is, at least in one important respect, a more promising and fruitful project. By its very nature, the question of utility appeals to the tangible effects religion has on our everyday lives, which are more or less directly observable to most of us, whereas the question of truth tends to waffle in more obscure and theoretical discourse, involving claims that cannot be so easily tested. Ultimately, I think that the utility of religion is a significant and generally underappreciated issue, and one thing I hope to accomplish in writing this dissertation is to bring more attention to it.

Fortunately, there are some who have recognized the value of examining the utility of religion, and we inherit a rich historical treatment of the issue, thanks to some classics in the philosophy of religion as well as to innovative insights provided by contemporary thinkers. As we shall see, some well-known philosophers have explicitly addressed the issue, and, while it may be true that few philosophers make the utility of religion their primary concern, many still have much to say about it indirectly by way of discussing related issues. Clearly, a comprehensive analysis of all relevant contributions is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and I must therefore propose a more manageable treatment of the subject.

Within philosophical circles, interest in the utility of religion increased markedly during the nineteenth century, which is highlighted by the contributions of three nineteenth-century philosophers in particular. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and

William James (1842-1910) each offer extensive reflections on the utility of religion. As it turns out, these three thinkers also offer an illuminating spectrum in terms of their positions regarding the utility of religion: James argues very much in favor of religion's overall usefulness and Nietzsche very much against it, while Mill offers a sympathetic yet critical view that lies somewhere in between. For these reasons, I feel justified in examining the utility of religion through the lens of what they have to say and, while I will allude to a variety of influential works, from the distant past to the present, I shall focus on three well-known and pertinent texts authored by them, with a chapter devoted to each: 1) *Utility of Religion* by Mill, 2) *The Anti-Christ* by Nietzsche, and 3) *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by James.

By working with these texts, I intend to survey the many issues one ought to consider when assessing the utility of religion. For instance, does religion improve the physical and mental health of believers, as many suggest? Moreover, what is the relationship between religion and morality? Is religion necessary for morality as some maintain, or is it morally problematic as others claim? These are just some of the many questions addressed in the analysis that follows. A few more examples of significant themes that emerge are: the psychology of religious belief; the relationship between religion and nihilism; the relationship between science and religion; the relationship between religion and violence; and the relationship between evolution and religion. As we shall see, all of these themes relate to the utility of religion in significant ways. Besides working with the philosophical texts mentioned, I will discuss empirical research pertaining to the various benefits and harms associated with religion. For example, I will discuss research relating to a possible link between religiosity and personal health, as well as research regarding the relationship between religiosity and moral behavior. As I examine what Mill, Nietzsche, and James suggest regarding the utility of religion and reflect on

the many related issues they raise, I naturally formulate my own conclusions regarding the usefulness of religion. I will argue that religion yields little moral utility and that it can even be morally problematic. However, I will contend that religion provides happiness to many individuals who seem otherwise incapable of experiencing it. In view of these considerations, I conclude by stressing the complex nature of the issue; I propose that a final judgment regarding the utility of religion calls for extended scholarly analysis, and I offer some suggestions for proceeding.

CHAPTER 1:

John Stuart Mill and *Utility of Religion*

I. *Introduction*

I begin my analysis of the utility of religion with an examination of John Stuart Mill's *Utility of Religion*, which is arguably one of the most significant contributions made to the subject, despite its short length of less than thirty pages. Compare this with William James's masterpiece, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a canonical work in the philosophy of religion and the subject of Chapter 3, which, in addition to being much more widely known, weighs in at over five-hundred pages. What Mill, a nineteenth-century British philosopher, is able to do in this essay is quite extraordinary. The *Utility of Religion* and two other essays written by Mill, *Nature* and *Theism*, were collectively published posthumously in 1874 as *Three Essays on Religion*. Despite its brevity, Mill advances a surprising number of arguments in *Utility of Religion*. Before turning to Mill's analysis, I'd like to make a few brief prefatory remarks, to help establish some context for his essay.

Utility of Religion seems like an excellent place to start because, as the title of the essay suggests, it is expressly concerned with considerations of the usefulness of religion. Consider Mill's stated purpose in writing the essay:

It is perfectly conceivable that religion may be morally useful without being intellectually sustainable; and it would be a proof of great prejudice in any unbeliever to deny, that there have been ages, and that there are still both nations and individuals, with regard to whom this is actually the case. Whether it is the case generally, and with reference to the future, it is the object of this paper to examine.⁸

⁸ John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume X - Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, Introduction by F.E.L. Priestley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 405.

Here, Mill calls attention to the distinction between the utility and the truth of religion. Indeed, Mill, who is known for championing utilitarianism, makes frequent appeals to the notion of utility, and, perhaps more importantly, to its significance, throughout many of his writings, just as he does in his essay *Nature*, where he says, “all human action whatever, consists in altering, and all useful action in improving, the spontaneous course of nature.”⁹ It is not surprising, then, that Mill’s focus in *Utility of Religion* is not on the truth of various religious doctrines, but on whether religions ultimately aid us in our pursuit of a good life.

At the time he penned *Utility of Religion*, Mill believed it was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain religion intellectually. Although Mill was always committed, first and foremost, to a value system governed primarily by considerations of utility and progress, as opposed to considerations of truth, he never completely severed the connection between them, and he explicitly remarks on the importance of this connection. For example, he begins *Utility of Religion* by suggesting that “if religion, or any particular form of it, is true, its usefulness follows without other proof.”¹⁰ For Mill, the relationship between truth and utility is an important one, and this relationship is often, as it is here, at the crux of discussions regarding both the truth and the usefulness of religion. I will address this relationship in more detail in Section C of Part III, as well as in subsequent chapters, but here I limit my reflections regarding this relationship to one more point. It is worth emphasizing that Mill is leery of those who are quick to dismiss the usefulness of religion simply on the grounds that its teachings are not true. He believes this dismissive standpoint is unwarranted, and he does not share the assumption of the “sceptical philosophers,” whom he says suggest that “if religion be false, nothing but good can be the

⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 402.

¹⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 403.

consequence of rejecting it.”¹¹ In fact, he fears that there are some who take their misgivings regarding the intellectual sustainability of religion too far and overstate the case against religion, as is evident from the declaration of his purpose in writing the essay. Accordingly, Robert Carr, who traces the evolution of Mill’s thoughts on religion throughout Mill’s lifetime in his article “The Religious Thought of John Stuart Mill: A Study in Reluctant Scepticism,” is right to suggest that “for Mill, the problem of the utility of religion could not be so simply disposed of as skeptical philosophers were wont to believe.”^{12, 13} Not surprisingly, Mill spends considerable time at the beginning of the essay trying to show how some have taken these anti-religious sentiments too far. Mill claims, for example, that Jeremy Bentham, a good friend of Mill’s father and a significant influence on Mill himself, overstated the skeptical case, and that Bentham’s discussion “presses many parts of the argument too hard.”¹⁴ Mill also suggests that these skeptics need to proceed more cautiously and exhibit more tolerance when considering the possibility of moral benefits pertaining to religion. He suggests that, for the sake of argument, we ought to suppose that religion embodies the best moral perspective available, and then to ask whether religion is *necessary* or *optimal* for it, which the skeptical philosophers whom he references are reluctant and/or fail to do. Finally, although he will ultimately argue against many of the arguments in favor of the utility of religion, he insists that most of the ill effects of religion

¹¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 405.

¹²Robert Carr, “The Religious Thought of John Stuart Mill: A Study in Reluctant Scepticism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1962), 488.

¹³ Carr provides a fascinating account of the evolution of Mill’s views on religion. Carr argues that these views changed considerably throughout Mill’s life, suggesting, for example, that “the Mill of 1870... was quite far removed, intellectually as well as chronologically, from the youthful propagandist who in 1823 had campaigned almost flippantly for religious toleration” (Carr, *Religious Thought*, 494). Carr, in turn, attributes this significant shift in views to three factors: “Mill’s personality itself, his absorbing concern for morality, and the age in which he lived” (Carr, *Religious Thought*, 494). With respect to this last factor, Carr remarks that “perhaps Mill unknowingly described himself as well as his age when in *On Liberty* he characterized Victorian England as an ‘age devoid of faith, yet terrified of scepticism’” (Carr, *Religious Thought*, 495).

¹⁴ Mill, *Collected Works*, 406.

ought to be divorced from it, claiming that, as humankind evolves and progresses, “the immoral, or otherwise mischievous consequences which have been drawn from religion, are, one by one, abandoned, and, after having been long fought for as of its very essence, are discovered to be easily separable from it.”^{15, 16} In sum, while Mill does not ultimately evince a very favorable impression of the usefulness of religion, especially, as we shall see, with respect to its social utility, he certainly remains on guard against any unwarranted hostility toward such prospects.

Lastly, I ought to say something about what Mill means by “religion,” a term that has been notoriously difficult to define. I think Daniel Dennett, a contemporary thinker closely associated with the New Atheism movement, is right when he says, “we should expect—and tolerate—some difficulty in arriving at a counterexample-proof definition of something as diverse and complex as religion.”¹⁷ In his own utilitarian analysis of religion, Mill suggests that “the essence of religion is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as of the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire.”¹⁸ For Mill, as Lou Matz points out, “what makes these ideals ‘religious’ is that they are the ultimate concern of human beings and form the highest ends to which all others are secondary.”¹⁹ In my view, this kind of definition can be problematic because it defines religion in such a broad manner that it includes secular commitments such as patriotism (as we shall see in outlining Mill’s analysis) and Marxism, and even Mill’s own commitment to utilitarianism, commitments that I believe most people would not readily associate with

¹⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 406.

¹⁶ I express my worries about this claim in Section C of Part II.

¹⁷ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 7-8.

¹⁸ Mill, *Collected Works*, 422.

¹⁹ Lou Matz, “The Utility of Religious Illusion: A Critique of J.S. Mill’s Religion of Humanity,” *Utilitas*, vol. 12, issue 2 (2000), 143.

religion.²⁰ Furthermore, it seems strange, given the undertones of Mill's own writing, to think of him as religious, yet his conception of religion would oblige us to do so. It seems to me that, when thinking of religion, most people have something more specific in mind than what Mill offers us here. In defining religion, most would likely appeal to some notion of God, and, perhaps, to other supernatural phenomena. World religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism, in addition to various indigenous religions, make this kind of appeal. Accordingly, what most people likely have in mind is not just any "ideal object," as Mill's general characterization suggests, but something more specific and akin to Dennett's conception of religions, which he describes as "*social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.*"²¹ Yet (and I cannot emphasize the following point enough), while Mill thinks of religion in such a broad manner, most of his analysis in *Utility of Religion* actually focuses on a more particular kind of religion, to wit, what he calls "supernatural" religions (by which he means something that closely resembles Dennett's definition of the term after all).²²

In my estimation, Mill concisely, and for the most part judiciously, attempts to analyze religion in terms of its effects on society and on individuals. Mill suggests that "the inquiry divides itself into two parts, corresponding to the double aspect of the subject; its social, and its individual aspect. What does religion do for society, and what for the individual?"²³ In outlining

²⁰ I do not mean to suggest that Mill is alone in thinking of religion in such a general fashion. For example, in his book, *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Erich Fromm offers a similar notion of religious experience, saying, "religious experience is the wondering, the marveling, the becoming aware of life and of one's own existence, and of the puzzling problem of one's relatedness to the world" (Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 9). Fromm also maintains that a feeling of oneness, akin to the famous "oceanic feeling" Freud alludes to in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is an element of the religious experience. Additionally, James employs a very similar conception of religion, as will become clear in Chapter 3.

²¹ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 9.

²² The difficulties associated with defining religion is a recurring theme throughout the remainder of the dissertation.

²³ Mill, *Collected Works*, 406.

his views regarding the matter, I follow this general structure, beginning with an analysis of what he has to say regarding religion as an instrument of social good (Part II), and then moving on to a discussion of his thoughts regarding religion as an instrument of individual good (Part III). I will survey the many arguments he presents regarding the relationship between religion and morality and discuss his well-known substitute for supernatural religions, the “Religion of Humanity.” I will argue that, with a few exceptions, which I will expand on as they appear, he generally offers illuminating observations with respect to both the social and the individual utility of religion. I will also express a few concerns, however, which ultimately make Mill’s analysis seem somewhat incomplete. I will soon turn to an analysis of why it is that Mill thinks religion erroneously receives so much credit for society’s moral persuasions (Section B of Part II), which will be followed by an analysis of why he thinks religion is in many ways morally problematic (Section C of Part II), but first I shall begin by characterizing the thesis that religion is morally advantageous.

II. Religion and Morality

A. The Moral Case for the Social Utility of Religion

Mill begins his essay by examining religion’s influence on the welfare of society, most notably, and, seemingly for Mill, exclusively, by way of the moral benefits it is thought to engender. Hence, Mill focuses on the relationship between religion and morality, which, to be sure, is what much of the discussion regarding the usefulness of religion seems centered around. If it is true, as is often suggested, that morality depends on—or is aided in some manner by—religion, and if it is true that a moral society is, in fact, a happier society (which, for the sake of argument, I shall grant here), then it seems we would have good reason to look favorably upon

religion, at least in terms of its social utility. Many well-known and respected historical figures have advanced this kind of thesis, crediting religion with yielding moral benefits to society. Indeed, Benjamin Franklin once stated that “religion will be a powerful regulator of our actions, give us peace and tranquility within our minds, and render us benevolent, useful and beneficial to others.”²⁴ Similarly, David Hume, who is well-known for his skeptical arguments regarding proofs for the existence of God, makes a case for why religion is necessary for social stability.²⁵ In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s literary classic, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov, one of the main protagonists, goes so far as to famously suggest that, if God does not exist, then everything becomes permissible. Similarly, when describing Mill’s early views regarding religion (i.e. those he voices in writings that predate *Three Essays on Religion*), Carr suggests that “from all indications...Mill was hesitant, if not unwilling, to assume a completely anti-religious position,” and notes that “his reason was not...that he had come to dislike religion less, but that he feared anarchy more.”²⁶ Elaborating on this point later in his article, Carr claims that Mill’s “desire for social renovation was constantly held in check by his fear of social upheaval.”²⁷ These thinkers all suggest that there is good reason to think that religion might be morally advantageous. The thesis that religion is morally advantageous can be supported in a variety of ways, some of which I will now briefly detail.

Some go so far as to suggest that *religion is necessary for morality*. Many, philosophers and non-philosophers alike, believe that it is impossible for human beings to develop a moral compass without the guiding influence of religion. For example, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-

²⁴ Walter Isaacson. *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 87-88.

²⁵ See Frederick G. Whelan’s *Church Establishments, Liberty & Competition in Religion* for a detailed analysis of Hume’s case for state-sanctioned religion: Frederick G. Whelan, “Church Establishments, Liberty & Competition in Religion,” *Polity*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Winter, 1990), 155-185.

²⁶ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 485.

²⁷ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 495.

1860), who was a precursor of—and a significant influence on—Friedrich Nietzsche (whose views regarding the utility of religion will be examined in Chapter 2), offers one formulation of this line of thinking, suggesting, by way of Demopheles, a character in his *Religion: A Dialogue*, that, “where you have masses of people of crude susceptibilities and clumsy intelligence, sordid in their pursuits and sunk in drudgery, religion provides the only means of proclaiming and making them feel the high import of life.”²⁸ Here, Schopenhauer paints a rather dismal and less-than-flattering portrait of humanity, according to which human beings, sans religion, are barbaric and incapable of naturally providing their own moral compass. Were they not acquainted with religion and the moral guidance provided by holy texts, the implication is that human beings would remain consumed by their own selfish earthly passions and remain wholly ignorant of, or, worse, unconcerned with, the plight and welfare of their fellow human beings. Albeit a bit crude, this characterization captures the view of some (and perhaps many) with respect to the relationship between religion and moral conduct. However, those making a case for the moral necessity of religion need not voice their case as strongly as Schopenhauer’s character does here. Instead, they might simply argue that, while not categorically necessary for *all* people, such religious sympathies are necessary in order for *some* individuals to realize their moral potential. As examples, proponents of this position might point to former hardened criminals who claim they would never have turned over a new leaf and assumed a straight and narrow path had they not “found God.” Such cases are familiar to many of us. The implication is still that religion elicits moral behavior that would have otherwise never come to fruition, at least in terms of some segment of the population.

²⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer* (New York: Willey Book Company, no date of publication), 1-2.

While many proponents of the thesis under consideration think that the development of morality is dependent—whether for some or for all individuals—on religion, others simply maintain that religion yields moral benefits to society (i.e. they do not go so far as to claim that religion is *necessary* for morality). Indeed, religion may still prove useful for society in moral terms even if it is not thought to be necessary for the establishment of our basic moral sensibilities. Ultimately, while shying away from the claim that we would have no semblance of morality were it not for religion, which is a stronger claim to be sure, one might still argue that religion allows us an easy means by which to propagate morality. Gregory S. Paul, whose empirical findings regarding the relationship between religion and morality will be discussed later in Section D of Part II, likely has this distinction in mind when he writes: “at one end of the spectrum are those who consider creator belief helpful but not necessarily critical to individuals and societies. At the other end the most ardent advocates consider persons and people inherently unruly and ungovernable unless they are strictly obedient to the creator.”²⁹ I now turn to a brief account of two major themes underlying most arguments in favor of the thesis under consideration, which Mill himself distinguishes and highlights as he proceeds with his analysis.

First, many think of religion as a sort of enforcer of morality, as something that helps to inspire moral behavior that might otherwise be lacking. The idea here is that religion helps provide the motive for people to act in a moral manner. Those who make this kind of case typically appeal to the threat of eternal punishment (e.g. hell) for immorality and the promise of eternal reward (e.g. heaven) awaiting those who behave morally. Granting moral behavior on the part of religious individuals may be—and no doubt for many is—solely inspired by a desire

²⁹ Gregory S. Paul, “Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies: A First Look,” *Journal of Religion & Society*, vol. 7 (2005), Paragraph 6, <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html> (accessed 10 Oct. 2011).

to emulate a good and loving God, for others it is thought to stem primarily from the thought of eternal consequences in an afterlife, which is imbedded in their religious convictions.

Accordingly, the threat of eternal consequences is said to act as a deterrent for unwanted behavior here on Earth.

In addition to acting as a formidable enforcer of morality, religion is often credited with introducing a large number of people to morality. That is, religion is viewed as a kind of teacher of morality. In contrast to the notion that religion is an enforcer of morality, the point here is “that granting the sufficiency of human motives to make the rule obeyed, were it not for the religious idea we should not have had the rule itself.”³⁰ Characterizing supporters of this view, Mill writes: “they say, that religion alone can teach us what morality is; that all the high morality ever recognized by mankind, was learnt from religion.”³¹ Along these lines, one might also suggest that religion offers a powerful voice on behalf of morality, citing, for example, the efficient means it provides for delivering moral teachings. Given the mass followings of the various religions in question, religious messages have a very large audience, which, in turn, likely makes disseminating moral messages and encouraging ethical strictures much easier when they are involved. Moreover, religion can be said to preserve and pass on moral wisdoms and teachings from generation to generation, providing society with a valuable service in doing so. In general, advocates of this line of thought assert that religion offers an ideal vehicle to deliver a moral message to the bulk of humanity, a message that might never have otherwise been received.

³⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 416.

³¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 415.

On a related note, there are those, including, as we shall see, Mill himself,³² who suggest that we have religion to credit for our initial discovery of moral conduct, and that, at the very least, we owe it a historical debt of gratitude. The idea here is that, devoid of religious influence, we would have never originally uncovered our sense of morality in the first place, and thus religion was necessary for the initial emergence of it (although religion may no longer be necessary for morality any longer). This is not so much an argument for why religion *is* presently useful for moral purposes, but, rather, an argument for why it *was* historically useful for such purposes. Hence, the implication is that morality is the legacy of religion, and that without religion the birth of morality would have been aborted.

It is worth emphasizing that, if true, most of what Mill says gives us good reason to be skeptical of the thesis we are considering, with regard to both religion's ability to act as an enforcer and to act as a teacher of morality. However, Mill takes it one step further than this. Not only does he call into question the positive influence of religion on morality, he goes so far as to suggest that religion might be *antithetical* to moral progress.³³ It's no surprise, then, that Mill tasked himself with writing *Utility of Religion*, wherein he expresses his moral misgivings regarding religion, given that in his *Autobiography* he writes: "on religion in particular the time appears to me to have come when it is the duty of all who being qualified in point of knowledge have on mature considerations satisfied themselves that the current opinions are not only false but hurtful, to make their dissent known."³⁴ I turn now to a discussion of Mill's analysis of the relationship between religion and morality.

³² I discuss Mill's endorsement of this point in Section B of Part II.

³³ This claim is discussed in more detail in Section C of Part II.

³⁴ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 28.

B. Mill's Case against the Thesis that Religion Is Morally Advantageous

While many are sympathetic to the idea that religion is morally advantageous, others are wary of its implications. Philaethes—Demopheles' foil in Schopenhauer's dialogue—cautions that “you mustn't ascribe to religion what results from innate goodness of character, by which compassion for the man who would suffer by his crime keeps a man from committing it. This is the genuine moral motive, and as such it is independent of all religions.”³⁵ Philaethes suggests that we are apt to credit religion for inspiring good acts when it is not in fact the true source of them. In *Utility of Religion*, Mill argues in a similar vein, suggesting that the moral advantages often associated with religion are mistakenly attributed to it, and that the connection between religion and morality is generally overstated and tenuous at best.

To begin with, Mill argues that, although religion may receive the credit for eliciting the moral sentiments present in human beings, in reality the true force behind these sentiments lies primarily in three other factors: 1) authority, 2) education, and 3) public opinion. He believes that there is a tendency to credit “religion *as such* with the whole of the power inherent in *any* system of moral duties inculcated by education and enforced by opinion.”³⁶ In his view, these other underlying factors are what really elicit and encourage moral behavior; divorce religion from these attendant factors, and it will cease to appear as though it exerts any real influence on—or control over—human behavior. Ultimately, Mill believes that, “since everything of this sort [i.e. the enforcement and teaching of morality] which does take place, takes place in the name of religion” and “almost all who are taught any morality whatever, have it taught to them

³⁵ Schopenhauer, *Essays*, 38.

³⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 407.

as religion,” “religion receives the credit of all the influence in human affairs which belongs to any generally accepted system of rules for the guidance and government of human life.”³⁷

Thus, Mill claims that religion only appears to produce moral benefits because of its associations with these more fundamental and powerful forces, and he begins making this case by examining the role that authority plays in the matter. In doing so, he accentuates “the enormous influence of authority on the human mind,” by which he means “an involuntary influence” that exerts influence on “men’s conviction, on their persuasion, [and] on their involuntary sentiments.”³⁸ In fact, he maintains that “authority is the evidence on which the mass of mankind believe everything which they are said to know, except facts of which their own senses have taken cognizance.”³⁹ For Mill, these general reflections on the nature of authority relate to morality because “when any rule of life and duty, whether grounded or not on religion, has conspicuously received the general assent, it obtains a hold on the belief of every individual, stronger than it would have even if he had arrived at it by the inherent force of his own understanding.”⁴⁰ The idea here is that much of what we see with respect to the moral beliefs and behaviors of individuals is similar to what we see with respect to their scientific beliefs: just as most individuals readily endorse scientific principles and theories that they cannot actually confirm by their own personal experiences, simply because they are widely accepted and backed by experts in the scientific community, so, too, individuals will adopt the same moral beliefs as others around them, especially those of authoritative figures. What Mill suggests, then, is that when morality is well-grounded and a permanent fixture in our lives it is simply because it

³⁷ Mill, *Collected Works*, 407.

³⁸ Mill, *Collected Works*, 407.

³⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 407.

⁴⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 407.

is widely recognized and upheld by so many people to begin with, especially by those held in high esteem by society, not because of any religious associations it might have.

Mill moves on to discuss the power of education and the role it plays in adherence to a system of morality, especially as it concerns the persuasions of highly impressionable youth. Mill attaches great significance to education, claiming that “there is not one natural inclination which it is not strong enough to coerce, and, if needful, to destroy by disuse.”⁴¹ Consider, he implores his readers, “how unspeakable is the effect of bringing people up from infancy in a belief, and in habits founded on it.”⁴² Couple this with the fact that “in all countries...all or nearly all who have been brought up by parents, or by any one interested in them, have been taught from their earliest years some kind of religious belief,”⁴³ and it should come as no surprise that religion has proven to be so influential in the course of human affairs. Mill’s point here is that this sort of influence can be garnered by any systemic worldview, religious or otherwise, provided it is impressed on people from an early age, which is to say that any moral benefits associated with this kind of influence are not the exclusive domain of religion. As a result, Mill concludes that “it is reasonable to think that any system of social duty which mankind might adopt, even though divorced from religion, would have the same advantage of being inculcated from childhood, and would have it hereafter much more perfectly than any doctrine has it at present.”⁴⁴ It is also worth emphasizing that Mill argues that religious teachings are particularly powerful (as are any kinds of teaching for which the following holds true) because children are exposed to them at such an early age. In support of this, he points out that “it is especially characteristic of the impressions of early education, that they possess what is so much more

⁴¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 409.

⁴² Mill, *Collected Works*, 408.

⁴³ Mill, *Collected Works*, 408.

⁴⁴ Mill, *Collected Works*, 408.

difficult for later convictions to obtain—command over the feelings.”⁴⁵ With this, Mill suggests that the emotional attachments formed during our youth usually become permanent fixtures within us, difficult to set aside later, even when rational thought would seem to jeopardize them.⁴⁶ In the end, Mill insists that, once again, religion only seems so powerful because of a greater force—in this case, education—associated with it. Remove the advantages of education from religion, and it ceases to appear so morally effective. Alternatively, imbue the young with a system of morality devoid of religion, and it should prove just as effective. Mill points out that this was attempted by the ancient Greek states, which, according to Mill, relied almost exclusively on secular inducements for moral behavior.⁴⁷ “Among the Greeks generally,” he writes, “social morality was extremely independent of religion,” and “such moral teaching as existed in Greece had very little to do with religion.”⁴⁸ Interestingly, he adds that “the case of Greece is...the only one in which any teaching, other than religious, has had the unspeakable advantage of forming the basis of education.”⁴⁹ It should be noted that, since Mill’s time, other examples of equally secular (albeit less successful) societies have emerged—for example, the former Soviet Union. In any case, Mill believes that the success of these ancient Greek states supports the “presumption that in other cases early religious teaching has owed its power over mankind rather to its being early than to its being religious.”⁵⁰

Next, Mill expounds the power of public opinion, suggesting that it, too, underlies the relationship between religion and morality. Here again, the idea is that much of the credit

⁴⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 408-409.

⁴⁶ As we will see in Chapter 3, James makes a similar case, suggesting that our feelings can—and often do—overrule rational considerations.

⁴⁷ Mill, *Collected Works*, 409.

⁴⁸ Mill, *Collected Works*, 409.

⁴⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 409-410.

⁵⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 410.

religion receives in the moral arena ought to really be attributed to a more fundamental force at play: namely, being held in such high regard by the public in the first place. According to Mill, this—public opinion—is really the driving force behind adherence to moral precepts, whether such moral precepts are associated with religion or not. As he puts it, the desire to garner a favorable reputation in society “is a source of strength inherent in any system of moral belief which is generally adopted, whether connected with religion or not.”⁵¹ Mill goes so far as to say that “when the motive of public opinion acts in the same direction with conscience...it is then, of all motives which operate on the bulk of mankind, the most overpowering.”⁵² Expanding on why public opinion exerts so much power over our beliefs and behavior, Mill points out that, in addition to fearing the general contempt of our peers, we also face the threat of penalties that such contempt can arouse: “exclusion from social intercourse and from the innumerable good offices which human beings require from one another; the forfeiture of all that is called success in life; often the great diminution or total loss of means of subsistence; positive ill offices of various kinds, sufficient to render life miserable, and reaching in some states of society as far as actual persecution to death.”⁵³ Given these threats, Mill suggests that it is no surprise that we generally endorse the prevalent moral precepts (and, I would add, the prevalent religious faiths) of our time. Thus, he concludes, “any one who fairly and impartially considers the subject, will see reason to believe that those great effects on human conduct, which are commonly ascribed to motives derived directly from religion, have mostly for their proximate cause the influence of human opinion. Religion has been powerful not by its intrinsic force, but because it has wielded

⁵¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 410.

⁵² Mill, *Collected Works*, 410.

⁵³ Mill, *Collected Works*, 411.

that additional and more mighty power.”⁵⁴ In sum, provided we recognize these three more fundamental forces, Mill thinks religion ceases to appear so morally advantageous.

In view of these considerations, what should we make of the idea that religion helps provide the motive to act in moral ways—that is, that it acts as a kind of enforcer of morality? Mill specifically addresses the idea that the supernatural consequences associated with many religions makes them an effective means for soliciting moral behavior. He doesn’t think that this is true and he argues that there is little reason to believe religion inspires moral behavior by way of supernatural threats. First, he argues that the threat of eternal consequences is not palpable enough in our everyday lives to make an appreciable difference in our behavior. He puts the point as follows: “rewards and punishments postponed to that distance of time, and never seen by the eye, are not calculated, even when infinite and eternal, to have, on ordinary minds, a very powerful effect in opposition to strong temptation. Their remoteness alone is a prodigious deduction from their efficacy, on such minds as those which most require the restraint of punishment.”⁵⁵ One might argue that all Mill demonstrates here is that eternal consequences are on the horizon of conscious concern, not that eternal consequences play no role in moral motivation whatsoever. However, Mill offers a fairly convincing response to this objection, writing:

There is one clear proof how little the generality of mankind, either religious or worldly, really dread eternal punishments, when we see how, even at the approach of death, when the remoteness which took so much from their effect has been exchanged for the closest proximity, almost all persons who have not been guilty of some enormous crime (and many who have) are quite free from uneasiness as to their prospects in another world, and never for a moment seem to think themselves in any real danger of eternal punishment.^{56, 57}

⁵⁴ Mill, *Collected Works*, 411.

⁵⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 412.

⁵⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 414-415.

⁵⁷ However, one could argue that this feeling is historically conditioned. For example, while the fear of judgment and hell may have been lacking during Mill’s time, it seemed prominent in the Middle Ages.

Thus, Mill argues that the threat of eternal punishment is too extreme to serve as a legitimate enforcer of morality, even as death draws nearer. The implication is that it is much too easy to persuade ourselves that we're not going to hell for any of our earthly sins—after all, how can our finite earthly sins justify eternal damnation? Mill echoes this point, saying, “even the worst malefactor is hardly able to think that any crime he has had it in his power to commit, any evil he can have inflicted in this short space of existence, can have deserved torture extending through an eternity,”⁵⁸ and so “he easily persuades himself that whatever may have been his peccadilloes, there will be a balance in his favour at the least.”⁵⁹

Further, Mill thinks that the extreme nature of hell forces religions incorporating it into a practical dilemma: “bad religions teach that divine vengeance may be bought off, by offerings, or personal abasement; the better religions, not to drive sinners to despair, dwell so much on the divine mercy, that hardly any one is compelled to think himself irrevocably condemned.”⁶⁰ Neither response is promising for those making a case for the moral utility of religion; the first response yields unhealthy and unwanted guilt,⁶¹ and the second response diminishes—or entirely eliminates—the fear associated with eternal consequences, which those making this case depend upon. These considerations lead Mill to conclude that “the sole quality in these punishments which might seem calculated to make them efficacious, their over-powering magnitude, is itself a reason why nobody (except a hypochondriac here and there) ever really believes that he is in any very serious danger of incurring them.”⁶² Mill offers us another reason to doubt the effectiveness of supernatural consequences when he suggests that “a still greater abatement is

⁵⁸ Mill, *Collected Works*, 413.

⁵⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 412-413.

⁶⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 413.

⁶¹ I will discuss the claim that religion fosters guilt in more detail in Part IV of Chapter 2.

⁶² Mill, *Collected Works*, 413.

their uncertainty.”⁶³ While there may be some religious individuals who remain so firm in their convictions that they do not ever entertain doubts regarding their accuracy, there are, no doubt, others who are not so steadfast. In the case of the latter, at least, Mill’s point holds true: the deterring effect of the supernatural consequences is minimized to the extent that there is uncertainty that such eternal consequences will ever, in fact, come to fruition.

Having shown why he believes religion does not, in fact, act as an effective enforcer of morality, Mill next considers its merits as a teacher of morality. Again, those advocating this kind of argument suggest that religion can be credited for delivering moral truths to us, regardless of whether it deserves credit for inspiring us to act on them. However, even if this turns out to be true, Mill’s view suggests that it is possible to teach these moral principles without the aid of religion.⁶⁴ Provided religion helps teach moral principles, if it doesn’t turn out to be necessary for this end (in which case there are other suitable teachers of morality available), then the question of whether it is optimal becomes relevant. Mill points to a number of reasons to think that religion is actually morally problematic (which I outline in Section C of Part II), in which case it is difficult to think of it as an effective teacher of morality.⁶⁵ While it’s hard to imagine that Mill would go as far as Sigmund Freud, who argues that, when it comes to modern religious restrictions, “primitive man was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct,”⁶⁶ he does suggest that, even supposing religion acts as an effective teacher of morality, there are non-religious alternatives available for introducing moral tenets to people (which also

⁶³ Mill, *Collected Works*, 412.

⁶⁴ Recall that Mill argues “it is reasonable to think that any system of social duty which mankind might adopt, even though divorced from religion, would have the same advantage of being inculcated from childhood, and would have it hereafter much more perfectly than any doctrine has it at present” (Mill, *Collected Works*, 408).

⁶⁵ Once again, it bears repeating that Mill’s reflections regarding this point are primarily concerned with *supernatural* religions.

⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 73.

avoid the problems he associates with supernatural religions). I now turn to a discussion of the problems he associates with viewing religion as an effective teacher of morality.

First, Mill alludes to the inconsistent teachings and moral recommendations offered by the multiplicity of religions that exist. The central concern here is that religions do not offer us any sort of consensus when it comes to divine moral instruction, and, what's worse, they even contradict one another at times. Hence, even granting, for the sake of argument, that morality is impossible without religious guidance, or that religion is otherwise advantageous when it comes to teaching moral principles, we must still determine the religion(s) for which this is true, which is a difficult task to be sure. The problem is exacerbated when religions recommend disparate and conflicting recommendations for action. For example, many Muslims believe that we ought to dress very modestly while in public (this belief is not, of course, limited to Muslims).

Accordingly, many belonging to the Muslim tradition believe that women ought to wear burqas when out in public. However, others belonging to other religious traditions maintain that, far from being morally appropriate, this is a cruel and unnecessary infringement on women's rights and that, if anything, wearing them is morally repugnant. In fact, in 2010, Belgium passed a bill banning any clothing that would obscure the identity of someone in places like parks and in the street; this, in effect, was a ban on burqas.

Making matters worse, sometimes different denominations within the same religious tradition uphold different moral standards. After all, not all Muslims advocate women wearing burqas. Also note that, throughout history, Christianity has been used to both support and oppose slavery, as well as the death penalty.⁶⁷ Many, including several notable philosophers,

⁶⁷ For a nice analysis of the variety of Christian takes on the death penalty, see: ProCon.org, *Does Christianity support the death penalty?*, <http://deathpenalty.procon.org/view.answers.php?questionID=000986> (accessed 25 Jun. 2011).

have also suggested that the teachings of Jesus are at odds with what has come to be known as “Christianity.” Mohandas Gandhi purportedly once said, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” Mill himself speaks of the “beauty and benignity and moral greatness which so eminently distinguish the sayings and character of Christ,”⁶⁸ despite his many reservations about Christianity. He reflects on the inconsistencies between Christianity as we have come to know it (owing, in large part, he says, to St. Paul) and the teachings of Christ himself.⁶⁹ Along these lines, Carr maintains that “Mill’s quarrel was not with religion per se, but with the social expressions of organized Christianity in XIXth-century England.”⁷⁰ Nietzsche also talks this way in much of his writing, suggesting that the character of the historical Christ offers a case of someone befitting the Aristotelian notion of nobility, a quality that is requisite for Nietzsche’s own “master morality” (which he views favorably), while Christianity, which is supposed to advance the teachings of Christ himself, is thought to do nothing of the sort. Instead, for Nietzsche, modern day Christianity signals “slave morality” and is indicative of an ignoble character, a character who is timid and weak, and whose values encourage a passive and submissive will, rather than an active and virtuous will (I will say much more regarding Nietzsche’s views in Chapter 2).

In the previous section, I mentioned the argument that religion was historically necessary for the initial introduction of morality to humankind. Regardless of its current moral utility for society, the suggestion here is that religion was, in a sense, historically useful for the sake of morality. On this point, Mill concludes that “there is truth in much of this, considered as a matter of history,” and “in any other way [ancient peoples] could not easily have been induced to

⁶⁸ Mill, *Collected Works*, 424.

⁶⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 424.

⁷⁰ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 481.

accept them [i.e. moral precepts].”⁷¹ It seems to me that, in granting this historical advantage, Mill neglects another point he emphasizes elsewhere, namely his distinction “between the intrinsic capacities of human nature and the forms in which those capacities happen to have been historically developed.”⁷² Similarly, in *The Subjection of Women* he acknowledges that “experience cannot possibly have decided between two courses, so long as there has only been experience of one.”⁷³ Yet Mill seems to rely solely on the course of history when he endorses the idea that religion helped elicit moral sentiments in ancient peoples. Even if it were conceded that history shows us that a significant portion of human beings were aided by religion in the realization of their moral capacities, it tells us nothing more than this. As such, it does not tell us that there were no other possible means by which those same people might have been assisted in the actualization of their moral capacities and, hence, that religion was *necessary* for the process. Nor does it demonstrate that religion was, in fact, the most optimal means available.

However, having granted this historical benefit, Mill then wonders, “are not moral truths strong enough in their own evidence, at all events to retain the belief of mankind when once they have acquired it?”⁷⁴ He concludes that “this benefit, whatever it amounts to, has been gained. Mankind have entered into possession of it. It has become the property of humanity, and cannot now be lost by anything short of a return to primaeval barbarism.”⁷⁵ Hence, in Mill’s view, once morality has been introduced to us, there is essentially no chance that we will dismiss its obvious benefits. While he is sympathetic to the case for religion’s historical usefulness, he makes it clear that its usefulness does not extend beyond the historical past. Regarding its current social

⁷¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 416.

⁷² Mill, *Collected Works*, 422.

⁷³ John Stuart Mill, *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 143.

⁷⁴ Mill, *Collected Works*, 416.

⁷⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 416.

utility, Mill ultimately concludes, “belief, then, in the supernatural, great as are the services which it rendered in the early stages of human development, cannot be considered to be any longer required, either for enabling us to know what is right and wrong [i.e. as a teacher of morality], or for supplying us with motives to do right and to abstain from wrong [i.e. as a morality enforcer].”⁷⁶

C. Mill’s Case for Why Religion Is Morally Problematic

Far from being a catalyst for morality, Mill suggests that religions can actually be morally inhibitory. To begin with, Mill is worried that religion might stagnate moral progress, arguing that “there is a very real evil consequent on ascribing a supernatural origin to the received maxims of morality:” “wherever morality is supposed to be of supernatural origin, morality is stereotyped,” which “prevents them [i.e. moral maxims] from being discussed or criticized”⁷⁷ and thus improved when they should be. Mill laments that:

If among the moral doctrines received as a part of religion, there be any which are imperfect—which were either erroneous from the first, or not properly limited and guarded in the expression, or which, unexceptionable once, are no longer suited to the changes that have taken place in human relations (and it is my firm belief that in so-called Christian morality, instances of all these kinds are to be found) these doctrines are considered equally binding on the conscience with the noblest, most permanent and most universal precepts of Christ.⁷⁸

Mill offers other reasons for thinking that religion can actually be counterproductive in terms of teaching morality. For one, he illuminates the selfish nature of “moral” behavior that is motivated by the fear of eternal consequences, referring to the fear of hell as a “coarse and

⁷⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 417.

⁷⁷ Mill, *Collected Works*, 417.

⁷⁸ Mill, *Collected Works*, 417.

selfish...social instrument.”⁷⁹ As he points out, insofar as believers are compelled to behave morally due to fear of the eternal consequences they personally stand to face in an afterlife, there is some question as to whether the behavior thus inspired is truly *moral* in the first place. After all, such believers are “moral” essentially out of fear of these *personal* consequences, which, on the face of it, certainly doesn’t seem to be a very moral motivation. In view of this, Mill writes, “what now goes by the name of religion operates mainly through the feelings of self-interest.”⁸⁰ Hence, in this scenario, those who must be compelled to act appropriately by the threat of eternal consequences have a vested personal interest in acting morally, which many moral philosophers (e.g. Immanuel Kant) would insist implicitly detracts from the moral worth of what they are doing. Mill himself describes moral sentiments as those within us that prove sympathetic to the unity of mankind, and the moral motivation inspired by the threat of supernatural consequences is, in this Millian sense, no true moral motivation, but rather a motivation to act on behalf of oneself. In Mill’s view, this proves to be “a radical inferiority of the best supernatural religions.”⁸¹

Matz raises an interesting objection pertaining to this point about motivation, suggesting that “a utilitarian like Mill must value, above all, the results of one’s action rather than the nobility or moral worth of action (which is demonstrated by one’s motive).”⁸² The idea here is that Mill seems inconsistent insofar as he emphasizes motives behind actions in making this point despite the fact that the moral theory he identifies with—utilitarianism—stresses the consequences that result from actions. Matz asks his reader to imagine two individuals: one whose behavior is motivated by supernatural beliefs and yields good consequences and one

⁷⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 415.

⁸⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 423.

⁸¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 423.

⁸² Matz, *Religious Illusion*, 151.

whose behavior is not motivated by such beliefs but also yields good consequence. He points out that, to the utilitarian, the difference in motivation would be inconsequential. Nevertheless, while I understand why Matz raises this concern, I don't believe it undermines Mill's point, especially—and unquestionably—for those who don't endorse utilitarianism in the first place. I think Mill's point about motives can still be relevant even for a utilitarian, insofar as certain kinds of motives might lead to more desirable consequences. Hence, a utilitarian could argue that those who act from selfless motives generally yield more happiness than do those who act from selfish motives, in which case Mill's point here is very relevant for a utilitarian like himself.

Another relevant concern here is the notion of “holy wars” and the related hypothesis that religion increases violence. If it is true that religion increases violence, as some argue,⁸³ then it can be argued that religion actually inspires immorality. I will say much more about this hypothesis throughout the remainder of the dissertation, and here I limit my comments to the implications of what Mill says about it. Mill asserts that, “in truth, mankind have been so unremittingly occupied in doing evil to one another in the name of religion, from the sacrifice of Iphigenia to the Dragonnades of Louis XIV.”⁸⁴ However, he maintains that “these odious consequences...do not belong to religion in itself, but to particular forms of it, and afford no argument against the usefulness of any religions except those by which such enormities are encouraged.”⁸⁵ It seems to me that Mill's qualification is a bit suspect. Granting that particular forms of religion refrain from the violence in question, why minimize the existence of those that do? Religion (or anything else that is the subject of a utilitarian analysis) should not be divorced

⁸³ As I mentioned in the Introduction of the dissertation, Sam Harris offers arguments in support of this hypothesis in his well-known work *The End of Faith*.

⁸⁴ Mill, *Collected Works*, 405.

⁸⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 405-406.

from any of its consequential offspring, whether good or bad. Religion in itself might not necessitate holy wars, but, without religion, holy wars, by definition, would not be possible.

Mill also alleges that these nefarious forms of religion are declining in number. In characterizing the progress of religion up to his time, as well as his expectations for it thereafter, Mill claims that a “process of extirpation continually goes on: the immoral, or otherwise mischievous consequences which have been drawn from religion, are, one by one, abandoned, and, after having been long fought for as of its very essence, are discovered to be easily separable from it.”⁸⁶ This shouldn’t come as a surprise given Mill’s generally optimistic views regarding the evolution of our species as a whole, which are evident in the discussions of his “Religion of Humanity.” Unfortunately, experience does not seem to corroborate Mill’s enthusiasm, and, if anything, it seems to have only refuted it thus far. The conflicts plaguing the contemporary world are arguably just as religiously motivated as those in previous eras. While some might find this debatable, few would suggest that we are anywhere near the pinnacle of time Mill predicts, a time in which few evil corollaries remain tangible at all. The events of 9/11 obviously serve as a grim reminder of this unfortunate fact.

Mill also suggests that religious teachings provide immoral examples. For instance, he takes exception to the concept of hell, and elaborates on the difficulties associated with the recognition of an “object of highest worship, in a being who could make a Hell,” asking, “is it possible to adore such a one without a frightful distortion of the standard of right and wrong?”⁸⁷ The creator of such a hell seems too concerned with retribution for Mill’s tastes, and, more significantly, the punishment this creator metes out seems incommensurate with what even the

⁸⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 406.

⁸⁷ Mill, *Collected Works*, 424.

most heinous of criminals deserve for their earthly sins. I will expand on the difficulties related to hell in Section C of Part III.

Similarly, religious faith can yield moral difficulties. In *Fear and Trembling*, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard develops a conception of faith whereby it comes to reflect believing in something by virtue of the absurd. Believing in something by virtue of the absurd, in turn, indicates a lack of rational and moral justification for the substance of the belief (i.e. the belief is irrational or transrational). Hence, faith is not thought to be something that can be explained or understood; instead, Kierkegaard refers to it as a passion, as something that is more directly and personally felt. A “knight of faith,” in turn, is someone who has entered into a personal relationship with God and who demonstrates his faith by believing that, with God, all things are possible, including the absurd. The quintessential example of a knight of faith is Abraham from the Bible, and through the voice of the book’s pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard further develops his notion of faith by analyzing the circumstances regarding Abraham’s willingness to comply with God’s demand that he sacrifice his son Isaac. As a knight of faith, Abraham does not question or doubt God’s commands, but follows them with absolute obedience, placing his duty to God above all else, *including his ethical obligations to Isaac and the rest of humanity*. In the end, what Abraham believes is beyond comprehension and no amount of reflection will yield a rational or moral justification for it. For instance, there is no reason to believe that he will get his son back, and yet he continues to believe that he will nonetheless. What’s more, Abraham does not try to confront God’s demand on a rational level; he does not try to understand the demand. As de Silentio says, “Abraham had faith and did not doubt; he believed the preposterous.”⁸⁸ Similarly, the knight of faith generally “acknowledges

⁸⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 20.

the impossibility, and in the very same moment he believes the absurd.”⁸⁹ In sum, de Silentio suggests that knights of faith habitually form such beliefs, saying, “the movement of faith must continually be made by virtue of the absurd,”⁹⁰ which he reinforces with his depiction of an imaginary contemporary knight of faith who “does not do even the slightest thing except by virtue of the absurd.”⁹¹ While Kierkegaard’s conception of faith is certainly more nuanced than it is for most people, it still captures the general sense many have about it, insofar as it suggests that religious faith is something that need not—and, perhaps, cannot—be rationally or morally justified.

Kierkegaard seeks to protect faith from the shallow treatment he thinks it often receives (and, more particularly, the shallow treatment he thinks it receives from G.W.F. Hegel, whom much of his book is intended to rebut), thanks to which it is seen as something inferior to rational and moral justification. In fact, he suggests that faith represents a higher form of existence (it represents a higher telos) than one steered by the universal standards implicit in reason and morality, and that those few individuals who truly demonstrate faith should be praised for their greatness and their courage. It is precisely this point about faith that has always worried me. While Kierkegaard suggests that “the story about Abraham is remarkable in that it is always glorious no matter how poorly it is understood,”⁹² I feel that such praise is off the mark, and I am not as inclined to endorse the corresponding movement of faith or to praise those, such as Abraham, who make the movement—and for many of the reasons alluded to by Kierkegaard (or de Silentio) himself. As de Silentio suggests, “either Abraham was a murderer every minute or

⁸⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 47.

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 37.

⁹¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 40.

⁹² Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 28.

we stand before a paradox that is higher than all mediations.”⁹³ Granting that the religious sphere and the faith that represents it cannot be comprehended or understood in universal, ethical terms, why deem it higher and better on that account?⁹⁴ It seems to me that equating irrational belief with something praiseworthy is itself irrational and, more importantly for our purposes, potentially very harmful, in which case it does not seem wise to praise it as the highest passion. Besides, if it is, by definition, irrational, how can one ever try to *rationaly* elevate it above other passions? Worse yet, condoning such acts of faith could open up the proverbial can of worms, which de Silentio hints at when he asks, “is it possible to speak unreservedly about Abraham without running the risk that some individual will become unbalanced and do the same thing?”⁹⁵ Surely we do not want everyone acting on orders that they believe they have received from God. On May 11, 2003, a Texan woman named Deana Laney killed two of her sons by stoning them to death in their backyard, and she said that she did so because God commanded her to. A jury later acquitted her of all charges *by reason of insanity*. Is Deanna Laney really worthy of any kind of praise? Are there any observable moral differences between the cases of Abraham and Deanna Laney? In both cases, each believes he or she has been commanded by God to do something that seems clearly immoral and irrational. In the end, all I can say is that I do not

⁹³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 66.

⁹⁴ Of course, de Silentio insists that there is much more to the picture, and that Abraham did not just go merrily about his life on Earth effortlessly choosing to comply with God’s every demand. Instead, he focuses his readers’ attention on the fear and trembling, along with faith’s concomitant paradox, which Abraham must endure and which is precisely what de Silentio feels is often overlooked when it comes to the story of Abraham (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 28; 66). It is especially this fear and trembling and this solitary confrontation with the paradox of faith that Kierkegaard lauds—it is this that he thinks elevates Abraham to greatness in the first place. It is not easy to ignore the pull of universal norms and ethical standards, but Abraham is able to overcome his anxiety because he has faith. Because of the great difficulty de Silentio associates with having to disregard these rational norms and standards (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 34), and because the knight of faith must endure a lonely, solitary existence (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 72), he deems the knight of faith especially courageous and worthy of admiration, claiming that “no one has the right to lead others to believe that faith is something inferior or that it is an easy matter, since on the contrary it is the greatest and most difficult of all” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 52). Ultimately, he concludes that faith is not something inferior “but that it is the highest, also that it is dishonest of philosophy to give something else in its place and disparage faith” (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 33).

⁹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 31.

understand this kind of higher telos, nor have I felt it. Like de Silentio himself, “I cannot make the movement of faith, I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd;”⁹⁶ nor, more importantly, do I think that doing so is the right thing to do.

D. Empirical Research

Since Mill’s time, the relationship between religion and morality has been the subject of extensive empirical research, and I want to discuss some of the relevant findings before moving on to Mill’s analysis of religion’s individual utility. On the whole, the empirical research seems to corroborate much of what Mill says insofar as it fails to substantiate a positive correlation between religion and morality. In fact, the relevant research fails to yield any sort of a consensus regarding the true nature of the relationship between religion and morality. While some research hints at a positive correlation between the two, much of the research suggests that there is no positive correlation between them, or that there is even a negative correlation between them (i.e. as religiosity increases, moral behavior decreases). I now turn to a brief discussion of some of the research demonstrating the nebulous nature of the relationship between religion and morality.

Evolutionary biologist Marc Hauser and philosopher Peter Singer suggest the following in a short article they coauthored together called “Godless Morality”: “atheists and agnostics do not behave less morally than religious believers, even if their virtuous acts are mediated by different principles. They often have as strong and sound a sense of right and wrong as anyone, including involvement in movements to abolish slavery and contribute to relief efforts associated

⁹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 34.

with human suffering.”^{97, 98} It is not hard to imagine Mill saying something similar to this. In the same vein as Mill, the authors present difficulties associated with the thesis that religion is morally advantageous. Instead of rooting morality essentially and significantly in religion, Hauser and Singer make a case for grounding it in evolution. One reason they cite in support of their evolutionary foundation for moral behavior, which they also believe undermines the religious foundation, is the universal nature of certain basic moral principles. They write: “a...difficulty for the view that morality has its origin in religion is that despite the sharp doctrinal differences between the world’s major religions, and for that matter cultures like ancient China in which religion has been less significant than philosophical outlooks like Confucianism, some elements of morality seem to be universal.”⁹⁹ Hauser and Singer created what they call a “web-based moral sense test” in an effort to demonstrate the universal nature of our moral sensibilities. This test presents the following three moral dilemmas and instructs the test-taker to fill in the blanks with morally “obligatory,” “permissible,” or “forbidden”:

1. A runaway trolley is about to run over five people walking on the tracks. A railroad worker is standing next to a switch that can turn the trolley onto a side track, killing one person, but allowing the five to survive. Flipping the switch is _____.
2. You pass by a small child drowning in a shallow pond and you are the only one around. If you pick up the child, she will survive and your pants will be ruined. Picking up the child is _____.
3. Five people have just been rushed into a hospital in critical care, each requiring an organ to survive. There is not enough time to request organs from outside the hospital. There is, however, a healthy person in the

⁹⁷ Marc Hauser and Peter Singer, “Godless Morality,” *project-syndicate.org*, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hausersinger1/English> (accessed 12 Nov. 2011).

⁹⁸ The authors go even further, suggesting, “the converse is also true: religion has led people to commit a long litany of horrendous crimes, from God’s command to Moses to slaughter the Midianites, men, women, boys and non-virginal girls, through the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, innumerable conflicts between Sunni and Shiite Moslems, and terrorists who blow themselves up in the confident belief that they are going straight to paradise” (Hauser and Singer, *Godless Morality*).

⁹⁹ Hauser and Singer, *Godless Morality*.

hospital's waiting room. If the surgeon takes this person's organs, he will die but the five in critical care will survive. Taking the healthy person's organs is _____.¹⁰⁰

They reveal that a significant proportion of the 1,500 subjects who responded from around the world responded with “permissible,” “obligatory,” and “forbidden,” in that order. They point out that “there were no statistically significant differences between subjects with or without religious backgrounds, with approximately 90% of subjects saying that it is permissible to flip the switch on the boxcar, 97% saying that it is obligatory to rescue the baby, and 97% saying that [it] is forbidden to remove the healthy man's organs.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, they add that “when asked to justify why some cases are permissible and others forbidden...those with a religious background are as clueless or incoherent as atheists.”¹⁰² They argue that, “on the view that morality is God's word, atheists should judge these cases differently from people with religious background and beliefs, and when asked to justify their responses, should bring forward different explanations. For example, since atheists lack a moral compass, they should go with pure self-interest, and walk by the drowning baby.”¹⁰³ Since atheists do not, as it turns out, answer any differently and turn out to be just as selfless, the authors infer that morality is more universal in nature than those suggesting that religion is morally advantageous would lead us to believe. Hauser's and Singer's findings are far from conclusive, especially given the limitations of their study, most notably, its non-experimental nature (consider, for example, its self-selected sample) and the small number of moral dilemmas they incorporate.

¹⁰⁰ Hauser and Singer, *Godless Morality*.

¹⁰¹ Hauser and Singer, *Godless Morality*.

¹⁰² Hauser and Singer, *Godless Morality*.

¹⁰³ Hauser and Singer, *Godless Morality*.

However, their findings are supported by other researchers. For example, Russell Middleton and Snell Putney found that, when it comes to religious and skeptical individuals, “the two groups do not differ in the degree to which they believe in elements of common social morality.”¹⁰⁴ In their research, Middleton and Putney emphasize a distinction between two kinds of ethical standards, “the ascetic” and “the social,” which they argue underlies their findings (as well as most findings pertaining to the relationship under investigation). The impetus for their doing so lies in their observation of something I have already pointed out: empirical investigations into the relationship between religion and morality have yielded conflicting results, and there is anything but a consensus among experts regarding the issue. On this point, they write, “empirical studies such as the classic by Hartshorne and May or others...have failed to find relationships between measures of religiosity and ethical behavior, nondelinquency, humanitarianism, and altruism. In contrast, several studies have found the religious less likely than the non-religious to violate certain moral standards.”¹⁰⁵ They believe that their distinction helps explain the contrast, and suggest that “this particular confusion, and much of the confusion surrounding the relation between religion and morality, derive from failure to distinguish two different types of ethical standards—the ascetic and the social.”¹⁰⁶ Social standards are said to prohibit “actions which in general are harmful to the social group,” and they predict that such standards are “shared by the religious and the nonreligious alike as a part of a general social ideology.”¹⁰⁷ By contrast, they characterize ascetic standards as stemming “primarily from an ascetic religious tradition,” and suggest that, while “violations of ascetic standards may be held

¹⁰⁴ Russell Middleton and Snell Putney, “Religion, Normative Standards, and Behavior,” *Sociometry*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Jun., 1962), 141.

¹⁰⁵ Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 142.

¹⁰⁶ Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 142.

¹⁰⁷ Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 142.

spiritually harmful to the perpetrator...such violations are usually not directly or obviously harmful to the social group—at least in moderation.”¹⁰⁸ They offer specific examples of both kinds of standards, which they then use in their research; examples of anti-ascetic actions “included gambling for money on sports events, gambling for money at cards or dice, smoking, nonmarital heavy petting, nonmarital sexual intercourse, intentionally looking at pornographic pictures, and drinking alcoholic beverages except for religious purposes,” while examples of antisocial actions included “stealing towels, spoons, or other articles from hotels, motels, and restaurants; striking another person in anger (except in self defense); lying to a teacher concerning the reason for missing class or failing to complete an assignment; theft from an individual (intentionally taking articles belonging to other individuals); cheating on examinations; and deliberately placing unjust blame on another person for something that was really one’s own fault.”¹⁰⁹ Middleton and Putney think that in instances where researchers established no positive correlation between religion and moral behavior social standards were the primary criteria used by the researchers, whereas in cases where a positive correlation was supported ascetic standards were involved. As they put it, “we hypothesize that differences in behavior between the religious and the nonreligious are confined to specific areas and are a product of differences in standards rather than of differential upholding of standards.”¹¹⁰

As it turns out, this is exactly what they find to be the case in their own study. They make several interesting discoveries, noting, for example, that the non-religious do not engage in violations of social standards any more than the religious do. In fact, they found that the non-religious violate them less often (although this finding was not statistically significant at the .05

¹⁰⁸ Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 143.

¹⁰⁹ Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 143-144.

¹¹⁰ Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 143.

level). Moreover, they found that the religious are less likely to engage in violations of ascetic standards, but that they are also more likely to subscribe to them in the first place. Finally, they observed that the behavior of the non-religious matches their beliefs and standards just as much as the behavior of the religious matches theirs; that is, they are equally likely to live up to their own ethical standards, whatever those standards may be. Hence, the non-religious “are less likely to regard anti-ascetic actions as wrong, but when they do regard them as wrong, they are no more likely than believers to engage in them.”¹¹¹ As for upholding the social standards one believes in, they found that “believers violate their social convictions more often than skeptics.”¹¹² It is also worth noting that “despite specific differences the same overall picture emerges regardless of the measure of religiosity utilized.”^{113, 114} Supporting the case that Hauser and Singer make, as well as Mill’s case, Middleton and Putney found that, “with regard to actions which have an obvious harmful impact on society, there is little or no apparent difference between the religious and the irreligious in either normative standards or behavior,” and this leads them to conclude “that the religious and the nonreligious in our society share the same basic social values and are about equally likely to live up to them.”¹¹⁵

As I have indicated, some research actually indicates that religion is negatively correlated with moral behavior. In his interesting article, “Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies,” Gregory S. Paul examines the relationship between religiosity, secularism, and social welfare,

¹¹¹ Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 148.

¹¹² Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 149.

¹¹³ Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 150.

¹¹⁴ They employed three measures of religiosity: 1) ideological (believers vs. atheists/agnostics/deists), 2) ritualistic (attend church once every two weeks vs. occasionally or never), and 3) intensity (agreement or disagreement with the statement “religion is one of the most important things in my life”) (Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 144).

¹¹⁵ Middleton and Putney, *Religion*, 151.

and he sets out to provide “a quantitative cross-national analysis” of their interaction, which he suggests “is feasible because a large body of survey and census data on rates of religiosity, secularization, and societal indicators has become available in the prosperous developed democracies including the United States.”¹¹⁶ Paul’s work is concerned first and foremost with the thesis that religiosity is socially beneficial. Expanding on what this thesis entails, he writes, “in broad terms the hypothesis that popular religiosity is socially beneficial holds that high rates of belief in a creator, as well as worship, prayer and other aspects of religious practice, correlate with lowering rates of lethal violence, suicide, non-monogamous sexual activity, and abortion, as well as improved physical health.”¹¹⁷ One important limitation regarding this kind of research, which he points out, is that religious belief and practice “have been most extensively and reliably surveyed in the prosperous developed democracies” and “similar data is often lacking for second and third world nations, or is less reliable.”¹¹⁸ Furthermore, I should note, as he does, that the data he works with is “from the 1990s, most from the middle and latter half of the decade, or the early 2000s,” and it chiefly looks at “Bible literalism and frequency of prayer and service attendance, as well as absolute belief in a creator, in order to examine religiosity in terms of ardency, conservatism, and activities.”¹¹⁹

Interestingly, he prefaces his results by noting that the “United States is the only prosperous first world nation to retain rates of religiosity otherwise limited to the second and third worlds (Bishop; PEW).”¹²⁰ This is especially worth noting after considering the results of Paul’s analysis, since he finds that the U.S. is often unique (among first world nations) in terms

¹¹⁶ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 1.

¹¹⁷ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 6.

¹¹⁸ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 9.

¹¹⁹ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 10.

¹²⁰ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 13.

of its moral characteristics. For instance, he discovers that “the U.S. is the only prosperous democracy that retains high homicide rates,”¹²¹ and that the United States experiences higher rates of certain STDs (e.g. it suffers “uniquely high adolescent and adult syphilis infection rates”¹²²). Also, he finds that “early adolescent pregnancy and birth have dropped in the developed democracies (Abma et al.; Singh and Darroch), but rates are two to dozens of times higher in the U.S. where the decline has been more modest.”¹²³ He finds results that are consistent with these global findings when he analyzes religiosity, secularity, and morality within the borders of the United States, writing that “there is evidence that within the U.S. strong disparities in religious belief versus acceptance of evolution are correlated with similarly varying rates of societal dysfunction, the strongly theistic, anti-evolution south and mid-west having markedly worse homicide, mortality, STD, youth pregnancy, marital and related problems than the northeast where societal conditions, secularization, and acceptance of evolution approach European norms (Aral and Holmes; Beeghley, Doyle, 2002).”¹²⁴ More generally, Paul found that “life spans tend to decrease as rates of religiosity rise,”¹²⁵ and he also notes that “increasing adolescent abortion rates show positive correlation with increasing belief and worship of a creator, and negative correlation with increasing non-theism and acceptance of evolution; again rates are uniquely high in the U.S.,” which leads him to conclude that “claims that secular cultures aggravate abortion rates (John Paul II) are therefore contradicted by the quantitative data.”¹²⁶ In sum, “higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion

¹²¹ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 15.

¹²² Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 16.

¹²³ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 16.

¹²⁴ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 20.

¹²⁵ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 15.

¹²⁶ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 16.

in the prosperous democracies.”¹²⁷ Given the high degree of religiosity in the U.S., “if the data showed that the U.S. enjoyed higher rates of societal health than the more secular, pro-evolution democracies, then the opinion that popular belief in a creator is strongly beneficial to national cultures would be supported.”¹²⁸ However, as I have indicated, Paul’s findings fail to show this, and he notes that, to the contrary, “the most theistic prosperous democracy, the U.S., is exceptional...the United States is almost always the most dysfunctional of the developed democracies, sometimes spectacularly so, and almost always scores poorly.”¹²⁹ What’s more, “the populations of secular democracies are clearly able to govern themselves and maintain societal cohesion” and, thus, “the widely held fear that a Godless citizenry must experience societal disaster is therefore refuted.”¹³⁰ Paul’s findings are clearly consistent with what Mill says.

I do not mean to suggest that all of the empirical research fails to support the thesis that religion elicits moral benefits—this is by no means the case. Indeed, some research indicates that the religious are more likely to subscribe to moral standards and beliefs. Consider a study conducted by Marijke ter Voert, Albert Felling, and Jan Peters, which suggests that the non-religious embrace more of a “self-interest morality” and are less inclined to view, for example, honesty as a duty.¹³¹ Similarly, in a recent article published in *Evolution and Human Behavior*, Quentin D. Atkinson and Pierrick Bourrat discuss the results of their analysis of cross-cultural survey data from 87 countries, where, among other things, they find that both (1) belief in God and (2) belief in heaven and hell are positively correlated to belief in the unjustifiability of a host

¹²⁷ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 18.

¹²⁸ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 19.

¹²⁹ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 18.

¹³⁰ Paul, *Cross-National Correlations*, Paragraph 19.

¹³¹ Marijke ter Voert, Albert Felling and Jan Peters, “The Effect of Religion on Self-Interest Morality,” *Review of Religious Research*, vol. 35, no. 4 (Jun., 1994), 302-323.

of moral transgressions, including cheating on taxes, adultery, speeding, and buying stolen goods.¹³² One limitation with respect to these two studies is that they only pertain to moral *beliefs*, and not to moral *action*. It is one thing to say and believe that telling the truth is a moral duty, it is quite another to actually tell the truth.

However, some researchers have found that, as religiosity increases, moral behavior does, in fact, increase. Take, for example, an experiment conducted by James M. Bloodgood, William H. Turnley, and Peter Mudrack in which they presented subjects with the opportunity to increase their chances of winning money by untruthfully reporting their success on a word search task (the more words subjects reported finding, the greater their prospects for financial gain). What they found was that higher religiosity (which they measured by participation in religious activities) was a predictor of more honest reporting of the number of words found while performing the task.¹³³ Likewise, Kent R. Kerley, Todd L. Matthews, and Troy C. Blanchard did an analysis of survey data collected from inmates at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, Mississippi (which is one of the largest prisons in the United States) and discovered that inmates who claimed to be religious were less likely to argue with other inmates and less likely to fight with other inmates.¹³⁴ Only 53.1% of prisoners who believed in a higher power reported arguing once or more per month, compared with 73.9% of prisoners who did not; 18.5% of prisoners who believed in a higher power reported fighting once or more per month, as opposed to 26.5% of those who did not.¹³⁵ The findings in these last two studies suggest that

¹³² Quentin D. Atkinson and Pierrick Bourrat, "Beliefs about God, the afterlife and morality support the role of supernatural policing in human cooperation," *Evolution and Human Behavior*, vol. 32, issue 1 (2011), 41-49.

¹³³ James M. Bloodgood, William H. Turnley and Peter Mudrack, "The Influence of Ethics Instruction, Religiosity, and Intelligence on Cheating Behavior," *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 82, issue 3 (2008), 557-571.

¹³⁴ Kent R. Kerley, Todd L. Matthews and Troy C. Blanchard, "Religiosity, Religious Participation, and Negative Prison Behaviors," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Dec., 2005), 443-457.

¹³⁵ Kerley, Matthews and Blanchard, *Negative Prison Behaviors*, 450.

religious belief makes a positive difference with regard to moral behavior, not just with regard to moral beliefs and standards. Therefore, these findings conflict with the research I referenced earlier (e.g. Middleton's and Putney's), and, as I've said before, an examination of the empirical research renders the true nature of the relationship between religion and morality anything but clear. In this section, I have tried to do two things: 1) point out that, since Mill's own time, we have had the opportunity to empirically test the thesis that religion is morally advantageous and 2) show that research has thus far failed to substantiate this thesis, as indicated by the ample studies that call into question the positive influence of religion on morality. For every study I have come across that suggests a positive influence (like those just mentioned), there's at least one that suggests a neutral or negative influence (like those mentioned earlier).

III. Religion and Personal Happiness

A. The Case for Supernatural Religions As a Source of Personal Happiness

After spending the first part of his essay trying to show that religion has very little social utility, Mill moves on to consider whether it nevertheless proves useful for individuals. He begins this portion of his analysis by investigating the psychological nature of religious belief, speculating about its origin and evolution in the process. Subsequently, he demarcates two psychological benefits that supernatural religions offer individuals, and then questions whether these religions are nonetheless necessary and/or optimal for securing such benefits. Mill ultimately argues that supernatural religions are neither necessary nor optimal for acquiring these benefits, and, in doing so, he builds a case for his alternative, the "Religion of Humanity." In this part of the chapter, I delve into each of these aspects of his analysis, beginning with an

account of why Mill believes that supernatural religion can aid individuals in their pursuit of happiness (Section A) and concluding with accounts of why he thinks it is nonetheless not necessary (Section B) or optimal (Section C) for doing so.

Mill begins by asking “what it is in human nature which causes it to require a religion; what wants of the human mind religion supplies, and what qualities it develops.”¹³⁶ Mill answers that religion originated with belief in God, which, according to him, could be universally and “rationally explained from the spontaneous tendency of the mind to attribute life and volition, similar to what it feels in itself, to all natural objects and phenomena which appear to be self-moving.”¹³⁷ Then, after increased recognition of universal patterns and the multitude of scientific laws underlying the universe, “the transition was made to supposing that the object present to the senses was inanimate, but was the creature and instrument of an invisible being with a form and organs similar to the human.”¹³⁸ With this, Mill explains how religion evolved to its modern day form; monotheistic religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam posit this kind of anthropomorphic deity.

Having characterized the origin and evolution of religious belief, Mill proceeds to try to explain its longevity. One reason why Mill thinks religion has been such a mainstay throughout human history is because it satiates our existential curiosity. Accordingly, he alludes to “the small limits of man’s certain knowledge, and the boundlessness of his desire to know.”¹³⁹ Our short-lived existence on Earth is a mystery that we all naturally, at one time or another, wish to “solve,” and Mill claims that religion, like poetry, helps satisfy this wish insofar as it allows us to entertain “ideal conceptions grander and more beautiful than we see realized in the prose of

¹³⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 418.

¹³⁷ Mill, *Collected Works*, 418.

¹³⁸ Mill, *Collected Works*, 418.

¹³⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 418.

human life.”¹⁴⁰ As a result, religion is thought to assuage the existential anxiety that we find accompanying our finite knowledge and existence. Like poetry, religion allows us to imagine greater possibilities, and to escape the everyday malaise of our earthly life.

However, religion is distinguished from poetry in that it “is the product of the craving to know whether these imaginative conceptions have realities answering to them in some other world than ours,” and, as opposed to poetry, religion entails “positive belief and expectation” that these ideal ruminations bear some truth.¹⁴¹ Subsequently, in addition to satisfying existential curiosity, Mill hints at another reason why supernatural religion has been so prominent throughout history: it offers a sense of redemption, of atonement for the hardships we suffer here on Earth, by way of its supernatural ideals. As Mill suggests, “so long as earthly life is full of sufferings, so long there will be need of consolations, which the hope of heaven affords to the selfish, the love of God to the tender and grateful.”¹⁴² In the afterlife promised by many religions, “each hopes to find the good which he has failed to find on earth.”¹⁴³ There is no question that Mill thinks these desires (for existential answers and for a sense of atonement) inherent in our human nature prove to be powerful psychological forces, which, in turn, inspire and explain the religious belief we find to be so widespread. Religions are thought to be beneficial for individuals insofar as they satisfy these psychological desires.¹⁴⁴

After offering this psychological analysis of religious belief, wherein he explicates how religion fulfills these two basic desires, Mill then explicitly speaks to its usefulness for individuals. He clearly suggests that religion is beneficial for individuals, writing, “the value,

¹⁴⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 419.

¹⁴¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 419.

¹⁴² Mill, *Collected Works*, 419.

¹⁴³ Mill, *Collected Works*, 419.

¹⁴⁴ As we will see in Chapter 3, this is one of James’s central tenets in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

therefore, of religion to the individual, both in the past and present, as a source of personal satisfaction and of elevated feelings, is not to be disputed.”¹⁴⁵ Hence, by satisfying the psychological needs of individuals, religion is thought to make them happier. However, immediately after acknowledging that supernatural religions can provide personal satisfaction by way of these exalted feelings, Mill reveals the rub: “it has still to be considered, whether in order to obtain this good, it is necessary to travel beyond the boundaries of the world which we inhabit.”¹⁴⁶ Granting that supernatural religions yield this benefit, Mill questions whether they are 1) *necessary* and 2) *optimal* for the acquisition of it. To this end, he establishes the existence of other alternatives (most notably, his own Religion of Humanity), and, thus, he argues that these supernatural religions are not necessary for the sake of personal happiness—that is, that there are other means by which to satisfy our psychological needs and, more generally, to make us happy. Then, he expounds on the detriments of supernatural religions, which suggests that they are not optimal for such purposes, either. I now consider each of these points in more detail.

B. Mill’s Case for Why Supernatural Religions Are Not Necessary for Securing Personal Happiness

First, Mill argues that supernatural religion is not necessary for personal happiness or, more specifically, the satisfaction of the particular psychological desires it is associated with. He points out that societies have survived and thrived without being significantly influenced by—or, in some cases, being entirely devoid of—supernatural beliefs. “History,” he writes, “so far as we

¹⁴⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 419-420.

¹⁴⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 420.

know it, bears out the opinion, that mankind can perfectly well do without the belief in a heaven.”¹⁴⁷ Consider, once more, the case of the ancient Greeks, who largely functioned without any significant consideration of such belief.¹⁴⁸ Despite this, “we neither find that the Greeks enjoyed life less, nor feared death more, than other people.”¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Mill thinks that many Buddhist societies provide us with more proof that it is possible for human beings to subsist and be happy without supernatural beliefs, insofar as he argues that the ultimate reward Buddhism offers is not another life in the hereafter, but, rather, cessation of existence altogether.¹⁵⁰

Moreover, Mill argues that the psychological needs satisfied by supernatural religions can be fulfilled by other means. Specifically, he believes earthly substitutes can accomplish the same effects. In support of this point, he cites two specific examples: patriotism and his own Religion of Humanity. Mill argues that love of one’s country is “sufficient to inspire large masses and long successions of mankind with an enthusiasm capable of ruling the conduct, and colouring the whole life.”¹⁵¹ In support of this conclusion, Mill points to the Romans’ historical allegiance to Rome, which he characterizes as follows:

Rome was to the entire Roman people, for many generations as much a religion as Jehovah was to the Jews; nay, much more, for they never fell off from their worship as the Jews did from theirs. And the Romans, otherwise a selfish people, with no very remarkable faculties of any kind except the purely practical, derived nevertheless from this one idea a certain greatness of soul, which manifests itself in all their history where that idea is concerned and nowhere else, and has earned for them the large share of admiration, in other respects not at all deserved, which has been felt for them by most noble-minded persons from that time to this.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Mill, *Collected Works*, 427.

¹⁴⁸ On this point, Mill says: “the Greeks had anything but a tempting idea of a future state” (Mill, *Collected Works*, 427). As evidence, he cites Homer’s *Odyssey*, wherein Achilles suggests that he would sooner be a slave on Earth than be a king in the afterlife.

¹⁴⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 427.

¹⁵⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 427.

¹⁵¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 421.

¹⁵² Mill, *Collected Works*, 421.

Mill himself offers a substitute for supernatural religions in the form of his “Religion of Humanity.” Mill’s own Religion of Humanity is no doubt inspired by Auguste Comte, who was the first to construct a “religion of humanity” and a thinker whom Mill greatly admired and became close friends with. Reflecting on their relationship, Carr suggests that “Mill liked Comte’s religion not primarily because it glorified the human race, but because it was a religion without a god”¹⁵³ and he points out that Mill, in return, “outlined to Comte a complete strategy for the introduction of atheism into England.”¹⁵⁴ Mill’s Religion of Humanity redirects the exalted feelings that would otherwise be directed towards an afterlife (as they are in the case of supernatural religions) onto the entire duration of human existence and the prospects of our human species. Like patriotism, Mill’s Religion of Humanity draws attention to elements of our earthly life, and not to a future existence. As Carr suggests, “what he wanted still was a religion which instead of carrying one beyond the physical world, derived its psychological power from an idealization of earthly life.”¹⁵⁵ In juxtaposition with patriotism, however, his Religion of Humanity enlarges the scope of our earthly concern, encouraging not love of one’s country but love of one’s species. At first, this might sound like a tall order, considering the incessant worldly conflicts that have marred humankind throughout history. However, Mill counters by pointing out that “if...persons could be trained, as we see they were, not only to believe in theory that the good of their country was an object to which all others ought to yield, but to feel this practically as the grand duty of life, so also may they be made to feel the same absolute obligation towards the universal good.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, Mill argues that we can infer that his Religion of Humanity is possible from the fact that patriotism has proven to be effective. What’s more,

¹⁵³ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 485.

¹⁵⁴ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 484.

¹⁵⁵ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 489.

¹⁵⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 421.

the psychological desires satisfied by supernatural religions are satisfied by the Religion of Humanity “in as eminent a degree, and in as high a sense, as by the supernatural religions even in their best manifestations, and far more so than in any of their others.”¹⁵⁷ Ultimately, Mill remains convinced that all are capable of “identifying their feelings with the entire life of the human race,”¹⁵⁸ and that the Religion of Humanity is “capable of fulfilling every important function of religion.”¹⁵⁹

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud makes similar remarks in his discussions regarding the import of science, implying that it, too, might help serve our purposes here. According to Freud, when confronted with inevitable restrictions on his or her pleasure, the civilized individual must succumb to what Freud identifies as the “reality principle,” and he or she is forced to modify his or her claim to happiness as a result.¹⁶⁰ In Freud’s estimation, our most profitable response to this reality principle is to become “a member of the human community” and, “with the help of a technique guided by science,”¹⁶¹ collectively attempt to subjugate nature for the benefit of each individual,¹⁶² thereby aspiring to attain the optimal amount of pleasure possible given the reality of the situation. In fact, through this process of subjugation (of nature), the individual will “almost become a God himself.”¹⁶³ Anticipating the objection that, despite the advances of science, many of us are still not happy, Freud cites specific scientific accomplishments—railway, telephone, longer life, etc.¹⁶⁴—and urges his reader to reflect on the enhancements and joys these accomplishments have nevertheless made

¹⁵⁷ Mill, *Collected Works*, 422.

¹⁵⁸ Mill, *Collected Works*, 420.

¹⁵⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 422.

¹⁶⁰ Freud, *Civilization*, 26.

¹⁶¹ Freud, *Civilization*, 27.

¹⁶² This sounds very reminiscent of Mill—recall, for instance, the quotation from Mill’s *Nature* cited early in Part I.

¹⁶³ Freud, *Civilization*, 44.

¹⁶⁴ Freud, *Civilization*, 40.

possible. Scientific and technological advancements, Freud writes, “are an actual fulfillment of every—or almost every—fairy-tale wish.”¹⁶⁵ I will say much more about the relationship between religion and science, and how this relationship affects considerations of the utility of religion, in Chapter 2, where I outline Nietzsche’s thoughts on these issues.

C. Mill’s Case for Why Supernatural Religions Are Not Optimal for Securing Personal Happiness

For the foregoing reasons, Mill believes we ought to consider the Religion of Humanity a viable—and, perhaps, preferable—alternative to supernatural religions. And, in fact, Mill does think that his Religion of Humanity is preferable, claiming that it “is not only capable of fulfilling these functions, but would fulfil them better than any form whatever of supernaturalism.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, Mill is convinced that his Religion of Humanity, along with its corresponding ideal of humanity, can not only elicit the same benefits garnered by supernatural religions, but can do so more optimally. He cites several reasons for believing this to be the case, which I will explicate in the following section.

To begin with, recall the moral difficulties associated with supernatural religions, which I elaborated on in Section C of Part II. Consider, for example, the self-interested nature of the behavior motivated by fear of hell and hope for heaven. By contrast, Mill points out that his Religion of Humanity is disinterested insofar as its ascendancy does not depend on the fear of eternal damnation or the hope for eternal reward.¹⁶⁷ As Lou Matz suggests, “morally, it [the Religion of Humanity] is disinterested, unlike vulgar Christianity which easily tempts Christians

¹⁶⁵ Freud, *Civilization*, 44.

¹⁶⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 422.

¹⁶⁷ Mill, *Collected Works*, 421.

to regard moral action as a means to personal salvation.”¹⁶⁸ What’s more, while Mill’s ideal of humanity does not depend on any hope of a reward, it still offers a reward nonetheless: namely, “the approbation, in this [world], of those whom we respect, and ideally of all those, dead or living, whom we admire or venerate.”¹⁶⁹ Insofar as some subscribing to supernatural religions profess to “worship without any perversion of the moral sentiments,” Mill maintains that they do so “by fixing the attention exclusively on what is beautiful and beneficent” and ignore the base and vile aspects of these religions, which reflects “a torpid and inactive state of the speculative faculties.”¹⁷⁰ Indeed, Mill concludes that “it is an immense abatement from the worth of the old religions as means of elevating and improving human character, that it is nearly, if not quite impossible for them to produce their best moral effects, unless we suppose a certain torpidity, if not positive twist in the intellectual faculties.”¹⁷¹

Speaking of these intellectual faculties, Mill thinks that his Religion of Humanity avoids a number of intellectual difficulties associated with supernatural religions. One gets the sense that, for Mill, supernatural religions are frequently at odds with objective considerations of truth.¹⁷² In this vein, Carr suggests that, “assuming that free discussion was the most excellent means of getting at the truth on any public issue, Mill was puzzled about the denial of this method of inquiry to religion.”¹⁷³ Mill, however, does hint at an explanation for this kind of denial in the *Utility of Religion*, suggesting that “many, again, having observed in others or experienced in themselves elevated feelings which they imagine incapable of emanating from any other sources than religion, have an honest aversion to anything tending, as they think, to dry

¹⁶⁸ Matz, *Religious Illusion*, 144.

¹⁶⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 421.

¹⁷⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 425.

¹⁷¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 423.

¹⁷² As we will see in Chapter 2, this is also a major theme in Nietzsche’s *The Anti-Christ*.

¹⁷³ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 479.

up the fountain of such feelings.”¹⁷⁴ Similarly, this is why they also “either dislike and disparage all philosophy, or addict themselves with intolerant zeal to those forms of it in which intuition usurps the place of evidence, and internal feeling is made the test of objective truth.”¹⁷⁵ As a result of the intellectual difficulties involved, Mill suggests that “it is time to consider, more impartially and therefore more deliberately than is usually done, whether all this straining to prop up beliefs which require so great an expense of intellectual toll and ingenuity to keep them standing, yields any sufficient return in human well being.”¹⁷⁶ I briefly mentioned in Section C of Part II how the common conception of faith, whereby it comes to mean believing something despite a lack of evidence or reason, or even despite contrary evidence or reason, yields moral difficulties; it also presents an intellectual difficulty insofar as it is essentially irrational. I now turn to some other specific examples of the intellectual difficulties Mill is referring to.

Consider, first, the notorious “problem of evil,” which has been widely discussed throughout the history of theology and philosophy. Many, including Mill, suggest that the problem of evil poses a problem for those who subscribe to supernatural religions because it doesn’t seem logically possible to reconcile the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and benevolent God (which is the kind of God most often, although certainly not always, embraced by such religions) with the abundant existence of evil in the world. Why would an all-loving God permit unspeakable evils to transpire at all, not to mention at the rate in which we actually find them happening, provided such a God has the power to prevent them? Thus, on the face of it, the existence of evil does not seem consistent with the existence of this kind of God.¹⁷⁷ In

¹⁷⁴ Mill, *Collected Works*, 404.

¹⁷⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 404.

¹⁷⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 404.

¹⁷⁷ To be sure, many have attempted to solve the problem. Some common solutions to the problem are: 1) we need the contrast between good and evil in order to have any appreciation or recognition of the good in the first place; 2) evil is an unfortunate consequence of the free will God has granted us; and 3) we can’t be expected to understand

describing the views Mill articulates in *Three Essays on Religion*, Carr suggests that “Mill was more impressed by nature’s cruelty than by its beneficence,” and that, “as Mill saw it, Nature was not simply amoral, but positively immoral.”^{178, 179} Ultimately, Mill argues, “it is impossible that any one who habitually thinks, and who is unable to blunt his inquiring intellect by sophistry, should be able without misgiving to go on ascribing absolute perfection to the author and ruler of so clumsily made and capriciously governed a creation as this planet and the life of its inhabitants.”^{180, 181}

Consider, further, the problem of hell. Remember that the effectiveness of religion as an enforcer of morality is often thought to depend on the belief that there will be eternal rewards and punishments assigned for our earthly behavior. Accordingly, either God is thought to have created heaven and hell (or to enforce similar consequences in a future life), in which case religion can be thought to act as a kind of enforcer of morality, or God is not thought to have done so, in which case religion no longer inspires moral behavior by way of such eternal threats. In the first scenario, we encounter an intellectual difficulty associated with believing in and emulating a God who creates a hell, for reasons I already mentioned in Section C of Part II. In the second scenario, much of the moral incentive—as well as the general social utility—traditionally associated with religions is lost.

everything God does given our limited intelligence, and, for all we know, apparent evils might prove necessary in God’s greater plan.

¹⁷⁸ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 486.

¹⁷⁹ Carr continues: “Were not all the arts of life, and even civilization itself, he asked, direct infringements on the natural order and hence admissions of nature’s imperfections?” (Carr, *Religious Thought*, 486).

¹⁸⁰ Mill, *Collected Works*, 423.

¹⁸¹ I should note that Mill does acknowledge one form of belief in the supernatural that “stands wholly clear both of intellectual contradiction and of moral obliquity” (Mill, *Collected Works*, 425)—namely, the one that abstains from insisting on an omnipotent creator, and that does not assign the evils present in this world to his doing. However, Mill suggests that such belief still rests on shallow evidence. More importantly for our purposes, in this case we are talking about a God that does not resemble the kind of God implicit in most of the religions we encounter, in which case it has little effect on a utility calculation associated with how religion actually affects individuals and society.

One might suggest that the idea of hell is intellectually sustainable by way of the notion of divine grace, thanks to which our earthly sins and moral errors are forgiven by God. However, here I argue that we are also faced with an intellectual difficulty. More specifically, there are problems associated with revelation and the exclusive nature of divine grace. Either God impartially offers such grace to all of us, or God does so selectively. In the first scenario, hell seems bankrupt insofar as it is, in a sense, an empty threat (since we are all to be saved by the grace of God in the end, regardless of whether we behave morally), in which case it loses its force as a moral deterrent. In the second scenario, we must face the intellectual difficulties associated with the notion of a God who is no longer impartial, and are left wondering, with Mill, why “it is, that so precious a gift, bestowed on a few, should have been withheld from the many” when “it would have cost the Divine Giver as little to have vouchsafed to all, as to have bestowed by special grace upon a favoured minority.”¹⁸² What’s more, he considers this to be proof of “one moral contradiction inseparable from every form of Christianity, which no ingenuity can resolve, and no sophistry explain away.”¹⁸³

Mill does acknowledge one apparent advantage of supernatural religions over his Religion of Humanity: the hope produced by the prospects of an afterlife that they promise. Along these lines, he writes that the “one advantage, such as it is, the supernatural religions must always possess over the Religion of Humanity” is “the prospect they hold out to the individual of a life after death.”¹⁸⁴ In fact, Carr points out that, in a series of articles Mill published in a paper in the 1820s (i.e. much earlier than when *Utility of Religion* was written), he actually argued that the fact that “atheism excludes us from the blessings of a future life should surely be a sufficient

¹⁸² Mill, *Collected Works*, 424.

¹⁸³ Mill, *Collected Works*, 424.

¹⁸⁴ Mill, *Collected Works*, 426.

reason...to induce every reasonable man to reject it.”¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, Carr adds that Mill “was convinced that Christianity was a social impediment, but he sensed also that it might be a personal necessity,” and so he “could not help suspecting that however wrongheaded its doctrines might be, religion was a psychological necessity without which man would lack both a sufficient sanction from morality and an ultimate hope to help him meet courageously the tribulations here below.”¹⁸⁶ Carr expounds on the tension between our intellectual and emotional faculties when it comes to religious belief, which, in turn, he suggests underlies much of Mill’s discussion and subsequent perspective on the utility of such belief. Accordingly, the emotional satisfaction supernatural religion is thought to offer is squared against the intellectual difficulties Mill thinks it spawns, which I have just detailed. As a result, Carr argues that “the conflict between intellect and emotion was never wholly absent from his religious struggles,”¹⁸⁷ and this tension greatly influenced the development of Mill’s religious views throughout the course of his life. As we will see in Chapter 3, James has much to say regarding this tension as well.

However, after acknowledging this one advantage supernatural religions appear to have over his earthly alternatives in *Utility of Religion*, Mill immediately proceeds to minimize the importance of such an advantage. First, note, once more, that there are examples of societies that have survived—and thrived—without belief in such an afterlife. Mill also suggests that we will care less and less about the prospect of an afterlife as we improve our condition and become more satisfied here on Earth. Accordingly, he “cannot but think that as the condition of mankind becomes improved, as they grow happier in their lives, and more capable of deriving happiness from unselfish sources, they will care less and less for this flattering expectation,” since “they

¹⁸⁵ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 480.

¹⁸⁶ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 476.

¹⁸⁷ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 478.

who have had their happiness can bear to part with existence.”¹⁸⁸ Mill goes so far as to suggest that it is “not only possible but probable, that in a higher, and, above all, a happier condition of human life, not annihilation but immortality may be the burdensome idea,”¹⁸⁹ and that we might find relief and not pain in the notion that we are not forever shackled to a conscious existence that we have no guarantee we will always want. In an 1854 journal entry, Mill writes that “the belief in a life after death, without any probable surmise as to what it would be, would be no consolation, but the very king of terrors. A journey into the entirely unknown—the thought is sufficient to strike with alarm the firmest heart.”¹⁹⁰ Interestingly, Matz observes that we can interpret “Mill’s view as a kind of Pascalian wager,”¹⁹¹ according to which it would be safer to choose non-existence than risk the infinite possibilities of eternal consciousness.

Furthermore, Mill echoes Socrates, who, in Plato’s *Apology*, argues that we have no reason to think of death as an evil and unwanted thing. There, Socrates suggests that “the fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being a pretence of knowing the unknown; and no one knows whether death, which men in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good.”¹⁹² Socrates believes there is great hope that death is a good given the two possible implications of death: (a) “a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness” or (b) “a change and migration of the soul from this world to another.”¹⁹³ As a result, he concludes that “those of us who think that death is an evil are in error.”¹⁹⁴ In this vein,

¹⁸⁸ Mill, *Collected Works*, 426.

¹⁸⁹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 428.

¹⁹⁰ John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XXVI - Journals and Debating Speeches Part II*, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), Chapter: DIARY 1854 (accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/261/52613> on 2011-11-12).

¹⁹¹ Matz, *Religious Illusion*, 145.

¹⁹² Plato, “Apology,” *Euthyphro, Crito, Apology & Symposium*, the Jowett translation (Chicago, Illinois: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), 41.

¹⁹³ Plato, *Apology*, 55.

¹⁹⁴ Plato, *Apology*, 55.

Mill himself writes that “the mere cessation of existence is no evil to any one: the idea is only formidable through the illusion of imagination which makes one conceive oneself as if one were alive and feeling oneself dead.”¹⁹⁵ In his view, all of this ultimately constitutes “proof that the idea [of death] is not really or naturally terrible.”¹⁹⁶ For Mill, these reasons show that the one advantage that can be associated with supernatural religions—the hope associated with their belief in an afterlife—proves to be rather insubstantial, and, all things considered, supernatural religions are less optimal than the more earthly alternatives he recommends. However, not everyone finds what Mill says in *Utility of Religion* convincing, and Mill himself would later alter his position on the utility of belief in an afterlife. In view of this, I want to briefly address the evolution of Mill’s own thoughts on the matter, as well as some scholarly criticism of the position he espouses in *Utility of Religion*.

First, I should point out, as many commentators—including Carr and Matz—have, that Mill adopts a more optimistic view regarding the utility of belief in an afterlife in his work, *Theism*, which he wrote much later than *Utility of Religion*. Characterizing Mill’s later view, Carr writes:

Though man could base only on hope his convictions about the benevolent government of the universe and about life after death, Mill would allow him to indulge that hope because of its beneficial effects...that the Religion of Humanity would be the religion of the future, Mill entertained little doubt; but he had come to believe also that the progress of that religion would be quickened if aided not only by intellects outraged by the moral dullness of orthodoxy [e.g. the problem of evil], but also by imaginations which roamed freely in the nether regions of hope and trust, where a psychologically satisfying vestige of the Christian God lived and moved and had his being.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 427.

¹⁹⁶ Mill, *Collected Works*, 428.

¹⁹⁷ Carr, *Religious Thought*, 494.

Similarly, Matz, who argues that Mill “pressed his argument against supernatural illusions too far” in the *Utility of Religion*, adds that this is a point that Mill “apparently recognizes at the end of his life.”¹⁹⁸

As I’ve just indicated, Matz is one who is critical of the stance Mill takes in *Utility of Religion* regarding the utility of belief in an afterlife. In his article “The Utility of Religious Illusion: A Critique of J.S. Mill’s Religion of Humanity,” Matz acknowledges that he agrees with Mill “that...religious belief is not necessary for morality,”¹⁹⁹ but he argues “that Mill cannot dismiss the utility of hope in an ultimate justice since it need not pervert the intellect or morality” and suggests that “there are thus utilitarian grounds to support some supernatural illusions, which undermines Mill’s defence of an exclusively naturalistic religion.”²⁰⁰ In support of this conclusion, Matz suggests that “Mill cannot show that such a hope, though not based in any human experience and perhaps partly inconsistent with it, should be abandoned, since it could, and does, inspire the commitment to the moral life without being inimical to intellectual and moral progress.”²⁰¹ He adds that “such a hope could and does, as a matter of fact, support the commitment to a moral life and inspires perseverance during troubled times by making some sense of the disconcerting fact that the virtuous and vicious often do not get their just due.”²⁰²

However, contrary to what Matz, as well as Mill’s own more considered view, suggests, and as I ultimately hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, I believe Mill does give good reasons to think that supernatural religious belief is inimical to both intellectual and moral progress. I discussed how this is true regarding the latter in Section C of Part II; in my

¹⁹⁸ Matz, *Religious Illusion*, 139.

¹⁹⁹ Matz, *Religious Illusion*, 139.

²⁰⁰ Matz, *Religious Illusion*, 137.

²⁰¹ Matz, *Religious Illusion*, 138.

²⁰² Matz, *Religious Illusion*, 150.

discussion of the two points mentioned earlier in Part III (i.e. that supernatural religion is neither necessary nor optimal for eliciting the individual utility associated with it), I have made a case for how this is true of the former as well.

IV. Conclusion

I would now like to briefly summarize my conclusions regarding the arguments Mill advances, and outline a couple of concerns I have regarding his overall analysis. I find it hard to find fault with most of the arguments presented in *Utility of Religion*, and I've alluded to the few instances in which I do. My few worries included: 1) his very general conception of "religion," 2) his minimization of the nefarious forms of religion, 3) his notion that instances of these nefarious forms are on the decline, and 4) the historical debt of moral gratitude he pays to religion. In general, however, I believe Mill makes a very compelling case against the thesis that religion is morally advantageous, and for considering that it may even be disadvantageous. For one thing, he undermines the case for religion as an enforcer of morality. On the one hand, if appeal to supernatural consequences is made, the motivation of believers behaving "morally" seems suspect (and possibly even immoral). On the other hand, even if such an appeal is not made, Mill gives us good reason to believe that religion is not necessary, nor preferable, for effecting moral behavior. I concur with Mill, and propose that other worldly deterrents imbedded in our society (e.g. prison and social disgrace), some of which Mill alludes to, seem just as successful—and arguably more so—at curbing immoral behavior as religious belief does. Also, bear in mind Mill's point about how the remoteness and "the unavoidable uncertainty of religious penalties makes them feeble as a deterring motive."²⁰³ Along these lines, worldly

²⁰³ Mill, *Collected Works*, 414.

consequences are likely more influential on human behavior precisely because they are more tangible and certain. We *may* have hell to pay should we commit ourselves to a life of crime, but we will *almost certainly* end up paying with years of our lives behind bars. As Philaethes, from Schopenhauer's dialogue, suggests, "if a man feels tempted to commit a crime, you may rely upon it that the first consideration which enters his head is the penalty appointed for it, and the chances that it will fall upon him: then comes, as a second consideration, the risk to his reputation...he will ruminate by the hour on these two impediments, before he ever takes a thought of religious considerations."²⁰⁴ Furthermore, Mill makes a compelling case against the moral merits of religion as a teacher of morality, citing the fact that disparate religions offer different—and, at times, conflicting—moral recommendations and that there are examples of immorality associated with these religions. Add to Mill's arguments the empirical evidence calling into question the positive influence of religion on morality, and I can't help but conclude that there's little reason to think that religion is morally advantageous.

I also tend to agree with the points Mill makes regarding the individual utility of religion. In my mind, there is a much better case to be made for religion's individual utility than there is for its social utility, which is reflected by Mill in his initial concession that religion does, in fact, make some people happy. Reflecting on the "why?" that underlies our existence is something we have all experienced, and it is likely something we have all yearned to answer at one point or another. Religion gives some people peace of mind regarding this existential anxiety that is so familiar to us all. However, I believe Mill is correct in suggesting that we nevertheless need to ask whether *supernatural* religious belief is necessary and/or optimal for such satisfaction. Moreover, in contrast to what Matz argues and to Mill's own later views, I agree with the

²⁰⁴ Schopenhauer, *Essays*, 37.

answers Mill provides to these questions in *Utility of Religion*: supernatural religious belief seems neither necessary nor optimal for satisfying our psychological desires and making us happy. Once again, consider the examples of societies that have flourished without a preponderance of supernatural belief, and the examples of other alternatives for satisfying the existential desires in question (e.g. patriotism and Mill's Religion of Humanity)—in light of these considerations, supernatural religious belief does not seem necessary for the kind of personal satisfaction in question. Moreover, the self-interested nature of moral behavior associated with supernatural consequences and the substantial intellectual difficulties cited in Section C of Part III give us good reason to believe that other alternatives may be more optimal for our individual pursuit of happiness than supernatural religions.

While I find much of what Mill argues in *Utility of Religion* convincing, I do have a few concerns about his overall analysis. To begin with, Mill does not consider the benefit of religious belief for the *physical* health of individuals. In fairness to Mill, this isn't likely something he would have had reason to consider during his lifetime (since he wasn't familiar with the empirical research available today that suggests it), and, thus, it doesn't suggest any fault on his part. Nonetheless, some research since Mill's time has indicated that religion is beneficial for the physical health of individuals. Kevin S. Seybold and Peter C. Hill offer a nice review of the relevant research in their article "The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Mental and Physical Health,"²⁰⁵ wherein they suggest that "studies on the influence of religion on physical health suggest that religion usually, but not always, plays a positive role"²⁰⁶ and conclude that the influence of religion and spirituality is generally a positive one.²⁰⁷ Similarly,

²⁰⁵ Kevin S. Seybold and Peter C. Hill, "The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Mental and Physical Health," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Feb., 2001), 21-24.

²⁰⁶ Seybold and Hill, *Religion and Spirituality*, 22.

²⁰⁷ Seybold and Hill, *Religion and Spirituality*, 21.

Harold G. Koenig examined the effects of religiosity on patients diagnosed with either congestive heart failure or chronic pulmonary disease and most of his findings suggested an inverse relationship between religiosity and mental and physical health problems.²⁰⁸ While Mill acknowledges the psychological (or mental) benefits associated with religion, he never mentions the possibility of physical health benefits for individuals.

In his work, Richard Dawkins, a well-known atheist and Darwinian scientist, endorses an evolutionary explanation of the widespread nature and survival of religious belief, and, in the process, he surveys the candidates for such an explanation, one of which is an appeal to the benefits religion offers for the physical health of believers. While he thinks that some of the benefits discussed by Mill, such as the notion that religion satisfies our existential curiosity and offers a sense of atonement for the suffering we experience on Earth, “miss the point of Darwinian explanations altogether,”^{209, 210} he suggests that a Darwinian can provide the kind of explanation in question by appealing to the improved physical health that religion is thought to offer individuals. Accordingly, in discussing the “evidence that religious belief protects people from stress-related diseases,” he suggests that it “would not be at all surprising” if this turned out to be true, given that “dummy pills, with no pharmacological activity at all, demonstrably improve health.”²¹¹ He argues that religion offers a kind of placebo effect, whereby believers, regardless of whether they’re actually in possession of true beliefs regarding matters of ultimate

²⁰⁸ Harold G. Koenig, “Religion, Congestive Heart Failure, and Chronic Pulmonary Disease,” *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 41, no. 3 (Fall, 2002), 263-278.

²⁰⁹ Richard Dawkins, “What Use Is Religion?,” *secularhumanism.org*, http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/dawkins_24_5.htm (accessed 10 Apr. 2011); this article originally appears in the magazine *Free Inquiry* (Richard Dawkins, “What Use Is Religion?,” *Free Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 5 (2004)).

²¹⁰ I must say that I have my doubts about whether Dawkins is right about this, and I’m not really sure why he says it here. In the next chapter, I will make the case that psychological (or mental) health can significantly influence physical health and, more generally, one’s prospects for survival.

²¹¹ Dawkins, *What Use*.

concern, think they are in possession of such beliefs, and thus experience all the positive benefits associated with thinking one is in possession of such truth.²¹² Hence, even some who are atheists and generally skeptical of the utility of religion have conceded that religious belief seems to offer physical health benefits to individuals. To be sure, there are those who remain unconvinced that this is in fact true, and Dawkins is right when he suggests that “the theory [i.e. that “religion is a medical placebo” that “prolongs life by reducing stress”] is going to have to run the gauntlet of skeptics who point out the many circumstances in which religion increases stress rather than decreases it.”²¹³ Still, many people would judge their physical health as being of utmost importance to them (that is, it is something highly valued by many people), in which case omitting it from consideration is no small matter. All of this goes to show that this is an important and significant aspect of individual utility, and it is an aspect that Mill does not seem to consider in his own analysis of religion’s individual utility.

Finally, granting, as Mill suggests, that there other more optimal ways to generate the kind of personal satisfaction and happiness religion produces, I am not convinced that these alternatives are realistic options for everyone. While I do believe patriotism and Mill’s own Religion of Humanity will work for some people and that Mill may be right to suggest that they are optimal, I still wonder whether others might require supernatural views. In Chapter 3, we will see that James makes the case that some individuals are so overburdened by earthly evils that supernatural religion becomes necessary for their salvation. If this is the case, Mill’s alternatives will prove to be insufficient for the happiness of some individuals, and religion would appear to warrant more credit in terms of individual utility than he gives it. However,

²¹² Dawkins, however, argues that such an explanation ultimately falls short as a valid evolutionary interpretation, insofar as he finds this “placebo theory too meager to account for the massive and all-pervasive phenomenon of religion” (Dawkins, *What Use*).

²¹³ Dawkins, *What Use*.

whether religion is indeed essential for the flourishing of some individuals, as James suggests, remains to be seen, and there are those who emphasize, instead, religion's corruptive influence on the welfare of individuals. Nietzsche, to whom we turn in the next chapter, does this, asserting that religion spawns self-deception and poor health in individuals. Nietzsche would likely submit that, instead of addressing the source of the problem James alludes to (i.e. our suffering here on earth), supernatural religion merely encourages us to turn away from it. Alternatively, Nietzsche recommends that we address the problem of earthly suffering head-on and seek to understand it better, not that we turn away from it. For Nietzsche, what's at the heart of this earthly suffering and also underlies supernatural religions is the problem of nihilism, which, for him, reflects the devaluation of earthly life that is implicit in these supernatural views. In the following chapter, I examine Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ* and offer a more detailed analysis of how this problem of nihilism affects considerations of the individual utility of religion.

CHAPTER 2:

Friedrich Nietzsche and *The Anti-Christ*

I. *Introduction*

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger argues that a human being is “distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it.”²¹⁴ The implication is that it is human nature to ponder our own existence and to question why we are here. At one point or another, most of us have wondered *why* there is something instead of nothing—that is, *why* does anything exist at all? Life, as they say, is a mystery. In response, some seek to unravel the mystery—to seek “the truth”—via philosophical questions, and some who do this are left feeling unsatisfied, and sometimes even hopeless, as a result. I think Heidegger is right: it seems that, at least to some degree, almost all human beings are concerned with these kinds of existential issues and feel this kind of existential anxiety at one point or another during their lives. As self-conscious beings, we reflect on our existence and grow anxious in doing so, with thoughts of death and suffering and a sense of meaninglessness plaguing us at times; this, in turn, can create psychological distress and a need for relief. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, many have suggested that religion is a kind of antidote for these existential ailments, offering a sense of relief through the answers it provides for life’s “big questions.” Like William James, the subject of Chapter 3, they believe religion satisfies a basic psychological need of human beings by relieving them of the existential anxieties inherent in their earthly existence as self-conscious beings. Similarly, in his well-known work, *The Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud illustrates the manner in which

²¹⁴Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1962), 32.

he thinks religion satisfies our desire to free ourselves from existential helplessness. Freud captures the point as follows: “how does he [man] defend himself against the superior powers of nature, of Fate, which threaten him as they threaten all the rest?...Man’s self-regard, seriously menaced, calls for consolation; life and the universe must be robbed of their terrors.”^{215, 216} Naturally, Freud concludes human beings are compelled to respond to their existential terror in one way or another—“a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion.”²¹⁷ Thus, given this ever-present need for a sense of purpose and the perpetual existential dread that can otherwise define being human, religion is often advocated on behalf of the existential relief it provides to believers. However, in his book *The Anti-Christ*, Friedrich Nietzsche staunchly rejects this stance, arguing that such religious relief comes at an extreme price, a price that more than offsets any of its benefits.

Much like Plato, Nietzsche is renowned for his artistic style, and, what’s more, each of his works seems to have a unique feel. Some of his books resemble traditional philosophical treatises (e.g. *The Birth of Tragedy*), while others consist entirely of aphorisms (e.g. *Beyond Good and Evil*) or read like an epic (e.g. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). All in all, he wrote 14 books before succumbing to mental illness in January of 1889, after which he spent the last ten years of his life in asylums or under the care of his mother and sister. *The Anti-Christ* was the second-to-last of these 14 books, and in the following I examine the arguments that Nietzsche advances in this work regarding the utility of religion.

²¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 20.

²¹⁶ Freud likens this sense of powerlessness to “the similar state of helplessness” in a child’s relationship to his or her parents, as the child “had reason to fear them” (Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 21) just as human beings fear the power of nature and fate.

²¹⁷ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 30.

Although Nietzsche is well-known for being critical of prior thinkers, there were some who significantly influenced him. It is worth noting here that many of his chief philosophical ideas, not to mention his own writing style (as evidenced by his use of aphorisms), were inspired by the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), whom I have already referenced in Chapter 1 and about whom I will say much more later in this chapter (as well as in Chapter 3). Schopenhauer was a German philosopher whose writing Nietzsche discovered by chance in a bookstore at the age of 21, and much of Nietzsche's own philosophy can be seen as an objection to Schopenhauer's pessimism and nihilistic tendencies or an endorsement of Schopenhauer's use of aphorisms and critical philosophy. As Robert Wicks suggests in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer's atheistic and turbulent vision of the world, in conjunction with his highest praise of music as an art form, captured Nietzsche's imagination, and the extent to which the 'cadaverous perfume' of Schopenhauer's world-view continued to permeate Nietzsche's mature thought remains a matter of scholarly debate."²¹⁸ Lest there be any doubt that Nietzsche himself felt, at least at some point in his life, a debt of gratitude to Schopenhauer, one need only consider that Schopenhauer is the often-praised subject of the third essay of his *Untimely Meditations* (four essays comprise this early work of Nietzsche's).

Regarding the third and fourth essays, Wicks writes:

The third and fourth studies — on Schopenhauer and Wagner, respectively — address how these two thinkers, as paradigms of philosophic and artistic genius, hold the potential to inspire a stronger, healthier and livelier German culture. These celebratory studies on Schopenhauer and Wagner reveal how, as a recurring feature of Nietzsche's thought, he presents us with some higher type of character — he offers different models of heroic characters as the years go by — as an ideal towards which he would have his best readers aspire.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Robert Wicks, "Friedrich Nietzsche," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Section 1, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/> (accessed 06 Apr. 2012).

²¹⁹ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 2.

As Wicks suggests, Nietzsche thinks (at least during the early stages of his philosophical career) that Schopenhauer demonstrates some of the character traits he associates with “strong” characters, whom, in turn, he juxtaposes with “weak” characters, which, as we shall soon discover, most religious individuals turn out to be on his account. Interestingly, we will see that Schopenhauer also possesses some “weak” characteristics, too.

In *The Anti-Christ*, a book consisting of 62 aphorisms, Nietzsche develops many criticisms of one religion in particular: Christianity. Accordingly, when characterizing Nietzsche’s project in the book, Wicks writes:

Nietzsche expresses his disgust over the way noble values in Roman Society were corrupted by the rise of Christianity, and he discusses specific aspects and personages in Christian culture — the Gospels, Paul, the martyrs, priests, the crusades — with a view towards showing that Christianity is a religion for weak and unhealthy people, whose general historical effect has been to undermine the healthy qualities of the more noble cultures.²²⁰

However, while Nietzsche focuses almost exclusively on Christianity throughout the book, most of his criticisms are equally applicable to other religions, and I will note the few instances where this does not seem to be the case.²²¹ Moreover, Nietzsche does apply many of these same points to other religions more explicitly in his other works, and I will mention some examples as I proceed. Interestingly, Nietzsche originally intended for the book to be the first of a major four-part project he called the “revaluation of all values” (a project I will say much more about in Part V); however, upon completing *The Anti-Christ*, he decided that he had more or less completed his goals with the project’s first installment.²²² *The Anti-Christ* offers a summation of his core philosophical beliefs regarding religion (and, to a lesser extent, morality), which, for the most

²²⁰ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 5.

²²¹ For example, I will allude to “Christian misery” in Part IV, which Nietzsche explicitly juxtaposes with “Buddhistic cheerfulness.” Hence, this suggests that depression and misery are problems that Nietzsche thinks only apply to some religions.

²²² Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 5.

part, he had already expressed, albeit with less vitriol, in previous works. This sense of Nietzsche rehashing what he had said before, coupled with the fact that Nietzsche can easily come across as being a bit belligerent in much of the text, leads many—both Nietzsche enthusiasts and critics alike—to view the work in a generally unfavorable light. Thus, in the Introduction to Judith Norman’s translation of the text, Aaron Ridley writes, “*The Anti-Christ* strikes one as over-emphatic and rather tiring.”²²³ Nevertheless, *The Anti-Christ* offers Nietzsche’s most mature views regarding religion, as well as, in my opinion, his most thorough and compelling case against it.

Familiarity with other essential elements of Nietzsche’s philosophy, many of which he begins to develop very early on in his writing career, is required if one hopes to understand and appreciate his criticisms of religion in *The Anti-Christ*. While he doesn’t focus on articulating and developing them in *The Anti-Christ* (although he does still reference them), concepts like “nihilism” and “master” and “slave” moralities underlie most of his criticisms of religion therein, and understanding these underlying concepts is therefore beneficial in adequately following his objections. Consequently, before analyzing Nietzsche’s criticisms of religion, I will provide context by discussing some important elements of his more general philosophy. I begin by detailing Nietzsche’s thoroughly naturalistic philosophy (Part II), highlighting, in particular, his famous reflections on master and slave moralities, his amoralism, and his reductionist ontology; I suggest that Nietzsche’s thoroughgoing naturalism is the primary precipitator of his criticisms of religion. Next, I outline what I think are the two major problems Nietzsche has with religions: 1) they are at odds with an honest concern for truth (Part III) and 2) they are unhealthy (Part IV).

²²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ix. All subsequent references to *The Anti-Christ* refer to this text.

Then, I characterize Nietzsche's "solution" to the problems he associates with religion—his project of a reevaluation of all values (Part V). Finally, in Part VI, I conclude by voicing some concerns I have regarding what is arguably (granting some of Nietzsche's own points) the most likely outcome of this project, a project that takes a metaphorical hammer to the foundation of all traditional values, including those most closely associated with religion. Specifically, I consider the possibility that, in doing away with (what Nietzsche considers to be) the fabrications of Christianity and with religious ideals in general, beliefs Nietzsche himself associates with "life preserving errors,"²²⁴ we might actually be undermining our prospects for living a healthy life. Given his own emphasis on facilitating healthy lives and combating nihilism (which is unhealthy), there is good reason to think that this would be of utmost concern to Nietzsche himself.

II. Nietzsche's Naturalism

With respect to most of life's "big questions," Nietzsche believes an honest thinker has no choice but to suspend judgment. Thus, in Section 55 of *The Anti-Christ* he writes, "there are some questions that people are *not* entitled to decide the truth of; all the ultimate questions, all the ultimate problems of value are beyond human reason."²²⁵ Subsequently, Nietzsche vehemently denies any supernatural interpretation of—or explanation for—any aspect of reality; all concepts suggesting anything unnatural—that is, anything unsubstantiated by the physical world we come to know during our lives on Earth—are, for Nietzsche, essentially nonsense and illusory. Consider Nietzsche's temper in the following passage:

²²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), Section 110 in Book 3.

²²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 55.

When the natural consequences of an action are not ‘natural’ any more but instead are attributed to spectral, superstitious concepts, to ‘God’, to ‘spirit’, to the ‘soul’, as exclusively ‘moral’ consequences, as reward, punishment, warning, as a lesson, then the presuppositions of knowledge have been destroyed,--*and this is the greatest crime against humanity.*²²⁶

Not only is such anti-naturalism dishonest, but he believes that engaging in such deception is ultimately unhealthy, which, for him, constitutes an even more egregious problem. In a moment I will turn to a brief discussion of his famous distinction between master moralities and slave moralities, as it reflects his thoroughgoing naturalism and ties in to his views on the utility of religion, most notably his scathing attack on Christianity in *The Anti-Christ*. First, however, I want to make a few remarks about traditional conceptions of morality, since they are at the crux of this distinction. Accordingly, I shall begin this part of the chapter by illustrating his skepticism regarding traditional moral views; I do this by way of a discussion of his reductionist ontology, showing how it undercuts traditional moral and religious thinking. Then, I will seek to paint a clear picture of the master and slave mentalities that underlie master and slave moralities. In doing so, I will explain why Nietzsche associates religion with the slave mentality, and I will elaborate on the problematic nature of such an association, noting, for example, the dishonesty implicit in this kind of mentality.

According to traditional conceptions of morality, there are certain values we should all embrace, as well as certain ways we should all behave; as a result, traditional moral claims are thought to *prescribe* particular values and actions. Moral claims are *prescriptive*, in that they are concerned with how the world ought to be, rather than *descriptive*, in which case they would be concerned, instead, with simply how the world actually is. Hence, “good” values and actions signal those that are considered “right” and are consequently prescribed, while “evil” ones

²²⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 49.

denote those that are deemed “wrong” and are, thus, devalued and discouraged. As a result of this prescriptive process, traditional moral theories (e.g. utilitarianism and deontology)—as well as, and more importantly for my present purposes, the religions that inculcate such theories—canonize certain values (e.g. equality and humility). Along these lines, while a lack of certain values, like not preferring vanilla ice cream, is not thought to be grounds for sincere reproach, a lack of others, like not valuing equality in society, is. Subsequently, in societies and cultures where these traditional moral views are favored, those who fail to endorse commonly preferred values are viewed unfavorably and often ostracized, and, in instances where social institutions incorporate such moral theories, delinquents can be penalized in a variety of ways, ranging from general social alienation to imprisonment and even, in some cases, death.²²⁷

Ultimately, there can be little doubt that Nietzsche is fundamentally *amoral* when it comes to these traditional conceptions of morality. After all, when analyzing traditional views of morality in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he famously claims that “there are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena.”²²⁸ Elsewhere, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he remarks, ““this is *my way*; where is yours?”—thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ For *the way*—that does not exist.”²²⁹ I also believe that this is why, in *The Will to Power*,²³⁰ Nietzsche claims it is his purpose to “demonstrate the absolute homogeneity of all events and the

²²⁷ Also, recall the related discussion of Mill’s reflections on the power of public opinion in Part II of Chapter 1.

²²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), Section 108.

²²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), Section 11 (“On the Spirit of Gravity”) of the Third Part.

²³⁰ I would be remiss if I did not mention that some scholars view *The Will to Power* unfavorably, suggesting that, since it consists of a collection of unpublished manuscripts compiled posthumously by his sister, it should not be taken seriously as an expression of views Nietzsche is fully committed to. However, I do not share this viewpoint; I believe that its contents can nonetheless prove revealing and useful, as it is, after all, still ultimately Nietzsche who is responsible for the creation of the thoughts that are expressed therein. Moreover, the most common modern version of the text incorporates significant annotations by Walter Kaufmann, who tasked himself with remedying clear instances of corruption on the part of Nietzsche’s sister. For these reasons, I have chosen to cite the book in my work.

application of moral distinctions as conditioned by perspective; to demonstrate how everything praised as moral is identical in essence with everything immoral.”²³¹ Indeed, in much of his work, Nietzsche denies that certain actions are ever justified—or that certain values are ever privileged—in this traditional moral sense; that is, he suggests there are no objectively “right” and “good” actions or values. In essence, it seems that Nietzsche’s own “moral” view is characterized by his reluctance to endorse a traditional moral view. What distinguishes Nietzsche is his very opposition to the idea that there are universally-binding or objective standards for actions. Hence, his reflections on morality do not constitute a “moral theory,” per se, but rather a kind of critique of all such theories. In view of this, Nietzsche’s own moral theory, like most of his philosophy, is primarily descriptive, not prescriptive. In his moral and religious reflections, he is chiefly concerned with describing the inner workings of various psychological mentalities (e.g. master and slave), as well as of life in general, not with prescribing particular values and actions.

In order to gain a better understanding of Nietzsche’s naturalism and amorality, it is also worth discussing his reductionist ontology. On his account, life consists of (1) incalculable, and purely natural, drives (2) incessantly in flux, all (3) perpetually seeking power (i.e. domination of other drives). First, Nietzsche suggests that human beings have a tendency to misconceptualize life, and he himself tends to speak of life in a much more reduced sense than one is ordinarily accustomed to hearing it talked about. For instance, in explicating what life is, Nietzsche claims that even the word “plant” is painfully misleading, for to even speak of a “plant” is to have “invented a false unity which does not exist: the fact of a millionfold growth with individual and

²³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), Section 272.

semi-individual initiatives is concealed and denied if we begin by positing a crude unity ‘plant’.”²³² As remarks like this suggest, Nietzsche thinks that there are, instead, millions of “drives,” or life forces, at work within every living being. Second, Nietzsche reduces reality to that which is immediately present at any given moment, in which case life is constantly becoming something completely distinct and entirely new with each and every moment; that is, it is constantly changing or, as he is apt to say, “becoming.” Finally, another of Nietzsche’s central philosophical ideas, the “will to power,” suggests that all living beings (or drives) strive to exploit their environment for their own benefit, in an effort not simply to survive but to flourish. The will to power is a prevalent theme throughout Nietzsche’s writings, including *The Anti-Christ*. Very early on in *The Anti-Christ* Nietzsche writes:

What is good?—Everything that enhances people’s feeling of power, will to power, power itself. What is bad?—Everything stemming from weakness. What is happiness?—The feeling that power is *growing*, that some resistance has been overcome.²³³

In Nietzsche’s view, as evinced by this notion of the will to power, life on Earth is filled with conflict and differences, and there is a tendency for the strong to naturally flourish and survive while the weak barely scrape by or perish. Nietzsche thinks the will to power is, in turn, a notion that applies universally to the aforementioned manifold drives, and it ultimately constitutes what he means by “life.”

Because it indicates that life is a chaotic struggle for power and that reality is constantly in flux, Nietzsche’s reductionist ontology explains why he is so quick to dismiss traditional religious and moral views, according to which there is a “right” action that is objectively true and proper for everyone everywhere. It also explains why Nietzsche suggests that nothing is “true”

²³² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 704.

²³³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 2.

of existence in any objective and universal sense, be it moral or otherwise. Ultimately, notions of objectively “right” and “wrong” actions are entirely misguided for Nietzsche, and, as we shall see in greater detail shortly, he reduces them to illusions that bring comfort. All we do have, in reality, are subjective values (i.e. *I think this is “good” and this is “bad”*), and Nietzsche refers to someone who does not deceive him- or herself about this aspect of reality as a “master.” As soon as one attempts to objectify these subjective values and to think of values in terms of “right” and “wrong” (i.e. “good” and “evil”), one becomes what Nietzsche calls a “slave.”

Thus, Nietzsche’s amorality is a major impetus for his famous distinction between “master” (or “noble”) and “slave” (or “Chandala”²³⁴) moralities, and, similarly, the distinction between individuals who possess a master mentality (i.e. those Nietzsche refers to throughout his writings as “nobles,” “masters,” “free spirits,” and “overmen”) and individuals who exhibit a slave mentality (whom Nietzsche often refers to collectively as “the herd”). In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes, “wandering through the many subtler and coarser moralities which have so far been prevalent on earth, or still are prevalent, I found that certain features recurred regularly together and were closely associated—until I finally discovered two basic types.”²³⁵ Although this distinction is not a focal point in *The Anti-Christ*, he does reference it there, too. For instance, when reflecting on the fruits of one of his earlier works, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche writes, “here for the first time, the contrast is made clear between a noble morality and a Chandala morality born of *ressentiment* and impotent revenge.”²³⁶ Similarly, when discussing the origin of Christianity (which he argues lies in Judaism and resentment) in Section 24, Nietzsche again references *On the Genealogy of Morality*, where he claims that he “introduced a

²³⁴ “Chandala” is an Indian term signaling “an Indian of low caste” (Merriam-Webster, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chandala> (accessed 30 April 2014)).

²³⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 260.

²³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 45.

psychology of the opposing concepts of *noble* morality and *ressentiment* morality; the latter originating *out of a no* to the former.”²³⁷ Generally speaking, slave moralities reflect traditional moral theories and their moral prescriptions, while master moralities are thought to transcend the need to moralize (in this traditional sense) in the first place. Master “moralities” refrain from the habit of judging actions and values in the traditional moral sense and instead move “beyond good and evil.” The implications of this master-slave distinction are far-reaching, and Nietzsche spends a good deal of time providing psychological analyses of the master and slave mentalities underlying these master and slave moralities, especially in his works predating *The Anti-Christ*. Moreover, Nietzsche clearly associates religion with slave moralities, as he does in Section 45 of *The Anti-Christ*, where he associates Christianity in particular with slave morality, noting that “Paul was the greatest of all apostles of revenge.”²³⁸ This association of religion with slave moralities should not be surprising, given that most religions clearly endorse a traditional moral view of values and actions. Also, recall from Chapter 1 that religions are often credited with propagating traditional moral values. I believe Nietzsche’s master-slave distinction can help shed light on his criticisms of religion, so I now turn to a more detailed analysis.

Through his works, Nietzsche offers a fairly detailed description of slave moralities and of the slave mentality. The slave mentality is signaled, first and foremost, by an obsession with the pain and suffering implicit in life; fear about reality (i.e. that life is rife with conflict, full of danger, and entails suffering) plagues the slave mentality. In this vein, Nietzsche argues that many religious individuals cannot handle the truth regarding their earthly reality, especially the pain and suffering associated with it, and that they elaborate self-deceptions (which I will discuss

²³⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 24.

²³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 45.

in more detail in Part III) as a result. This is reflected in his discussion of the psychology of redemption in Section 30 of *The Anti-Christ*, where he writes, “*the instinct of hatred for reality: the consequence of an extreme over-sensitivity and capacity for suffering that does not want to be ‘touched’ at all because it feels every contact too acutely.*”²³⁹ In a similar manner, Nietzsche suggests that slave moralities emphasize comfort and the preservation of the herd in an effort to mitigate the slave’s acute sense of pain and suffering. On his account, slave moralities cater to a herd mentality, which aims to ensure that everyone survives and lives as comfortably as possible in virtue of the considerations of others it expressly requires. The universalization of values and actions through moral maxims ostensibly renders the world a less dangerous place because imbedded within the traditional moralizing process is an implicit suspicion of—and contempt for—outliers who stray too far from the norm, and, naturally, the more prominent this herd mentality becomes, the less likely it is that these anomalies will exist in the first place. Preoccupied with the threat posed by others, slaves react by attempting to get everyone to subscribe to a particular set of values, which, if adhered to, are thought to produce the most comfort and security. Ultimately, moral ideals help buffer slaves from the distress implicit in their lives by imploring all to be “good,” meaning, in essence, to be normal, obedient and, most importantly, *less dangerous*.

In view of this, Nietzsche distinguishes values from the slave’s perspective by using the terms “good” and “evil,” where “good” indicates all that is normal, expected and, therefore, comfortable and “evil” signifies all that is unique, unexpected and, therefore, dangerous. In the end, Nietzsche argues that fear is the mother of slave moralities,²⁴⁰ and, not surprisingly, that,

²³⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 30.

²⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 201.

from the slave's perspective, "what is new...is always *evil*."²⁴¹ Consequently, while the values of a master are merely thought to be the product of his or her own personal expression, the slave's values are said to be primarily—if not entirely—dictated by others and his or her relationship to them. Accordingly, one of the hallmarks of the slave mentality is sincere concern for the welfare of others, and offering pity for the plight of others is viewed favorably—if not deemed obligatory—by those who have this mentality. The upshot is that traditional moral views, as well as the religions inculcating them, require us to act like slaves insofar as they implore us to set aside, at least to some degree, our own self-interest for the sake of others. This, in Nietzsche's view, also makes them unnatural, which, not surprisingly, renders them a significant object of derision for him. All of this goes to show why, with respect to Christianity, Nietzsche concludes that "the fear of pain, even of infinitesimal amounts of pain—this could end up *only* as a *religion of love*,"²⁴² given that he thinks "love is the state in which people are most prone to see things the way they are *not*."²⁴³

By contrast, masters are defined, in part, by their lack of concern regarding the values of others or the assimilation of common values, and Nietzsche believes that, by accentuating individual well-being and accepting—and even encouraging—individual differences, master "moralities" actually minimize the importance of outward concern for others. Indeed, instead of attempting to universalize his or her values, the master seeks to distinguish them, encouraging the creation of new and more personal values. For a master, what matters most is not whether an action achieved this or that specific result or whether it was in accord with particular popular and privileged values, but whether it was performed boldly and with passion. What's more, what

²⁴¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 4 in Book One.

²⁴² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 30.

²⁴³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 23.

distinguishes boldness and passion is, in part, the degree to which one swims against the current. The herd mentality may produce a greater sense of security and comfort, but Nietzsche, presumably considering himself a master, believes this comes at a significant cost. While *quantitatively* humanity gains from such efforts (i.e. more human beings may survive), *qualitatively* it loses some degree of distinction, which is to say, on Nietzsche's account, *value* (and this is one reason why Nietzsche does not value slave moralities). Normality may yield numbers, but only distinction is thought to produce greatness, significance, and beauty. According to Nietzsche, one who properly understands his or her values will keep them to him- or herself, for this (i.e. their personal and subjective nature) is precisely wherein he thinks their true value lies (i.e. in their being different, interesting, and noteworthy). Along these lines, he warns us that "whatever kind of bizarre ideal one may follow...one should not demand that it be *the* ideal: for one therewith takes from it its privileged character. One should have it in order to distinguish oneself, not in order to level oneself."²⁴⁴ For this same reason, Nietzsche's "philosopher of the future" in *Beyond Good and Evil* declares:

My judgment is *my* judgment...One must shed the bad taste of wanting to agree with many. 'Good' is no longer good when one's neighbor mouths it. And how should there be a 'common good'! The term contradicts itself: whatever can be common always has little value.²⁴⁵

Unlike masters, slaves create no new values, since they actively pursue the assimilation of universal values proffered and preferred by the herd, and this means that they make no appreciable difference in the grand scheme of things and are, therefore, of no real significance. In sum, Nietzsche believes that slaves seek, above all else, to diminish the pain and suffering inherent in life by establishing a communal situation that promotes the least amount of danger

²⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 349.

²⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 43.

for everyone, instead of embracing life in its entirety and seeking beauty, significance, and true value like masters. As we shall see in greater detail later, he views the slave's obsession with pain and suffering and their concomitant attempt to universalize values as a sign of weakness and disease.

Nietzsche ultimately prefers that we foster a society in which the highest human beings (i.e. masters) flourish, even if it must be at the expense of those who are diseased and weak, and he would gladly trade in any perceived quantitative successes associated with societies and cultures that embrace the slave mentality for the more qualitative success he associates with those embracing a master mentality. Indeed, Nietzsche's endorsement of master morality is clear throughout most of his works, including *Ecce Homo*, where, as Wicks points out, "he claims that he is a destiny because he regards his anti-moral truths as having the annihilating power of intellectual dynamite; he expects them to topple the morality born of sickness which he perceives to have been reigning within Western culture for the last two thousand years."²⁴⁶ Additionally, in *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche remarks that "the weak and the failures should perish: first principle of our love of humanity."²⁴⁷ These kinds of remarks suggest that Wicks is right when he claims that "Nietzsche alternatively philosophizes from the perspective of life located beyond good and evil, and challenges the entrenched moral idea that exploitation, domination, injury to the weak, destruction and appropriation are universally objectionable behaviors."²⁴⁸ For Nietzsche, this is just how life works—hence, it's what he thinks is *natural*. Alternatively, those endorsing the slave mentality perpetuate what is unnatural, which is why Nietzsche does not value the slave mentality. On this point, Wicks writes:

²⁴⁶ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 5.

²⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 2.

²⁴⁸ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 4.

Nietzsche ultimately advocates valuations that issue from a self-confident, self-reinforcing, self-governing, creative and commanding attitude, as opposed to those that issue from reactive attitudes that determine values more mechanically, subordinatingly, and opposingly to those who are inherently more powerful. For Nietzsche, those who prefer to think in terms of “good vs. bad” exemplify the former, leading and superior mentality, and those who think in terms of “good vs. evil,” exemplify the latter, inferior and subservient mentality.²⁴⁹

As Wicks suggests here, Nietzsche represents the value judgments of a master by using the terms “good” and “bad,” where “good” just indicates whatever he or she happens to value and “bad” whatever he or she happens to despise, with no moral implications or undertones in either case. That is, masters do not attempt to objectify values, and, thus, master morality is “beyond good and evil.” In view of the traditional conception of morality discussed earlier, then, there really is nothing “moral” about master moralities.

I believe that Nietzsche’s problems with religion primarily stem from his analysis of the slave mentality and his belief in its fundamental incompatibility with his thoroughgoing naturalism. I now turn to more detailed analyses of what I think are his two chief objections to religion. I will begin by discussing why Nietzsche believes religion entails dishonesty (Part III), and then move on to discuss why he thinks it is unhealthy (Part IV). As we shall see, Nietzsche thinks that slave deceptions, such as other-worldly notions and moral standards, simply do not hold up upon close intellectual scrutiny, and he would certainly echo many of Mill’s criticisms regarding the intellectual unsustainability of supernatural religions mentioned in Chapter 1 (especially in Section C of Part III). Moreover, from Nietzsche’s perspective, whatever enhances earthly life is “good” and whatever saps the instincts for life is “bad” (notice that I use the contradistinction “good and bad” here, and not “good and evil”), and he argues that religion ultimately does the latter.

²⁴⁹ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 4.

III. Religion and Truth

A sincere concern for the truth is something that is of utmost importance to Nietzsche, and, aside from health, he seems to value it above all else. Echoing this sentiment, Walter Kaufmann, one of the leading Nietzsche scholars and translators, remarks that “Nietzsche himself was a fanatical seeker after truth and recognized no virtue above intellectual integrity.”²⁵⁰ Indeed, the impact of Nietzsche’s high regard for honesty regarding the nature of reality is far-reaching in the development of his philosophy, and it underlies many of his criticisms of religion. Ultimately, Nietzsche praises masters because they have the “courage” to be honest and embrace the truth about reality, which essentially amounts to endorsing his thoroughgoing naturalism, and, conversely, he is extremely critical of slaves because they are too weak to accept life as it actually is (i.e. as a constant struggle for power amidst an ever-changing and chaotic existence) and must indulge in self-deception as a result. Nietzsche frequently juxtaposes the honesty of free spirits and masters with the dishonesty of priests, philosophers, and other slaves, and he is not shy about his disdain for the latter, who he thinks deceive themselves about the reality of their lives on Earth. Not surprisingly, then, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche laments that “it is precisely the truth that has been absolutely forbidden so far,”²⁵¹ and, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he suggests that “perhaps nobody yet has been truthful enough about what ‘truthfulness’ is.”²⁵² Similarly, when remarking on the falsifications and self-deceptions plaguing the history of Christianity, which will be discussed in more detail shortly, Nietzsche writes, “we alone, we spirits *who have become free*, have the requisite presuppositions for

²⁵⁰ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 16.

²⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Section 3 of Preface. All subsequent references to *Ecce Homo* refer to this text.

²⁵² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 177.

understanding what nineteen centuries have misunderstood,—the honesty that has become instinct and passion, that wages war on the ‘holy lie’ above all other lies.”²⁵³ As opposed to the religious, Nietzsche suggests that free spirits like himself “have become more modest in every way. We have stopped deriving humanity from ‘spirit’, from ‘divinity’, we have stuck human beings back among the animals.”²⁵⁴ On Nietzsche’s account, moving beyond a thoroughgoing naturalism, as slaves do, entails self-deception.

This is something most individuals are guilty of doing, as he indicates when reflecting on common misconceptions regarding the Gospels and the origin of Christianity in *The Anti-Christ*: “the whole of humanity, even the best minds of the best ages—(with a single exception, someone who is perhaps just inhuman--) have allowed themselves to be deceived.”²⁵⁵ In the final section of *The Anti-Christ*, he concludes that “a will to lie at any cost, a disgust, a hatred of all good and honest instincts!—Those would be the blessings of Christianity as far as I am concerned.”²⁵⁶ The self-deception and dishonesty he associates with religion is exacerbated by other instantiations of the slave mentality, such as traditional philosophy. Certainly, Nietzsche is quite scathing in his reflections on philosophy. Consider, for example, his synopsis of the history of philosophy: “I will make an exception for a couple of the sceptics, the decent types in the history of philosophy; but the rest of them have no conception of the basic demands of intellectual integrity.”²⁵⁷ What’s more, Nietzsche suggests that modern German philosophy ultimately amounts to “an underhanded theology,”²⁵⁸ and adds that “philosophers supported the church: the *lie* of ‘the moral world order’ runs through the entire development of philosophy, even modern

²⁵³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 36.

²⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 14.

²⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 44.

²⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

²⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 12.

²⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 10.

philosophy.”²⁵⁹ Ultimately, religion (along with its more salient extensions, such as morality and philosophy) is problematic for Nietzsche insofar as he thinks it fosters self-deception, and in this part of the chapter I outline the arguments he offers in support of this thesis.

As James points out, religion is associated with belief in an “unseen order.” “Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible,” James says, “one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”²⁶⁰ This kind of belief in the unseen, in the supernatural, is completely at odds with Nietzsche’s naturalism, and he often reflects on the extensive self-deception and falsification of reality he associates with it. Indeed, he goes to great lengths in *The Anti-Christ* to demonstrate the many ways in which he thinks religions (and usually Christianity in particular) falsify reality as a result of their supernatural emphases. He chronicles, for example, several intangible fictions he associates with Christianity, such as “spirit,” “grace,” “sin,” and “souls,”²⁶¹ and he goes so far as to say that “this entirely fictitious world can be distinguished from the world of dreams (to the detriment of the former) in that dreams reflect reality while Christianity falsifies, devalues, and negates reality.”²⁶² James, who expresses an appreciation for religion’s ability to assuage our existential anxieties through such supernatural beliefs (as I will say much more about in Chapter 3), acknowledges Nietzsche’s point about the unrealistic nature of (at least some) religious belief, but he suggests that entertaining unrealistic beliefs is something we all do naturally anyway:

The systematic cultivation of healthy-mindedness as a religious attitude is therefore consonant with important currents in human nature, and is anything but absurd. In fact, we all do cultivate it more or less...we divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can...so that the world we recognize officially in

²⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 26.

²⁶⁰ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 57.

²⁶¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 15.

²⁶² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 15.

literature and in society is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world that really is.²⁶³

This seems reminiscent of Nietzsche's depiction of the slave mentality, which he says emphasizes comfort and introduces illusions in order to minimize feelings of pain and danger. What's more, with respect to those he calls slaves, it seems that Nietzsche would have to agree with James's suggestion that this process of falsifying reality is a natural process, since Nietzsche believes that "suffering people need to be sustained by a hope that cannot be refuted by any reality."²⁶⁴ I will say more about the ramifications of this being a natural process for the majority of people in parts V and VI.

Consider, also, one of the central tenets of many religious and traditional moral viewpoints: the notion of equality. Such views suggest that people be treated equally; for instance, as Nietzsche is quick to point out, the Gospels suggest that a fundamental belief of Jesus was that "everyone is equal to everyone else."²⁶⁵ In Nietzsche's view, however, this is an unnatural concept (which, for Nietzsche, makes it a deception), insofar as it is starkly at odds with his naturalism and reductionist ontology, and his notion that, in reality, life is full of inequality. According to Nietzsche, those who are honest with themselves will admit that inequality is an unavoidable fact of life. He asserts that "caste-order, *order of rank*, is just a formula for the supreme law of life itself...*unequal* rights are the condition for any rights at all.—A right is a privilege."²⁶⁶ Subsequently, "injustice is never a matter of unequal rights, it is a matter of claiming 'equal' rights."²⁶⁷ In his view, moral theorists, Jesus, and other slaves do not adequately recognize or appreciate this. For this reason, when reflecting on those who he

²⁶³ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 88.

²⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 23.

²⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 29.

²⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 57.

²⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 57.

thinks unjustifiably think of Jesus as a kind of “genius” and a “hero,” Nietzsche suggests that “the rigorous language of physiology would use a different word here: the word ‘idiot’.”^{268, 269}

According to Nietzsche, appeals to religious faith also entail deception. In his view, “‘faith’ means not wanting to know the truth,”²⁷⁰ and those expressing it are, therefore, thought to lack a sincere concern for discovering the true nature of reality. Further, Nietzsche claims that “Christianity knows that it is a matter of complete indifference whether or not something is true, but it is of supreme importance that people have faith in its truth. Truth and the faith that something is true: these sets of interests belong to entirely different, almost opposite worlds.”²⁷¹ Once again, Nietzsche suggests that religious faith results from the slave’s instinct to minimize pain and suffering, not from an honest regard for the truth. Hence, he suggests that “a faithful person is not free to have any sort of conscience for the question of ‘true’ or ‘untrue’: honesty on *this* point would be his immediate downfall. People with convictions have pathologically conditioned optics, which makes them into fanatics.”²⁷² For Nietzsche, faith ultimately amounts to a disingenuous sense of certainty, and any “justification” for it usually just begs the question, as he suggests in one of his characterizations of it: “I have faith that faith makes blessed;-- *consequently* it is true.”²⁷³ As is the case with many of the problems he associates with

²⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 29.

²⁶⁹ Nietzsche goes on to say that, “if anything is unevangelical, it is the concept of a hero” as “the polar opposite of struggle, of any feeling of doing-battle, has become instinct here: an incapacity for resistance has become morality here” (Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 29). Throughout *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche describes Christ as being consumed by inward concern and reflection, to the point that he seems not to acknowledge, let alone resist, external reality at all. He claims that Jesus demonstrated “an instinct of hatred for every reality, as a flight into the ‘unimaginable’, into the ‘inconceivable’, as an aversion to every formula, to every concept of space and time, to everything solid, to every custom, institution, church, as a being-at-home in a world that has broken off contact with every type of reality, a world that has become completely internal’, a ‘true’ world, an ‘eternal’ world” (Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 29).

²⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 52.

²⁷¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 23.

²⁷² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 54.

²⁷³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 50.

Christianity in *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche believes that the prevalence of faith is largely related to the priestly caste's effort to gain power; he writes:

I wage war on this theologian instinct... anyone with theologian blood in his veins will approach things with a warped and deceitful attitude. This gives rise to a pathos that calls itself *faith*: turning a blind eye to yourself for once and for all, so you do not have to stomach the sight of incurable mendacity.²⁷⁴

Nietzsche concludes that, "if *faith* is needed above all else, then reason, knowledge, and inquiry have to be discredited: the path to truth becomes the *forbidden* path."²⁷⁵

Along these lines, Nietzsche explicitly juxtaposes religion with science throughout *The Anti-Christ*, associating the former with self-deception and the latter with a sincere concern for truth. In Section 52, for instance, he suggests that "the church has to condemn all straight, honest, scientific paths to knowledge as forbidden paths. Doubt is already a sin."²⁷⁶ Elsewhere, when explaining why he thinks religion constitutes a "crime against life," Nietzsche complains that "a religion like Christianity, which is completely out of touch with reality, which immediately falls apart if any concession is made to reality, would of course be morally opposed to the 'wisdom of this world', which is to say *science*."²⁷⁷ Once more, Nietzsche argues that the impetus for the animosity between religion and science largely lies in the priestly caste's quest to gain power. He expounds on how science is at odds with their ascent to power as follows: "it is all over for priests and gods when people become scientific!—*Moral*: science is the taboo of all taboos,—it is the only thing forbidden. Science is the *first* sin, the seed of all sins, the *original* sin. *Only this is morality*,—"Thou shalt *not* know."²⁷⁸ As a result, he thinks the priestly caste attempts to destroy knowledge and science by endorsing supernatural concepts like "judgment,"

²⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 9.

²⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 23.

²⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 52.

²⁷⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 47.

²⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 48.

“sin,” “redemption” and “forgiveness,” suggesting that these concepts “are invented to destroy people’s *sense of causation*”²⁷⁹ and that the “priest can only imagine one great danger: and that is science—the healthy concepts of cause and effect.”²⁸⁰ Accordingly, he locates the origin of “sin” in the priestly caste’s reaction to science, as indicated by the following:

Science generally only flourishes in favourable conditions,—you need a *surplus* of time and spirit in order to ‘know’... ‘*Consequently*, people need to be made unhappy’... You can already guess *what* would enter the world, given this logic:—‘*sin*’... The concepts of guilt and punishment, the whole ‘moral world order’ is invented *against* science,—*against* priests losing their hold on people.²⁸¹

In response to the threat of science, Nietzsche argues that “the ‘priest-in-itself’ invents troubles, death, the moral dangers of pregnancy, every type of misery, age, hardship, and above all *illness*,”²⁸² because “troubles *prevent* people from thinking... War—among other things, a huge source of disruption for science!”²⁸³

To be sure, Nietzsche believes many of the ills he associates with religion are a result of priestly influence. For instance, when chronicling the history of Christianity, Nietzsche suggests that the concept of God “becomes a tool in the hands of priestly agitators who now interpret all happiness as a reward, all unhappiness as a punishment for disobeying God, for ‘sins’: that most deceitful of all modes of interpretation, the supposed ‘moral world order’, which turns the natural concepts of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ on their heads once and for all.”²⁸⁴ This priestly caste needed “an *anti-natural* causality” and, as a result, “all the rest of un-nature now follows.”²⁸⁵ Thus, largely as a result of this priestly influence, Christianity becomes entrenched in rampant

²⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 49.

²⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 49.

²⁸¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 49.

²⁸² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 48.

²⁸³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 48.

²⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 25.

²⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 25.

falsifications and self-deceptions. In this manner, scripture is said to stem from the priest's effort to maintain power, as indicated in the following:

Advancing to the next state: the 'will of God', which is to say: the conditions for maintaining power in the hands of the priests, needs to be *divulged*,—this calls for a 'revelation'. In simple terms: an enormous literary falsification is needed, a 'holy scripture' is discovered...From now on, everything in life will be arranged so that the priest is *everywhere indispensable*; the holy parasite will show up at all the natural occasions of life, at birth, marriage, illness, death, not to mention sacrifice ('meals'), and *denature* them all: in his words, 'sanctify' them... Viewed psychologically, 'sins' are indispensable in every society organized by priests. They are the real levers of power, the priest *lives* on sin, he needs 'sinning' to happen...He coldly and cynically measures peoples, ages, and individuals according to whether they promote or oppose the domination of the priests.²⁸⁶

Clearly, Nietzsche thinks that the interests of the priestly caste are at odds with an honest pursuit of truth, and he concludes that "as long as the priest is considered a *higher* type of person—this *professional* negater, slanderer, poisoner of life—there will not be an answer to the question: What *is* truth? Truth has already been turned on its head when someone who consciously champions nothingness and negation passes for the representative of 'truth'."²⁸⁷ In sum, "anything a theologian thinks is true must be false: this is practically a criterion of truth. His most basic instinct of self-preservation does not allow any scrap of reality to be honoured or even expressed."²⁸⁸

Many of Nietzsche's reflections in *The Anti-Christ* pertain to the history of Christianity in particular, and to the problems allegedly plaguing this history, and they may not apply to other religions. Having said that, he writes that "the history of Israel is invaluable because it is typical of all histories where natural values are *denatured*,"²⁸⁹ which, on his account, would include the histories of most other religions. In other words, the history of Christianity illustrates the same

²⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 26.

²⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 8.

²⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 9.

²⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 25.

kind of self-deception and denaturalization of reality found in many other religions. The first point Nietzsche emphasizes regarding the history of Christianity is that it actually begins with Judaism and a corresponding instinct of resentment. Accordingly, he suggests that Christianity “is *not* a counter-movement to the Jewish instinct,” but rather “it is its natural consequence, a further conclusion drawn by its terrifying logic.”²⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the final stage in the history of Christianity actually consists of its rejection of Judaism, which he believes involves significant misunderstandings on the part of most Christians. He explains that “as soon as the gap between Jew and Judaeo-Christian appeared, the latter had no choice except to use the same methods of self-preservation dictated by the Jewish instinct *against* the Jews themselves, while the Jews had only ever used them against *non*-Jews. The Christian is just a Jew with less rigorous beliefs.”²⁹¹ Thus, Nietzsche concludes that “the small, rebel movement christened with the name of Jesus of Nazareth is the Jewish instinct once again.”²⁹² For Nietzsche, this all goes to show that “the Jews are the *most disastrous* people in world history: they have left such a falsified humanity in their wake that even today Christians can think of themselves as anti-Jewish without understanding that they are the *ultimate conclusion of Judaism*.”²⁹³

Furthermore, Nietzsche asserts that most religious individuals are not themselves aware of any of these self-deceptions—hence, the *self-deception*. For instance, since Christians don’t realize that they are actually the inevitable spawn of their Jewish ancestry, he declares that “‘Christians’, the people who have been called Christian for two thousand years, are just a psychological self-misunderstanding.”²⁹⁴ Once again, although he highlights Christianity

²⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 24.

²⁹¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 44.

²⁹² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 27.

²⁹³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 24.

²⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 39.

throughout *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche still applies many of his findings to other religions. For example, he relates Saint Paul²⁹⁵ and Christianity to Mohammed and Islam, suggesting that Mohammed later borrowed “Paul’s invention, his method of priestly tyranny, of forming the herds, the belief in immortality—which is to say the doctrine of the ‘judgment’.”²⁹⁶ With respect to the religious, whom he accuses of denaturing reality, he ultimately suggests that, “examined more closely and in spite of all ‘belief’, they have been governed only by instincts.”²⁹⁷ Similarly, he claims that, while “people have always talked about ‘faith’, they have always acted from instinct.”²⁹⁸ The implication is that, despite the pervasive appeals the religious make to supernatural phenomena (or, as James would say, to an “unseen order”), they are all the while still motivated by purely natural forces.

Nietzsche’s depiction of the relationship between religion and truth is certainly controversial, and there are several issues worth mentioning here. One reasonable objection is that Nietzsche actually says very little that is novel. One could argue, for example, that Nietzsche simply offers a restatement of the secular Enlightenment (e.g. the idea that a “priestly caste” is responsible for religion as we know it). Similarly, the suggested divide between Christ and Paul used to be made by Christian scholars in the nineteenth century, and such a divide is thought by many to have been subsequently discredited. Aside from offering little that is new,

²⁹⁵ Nietzsche thinks that Paul is much to blame for many of the misrepresentations of Christ that he enumerates, and he even goes so far as to suggest that Paul was the antithesis of Jesus. One of Nietzsche’s chief complaints against Paul is that Paul is one who emphasizes an afterlife, appealing to the prospects of a better life after this natural one on Earth, which, together with the idea of immortality, he portrays as rewards that must be earned (Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 41). Nietzsche claims that, thanks in large part to Paul’s influence, “a number of different things started seeping into the type of the redeemer: the doctrines of judgment and return, the doctrine of death as a sacrifice, and the doctrine of the resurrection; and at this point the whole idea of ‘blessedness’, the solitary reality of the evangel, vanishes with a wave of the hand—and all for the sake of a state after death!” (Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 41). Ultimately, Nietzsche argues that almost everything about Christ’s actual nature was falsified by Paul.

²⁹⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 42.

²⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 39.

²⁹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 39.

another problem surfaces with respect to the sheer degree of vitriol present in Nietzsche's analysis—one can't help but sense a high degree of bias underlying it and wonder whether someone like Nietzsche is capable of an objective analysis of the subject matter. Not surprisingly, critics suggest that Nietzsche's portrayal of religion and of those who are religious is unfair and borders on caricature, and they argue that Nietzsche makes extraordinarily sweeping judgments and over-simplifications. As will become clear in Chapter 3, it is not hard to imagine someone like James suggesting that Nietzsche's evidence is not very good and that he seems to be imposing a generally-negative attitude toward what is, in actuality, a much more complex and varied reality. What's more, while Nietzsche claims that Christianity is antithetical to any honest pursuit of truth, including the prospects of science, others have suggested that the opposite is actually the case. For instance, there are those who suggest that the Western passion for truth is actually rooted in Christianity, and some, like Alfred North Whitehead, have argued that Christianity played an important role in the *rise* of modern science. Nevertheless, despite these concerns, Nietzsche clearly thinks that religion is marred by falsifications and self-deceptions. As it turns out, he thinks religion not only fosters self-deception—it is also sickly and life-negating, which renders it “nihilistic” and, on his account, a kind of psychological disease. I now turn to a more detailed analysis of this equally controversial contention.

IV. Religion and Health

In a sense, Nietzsche's master-slave distinction can be reduced to a difference in one's psychological attitude toward—or outlook on—life. In his view, the way that individuals deal with the reality of their existence and any concomitant existential anxieties reflects a great deal about them, and whether they are masters or slaves essentially comes down to whether they can

be truthful with themselves about this reality. The crucial factor is whether, when faced with the existential anxieties associated with life as a human being, they (1) accept their natural existence for what it is, including all the pain and suffering within it and its lack of an objective standard or ultimate purpose, in which case they are considered masters, or (2) resent or bemoan it and render it something it is not, thus deceiving themselves with illusions (which he also calls “ideals” and “idols”) for the sake of comfort, in which case they are considered slaves. As Nietzsche is fond of putting the point, masters are those who say “Yes” to life, while slaves are those who say “No” to it. For Nietzsche, the slave’s preoccupation with comfort and his or her condemnation of the suffering inherent in earthly life amounts to resenting this life. Indeed, as I’ve shown in Part II and Part III, Nietzsche thinks that slaves spend much of their energy dwelling on the pain and suffering in their earthly life, often (especially in the case of religious individuals) anticipating a better existence in another life hereafter. According to Nietzsche, slaves are troubled by the nature of life itself, and this leads them to live restricted and self-sacrificing lives in the service of the disillusioned ideals they have invented for the sake of coping with the pain and suffering they obsess about.

All of this goes to show that Nietzsche’s analysis of master and slave mentalities stems from what was, for him, a much more critical concern: the problem of nihilism. Moreover, the sickness and mental disease that Nietzsche associates with religion and other instances of the slave mentality also reflect this problem. For Nietzsche, nihilism essentially entails saying no to life; it is a kind of negation and depreciation of earthly life. In turn, much of his philosophy aims to combat nihilism, which is why Kaufmann claims that “to escape nihilism—which seems involved both in asserting the existence of God and thus robbing *this* world of ultimate significance, and also in denying God and thus robbing *everything* of meaning and value—that is

Nietzsche's greatest and most persistent problem."²⁹⁹ As Kaufmann intimates here, Nietzsche often talks about nihilism in a manner that suggests it comes in stages and can be classified into different types, and we shall see shortly that, while Nietzsche derides religion for being nihilistic, he is even more worried about more extreme, non-religious cases of nihilism. He characterizes nihilism and the plight of the religious as if there is a natural progression involved, warning his readers that religious individuals typically constitute milder versions of nihilism and that they can evolve into much worse kinds.

Ultimately, what is most troubling and problematic about the slave mentality is the anti-life sentiment that underlies it, which renders it nihilistic. He argues that, as a result of the slave mentality, morality is "not the expression of the conditions of a people's life and growth any more, not its most basic instinct of life any more, but instead something abstract, an opponent of life."³⁰⁰ In a similar vein, he writes:

I consider life itself to be an instinct for growth, for endurance, for the accumulation of force, for *power*: when there is no will to power, there is decline. My claim is that *none* of humanity's highest values have had this will, --that *nihilistic* values, values of decline, have taken control under the aegis of the holiest names.³⁰¹

Similarly, he claims that church concepts are "the most malicious counterfeits that exist to *devalue* nature and natural values."³⁰² He maintains that when religions like Christianity take hold over the masses, the highest values central to a healthy and flourishing character (i.e. things that masters value, like life-affirmation, personal expression, truthfulness, etc.) are flipped on their head and, instead, life-negation is praised. Thus, in the case of Christianity, Nietzsche

²⁹⁹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*, 101.

³⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 25.

³⁰¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 6.

³⁰² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 38.

suggests that “the instinct of *ressentiment* said no to everything on earth that represented the *ascending* movement of life: success, power, beauty, self-affirmation; but it could do this only by becoming ingenious and inventing *another* world, a world that viewed *affirmation of life* as evil, as intrinsically reprehensible.”³⁰³ From the slave’s perspective, life on Earth is best depicted as an obstacle to be overcome and it is devoid of any significant value; contrary to Nietzsche and those like him who aim to affirm earthly life, the slave fails to view this life as valuable in itself. In the worst-case scenarios, an emphasis on pain and suffering causes slaves to renounce their earthly lives altogether (much as Schopenhauer does) and sometimes even to commit suicide. It is fair to say that Nietzsche despises this kind of anti-naturalism and its denigration of earthly existence more than anything else.

Nietzsche believes that this nihilistic impulse is a trademark of all instances of the slave mentality, including religious and non-religious instances. I think it is important to note that anyone can be a slave (i.e. nihilistic), and, indeed, slaves come from all walks of life. To be sure, homeless individuals can be masters, and CEOs can be slaves. In the case of slaves, the bottom line is that they negate life in some manner regardless of their particular circumstances. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Nietzsche was heavily influenced by Schopenhauer, an atheist who was highly critical of most of the philosophy preceding him, just as Nietzsche’s own philosophy would later turn out to be. Although Nietzsche often gives Schopenhauer high praise, his own philosophy in many ways aims to refute the pessimism manifest in much of Schopenhauer’s thought, which ultimately renders Schopenhauer a slave. Briefly, Schopenhauer suggested that, because our desires can never be completely satisfied and we are, therefore, forever destined to a life of discontent, it is essentially futile to seek

³⁰³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 24.

satisfaction and joy in the first place. Wicks, who is also the author of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Schopenhauer, elaborates on the desolate prospects of Schopenhauer's pessimistic worldview, suggesting that, for Schopenhauer, "the world is represented as being in a condition of eternal frustration, as it endlessly strives for nothing in particular, and as it goes essentially nowhere,"³⁰⁴ and "the world of daily life is essentially violent and frustrating."³⁰⁵ On Schopenhauer's account, we are better off investing as little energy in life as possible, trying to desire as little as possible, in which case the pain and suffering that inevitably accompany it will not sting quite as much. In a sense, the less we get our hopes up to begin with and the less we come to expect out of our lives, the less we will feel let down in the long run. Our best course of action is to try and soften the blow, so to speak. Consequently, as Wicks suggests, "the result is an attitude of the denial towards our will-to-live, which Schopenhauer identifies with an ascetic attitude of renunciation, resignation, and willessness."³⁰⁶ Schopenhauer presents us with a more extreme case of nihilism than does the typical religious person, since earthly life seems entirely meaningless for him, whereas earthly life retains a kind of integral value for the religious person, insofar as it is thought to determine one's eternal destiny. Interestingly, it is the non-religious instances of nihilism, such as the case of Schopenhauer, that Nietzsche fears the most. In Part V, I will discuss how Nietzsche's notion that "God is dead!" captures this concern, but first I want to elaborate on the problematic nature of nihilism and why Nietzsche deems religion nihilistic.

While intellectual honesty and the pursuit of truth are among Nietzsche's highest values and religion is, in his view, objectionable insofar as it fails to uphold them, it is health that he

³⁰⁴ Robert Wicks, "Arthur Schopenhauer," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Section 4, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schopenhauer/> (accessed 14 Apr. 2012).

³⁰⁵ Wicks, *Arthur Schopenhauer*, Section 4.

³⁰⁶ Wicks, *Arthur Schopenhauer*, Section 5.

values above all else. Accordingly, Wicks points out that, in Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, "Nietzsche claims that the principle of 'life' is a more pressing and higher concern than that of 'knowledge,' and that the quest for knowledge should serve the interests of life."³⁰⁷ Likewise, Wicks points out that "this parallels how, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche looked at art through the perspective of life."³⁰⁸ As we've seen, honesty in the pursuit of truth certainly matters to Nietzsche, but living a healthy life ultimately matters much more. Not surprisingly, then, what makes nihilism (and, therefore, religion) particularly problematic for Nietzsche is that it is unhealthy and unnatural. Indeed, he thinks that nihilism is a sign of a psychologically diseased organism that cannot handle the reality of life.

Nietzsche argues that, instead of helping people survive and flourish, religion and other instances of the slave mentality spread decadence. Indeed, Nietzsche explicitly associates religion, especially Christianity, with weakness and mental illness throughout *The Anti-Christ*. In Section 5, for example, he suggests that "Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, failed, it has made an ideal out of whatever *contradicts* the preservation instincts of a strong life."³⁰⁹ Later, in Section 22, he writes, "Christianity wants to rule over *beasts of prey*; its method is to make them *sick*, —weakening is the Christian recipe for *domestication*, for 'civilization'."³¹⁰ And, in Section 52: "sickness belongs to the essence of Christianity, the typical Christian state of 'faith' has to be a form of sickness... 'Whatever makes things sick is *good*; whatever come from fullness, from over-fullness, from power is *evil*': this is how the faithful see things."³¹¹ Ultimately, Nietzsche believes that "Christianity is based on the rancor of

³⁰⁷ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 2.

³⁰⁸ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 2.

³⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 5.

³¹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 22.

³¹¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 52.

the sick, the instinct *against* the healthy, *against* health.”³¹² In view of these considerations, and of the popularity of Christianity and other instantiations of the slave mentality, he ultimately laments that “comparatively speaking, humans are the biggest failures, the sickliest animals who have strayed the most dangerously far from their instincts.”³¹³ Once again, further complicating matters is the fact that slaves do not recognize their own weakness and disease; hence, “they do not call themselves weak, they call themselves ‘the good’.”³¹⁴ Likewise, a priest “will instinctively deny that sickness is sickness.”³¹⁵

Nietzsche offers several specific examples of how religion is unhealthy. For instance, in his estimation, traditional conceptions of morality, which most religions inculcate in their teachings and doctrines, are unhealthy. This is why, when reflecting on Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Wicks suggests that “Nietzsche offers a competing account of the origin of moral values, aiming to reveal their life-negating foundations and functions.”³¹⁶ Recall that traditional conceptions of morality require us to set aside our own interests for the sake of attending to the interests of others. For example, utilitarians present arguments in favor of sacrificing oneself if doing so is for the greater good. This kind of self-sacrifice is, in Nietzsche’s view, unnatural and unhealthy, and it is arguably non-existent in the natural order of the world outside of humanity. In this vein, he writes, “I call an animal, a species, an individual corrupt when it loses its instincts, when it chooses, when it prefers things that will harm it.”³¹⁷ To be sure, this self-sacrifice afflicts many instantiations of the slave mentality, including the religious. After all, there are ample biblical verses imploring believers to live for the Lord or for

³¹² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 51.

³¹³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 14.

³¹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 17.

³¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 51.

³¹⁶ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 4.

³¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 6.

others and not for oneself. For example, Jesus says that “whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me,”³¹⁸ and “greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”³¹⁹

Moreover, while those proclaiming their religious faith are often praised and admired, Nietzsche believes that, in reality, they are weak and not worthy of admiration at all. He puts the point as follows: “men of faith, the ‘faithful’ of every type, necessarily dependent people,--the sort of people who cannot posit *themselves* as a goal...The ‘man of faith’ does not belong to *himself*, he can only be a means, he needs to be *used up*.”³²⁰ Likewise, he suggests that “the need for faith, for some unconditional yes or no...is a need of the *weak*.”³²¹ He alleges that the person of faith is diseased insofar as faith entails submission to a higher power and, in the process, the relinquishing of one’s own natural will to power. Accordingly, Nietzsche writes:

Every type of faith is an expression of self-abnegation, of self-alienation...Just think how the vast majority of people need some regulative guideline as an external principle of bondage or mooring, how compulsion, *slavery* in a higher sense, is the only and ultimate condition for the thriving of the weak-willed person.³²²

Not surprisingly, Nietzsche suggests that he and other free spirits (i.e. masters) are skeptics and abhor faith. Thus, he writes: “make no mistake about it: great spirits are sceptics. Zarathustra is a sceptic. The vigour, the *freedom* that comes from the strength and super-strength of spirit *proves* itself through skepticism.”³²³

Further, given Nietzsche’s naturalism, it should come as no surprise that he also views the supernatural concepts commonly associated with religion (e.g. souls and immortality) as

³¹⁸ Luke 9:23.

³¹⁹ John 15:13.

³²⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 54.

³²¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 54.

³²² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 54.

³²³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 54.

unhealthy, too. He emphasizes that religion entails an unhealthy negation of natural, earthly life by way of such supernatural emphases, suggesting, for instance, that “‘pure spirit’ is a pure stupidity: when we discount the nervous system and the senses, the ‘mortal shroud’, we *miscount*—nothing more,”³²⁴ and that “the enormous lie of personal immortality destroys all reason, everything natural in the instincts,--everything beneficial and life-enhancing in the instincts, everything that guarantees the future, now arouses mistrust.”³²⁵ For Nietzsche, religion (and other instances of the slave mentality) teaches people “to become *perfect* by acting like turtles and pulling their senses inside themselves, cutting off contact with worldly things and shedding their mortal shrouds.”³²⁶ Hence, a distinction arises between worldly dispositions (i.e. those that affirm earthly life) and other-worldly dispositions (i.e. those that negate earthly life by emphasizing supernatural phenomena). Instead of affirming earthly life and accentuating worldly concerns, Nietzsche suggests that religions cater to other-worldly emphases. Accordingly, for many religious individuals, the value of worldly life is thought to be diminished, insofar as earthly life is reduced to being a trial that dictates our fates in a more important future existence; for such individuals, earthly life becomes merely a test to see who is worthy of a place in heaven, rather than a prize to be enjoyed and naturally valued in itself. Thus, Nietzsche stresses that what really matters for many religious individuals is not what transpires—what they achieve or become—during their life on Earth, but whether they’re granted access into heaven afterward. Nietzsche, of course, objects to this, lamenting that “when the emphasis of life is put on the ‘beyond’ rather than on life itself—when it is put *on nothingness*--, then the emphasis has been completely removed from life.”³²⁷ When someone

³²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 14.

³²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 43.

³²⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 14.

³²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 43.

dies, it is not uncommon for religious individuals to comfort the deceased's loved ones by saying things like "they've moved on to a better place," but, for Nietzsche, whose naturalism admits of no such place, this kind of suggestion simply amounts to an unhealthy denial of reality. Due to other-worldly dispositions, time, energy, and resources are taken away from life-affirming activities, which Nietzsche clearly believes is unnatural and unhealthy. In sum, religion is unhealthy because its other-worldly nature is thought to undermine our prospects for a flourishing earthly existence. Interestingly, in the following, Richard Dawkins, who is associated with the New Atheism movement, articulates a position akin to Nietzsche's:

As a Darwinian, the aspect of religion that catches my attention is its profligate wastefulness, its extravagant display of baroque uselessness. Nature is a miserly accountant, grudging the pennies, watching the clock, punishing the smallest waste. If a wild animal habitually performs some useless activity, natural selection will favor rival individuals who instead devote time to surviving and reproducing. Nature cannot afford frivolous jeux d'esprit. Ruthless utilitarianism trumps, even if it doesn't always seem that way....Religious behavior in bipedal apes occupies large quantities of time. It devours huge resources. A medieval cathedral consumed hundreds of man-centuries in its building. Sacred music and devotional paintings largely monopolized medieval and Renaissance talent.³²⁸

Similarly, Nietzsche's problem with Christianity's God (and comparable gods of other religions) is that God becomes "the formula for every slander against 'the here and now', for every lie about the 'beyond'! God as the deification of nothingness, the canonization of the will to nothingness."³²⁹ In Nietzsche's view, this idea of God signals another way in which religion denatures reality, and it therefore provides further proof that religion is unhealthy. God ultimately becomes "a *contradiction of life*, instead of its transfiguration and eternal *yes!*"³³⁰

³²⁸ Richard Dawkins, "What Use Is Religion?," *secularhumanism.org*, http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/dawkins_24_5.htm (accessed 10 Apr. 2011); this article originally appears in the magazine *Free Inquiry* (Richard Dawkins, "What Use Is Religion?," *Free Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 5 (2004)).

³²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 18.

³³⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 18.

Nietzsche suggests that there is nothing about the Christian God that is worth worshipping, and he even goes so far as to deem such a God a “crime against life;” speaking to other free spirits (i.e. masters) like himself, he writes, “we are separated by the fact that we view the thing worshipped as God as pathetic, absurd, and harmful, not as ‘divine’” and “we do not treat it as a simple error but as a *crime against life*.”³³¹ Ultimately, Nietzsche believes that such a God is needed and advocated by weak individuals who cannot handle reality as it actually is.

Accordingly, in Section 17 of *The Anti-Christ*, he writes: “whenever the will to power falls off in any way, there will also be physiological decline, decadence. And when the most masculine virtues and drives have been chopped off the god of decadence, he will necessarily turn into a god of the physiologically retrograde, the weak.”³³²

In a similar vein, Nietzsche talks at length about the demerits of pity—a feeling that is often encouraged by most slaves, including the religious—in many of his works. In fact, he suggests that “pity is the *practice* of nihilism,”³³³ and that, “in the middle of our unhealthy modernity, nothing is less healthy than Christian pity.”³³⁴ For Nietzsche, the problem with pity is that it involves dwelling on pain and suffering. Instead of accepting pain and suffering as they come and then forgetting about them, those expressing pity remain focused on these conditions. Thus, Nietzsche writes, “pity has a depressive effect...[it] further intensifies and multiples the loss of strength which in itself brings suffering to life.”³³⁵ Similarly, he suggests that, “by *multiplying* misery just as much as by *conserving* everything miserable, pity is one of the main tools used to increase decadence—pity wins people over to *nothingness!*”³³⁶ According to

³³¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 47.

³³² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 17.

³³³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 7.

³³⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 7.

³³⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 7.

³³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 7.

Nietzsche, those expressing pity call attention to pain and suffering when they should be moving on to life's next challenge. Hence, "pity preserves things that are ripe for decline, it defends things that have been disowned and condemned by life, and it gives a depressive and questionable character to life itself by keeping alive an abundance of failures of every type."³³⁷ Alternatively, he praises Aristotle for recognizing the dangers associated with pity, saying, "Aristotle famously saw pity as a dangerous pathology that should be purged from the system every once in a while."³³⁸

Most would agree that fear and guilt, when not employed as a necessary means for some perceived good, are unwanted, as these feelings only engender psychological discomfort for those who experience them. To be sure, there are certainly instances when fear and guilt are warranted; for example, we are better off if we learn to fear crocodiles and most would agree that we ought to reproach ourselves for physically assaulting someone for no reason. However, on Nietzsche's account, religions often elicit and propagate *unnecessary* fear and guilt, which ultimately proves to be unhealthy. Wicks points this out when reflecting on *On the Genealogy of Morals*, writing that "Nietzsche continues with an account of how feelings of guilt, or the 'bad conscience,' arise merely as a consequence of an unhealthy Christian morality that turns an evil eye towards our natural inclinations."³³⁹ The suggestion here is that supernatural religions, like Christianity and Islam, exert so much control over some individuals that these individuals are riddled with unnecessary guilt regarding some of their most natural feelings and thoughts.³⁴⁰ Along these lines, Nietzsche claims that contempt of sexuality, or sexual prudishness, is anti-

³³⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 7.

³³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 7.

³³⁹ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 4.

³⁴⁰ As we will see in Chapter 3, James offers many relevant examples in his survey of religious cases comprising *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

natural, and that, as a result, “the preacher of chastity is a public incitement to anti-nature.”³⁴¹

Moreover, the emphasis on reward and punishment in a life hereafter, a prominent feature of many religions, naturally solicits *fear* over one’s eternal prospects. On Nietzsche’s account, this fear turns out to be unnecessary, since such supernatural belief is illusory.

Nietzsche also argues that Christianity is depressive and that it engenders misery. “It is Christian,” he writes, “to hate the *senses*, to hate enjoyment of the senses, to hate joy in general,” and, for the Christian, he thinks “dismal and upsetting thoughts have pride of place.”³⁴²

Interestingly, Nietzsche speaks at great length about Buddhism, another world religion, when depicting Christianity in this manner, juxtaposing these two major religions in terms of the general dispositions he thinks they facilitate. In contrast with Christianity, Nietzsche thinks that

Buddhism exudes cheerfulness and realizes its goal of minimizing conscious suffering. To be clear, Nietzsche still believes that Buddhism is slavish and nihilistic, as it encourages us to minimize our natural desires and, thus, does not embrace earthly life to the fullest extent

possible. On this point, he says, “I do not want my condemnation of Christianity to lead me to be unfair to a related...religion, *Buddhism*. The two belong together as nihilistic religions.”³⁴³

Nevertheless, while Buddhism is still slavish to a degree, it avoids the pervasive feelings of dread and misery that Nietzsche thinks accompany other supernatural religions, like Christianity, and, as a result, Nietzsche is careful to clearly demarcate Buddhism from Christianity, suggesting that “there are the most striking differences between them”³⁴⁴ and that “Buddhism is a hundred times more realistic than Christianity.”³⁴⁵ In fact, Nietzsche believes that Buddhism is one-of-a-

³⁴¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

³⁴² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 21.

³⁴³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 20.

³⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 20.

³⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 20.

kind when it comes to religions, claiming that “Buddhism is the only really *positivistic* religion in history.”³⁴⁶ He reaches this conclusion because he thinks that Buddhism “has stopped saying ‘war against *sin*’ and instead, giving reality its due, says ‘war against *suffering*’,”³⁴⁷ and because, “in sharp contrast to Christianity, it has left the self-deception of moral concepts behind,—it stands, as I put it, *beyond* good and evil.”³⁴⁸ Similarly, he suggests that “Buddhism is a hundred times colder, truer, more objective. It no longer needs to make its suffering, its susceptibility to pain *respectable* by interpreting it as a sin.”³⁴⁹ Likewise, when expounding on what he calls the three Christian virtues—faith, love, and hope—he says “I call them the three Christian *shrewdnesses*,”³⁵⁰ and he specifically mentions that “Buddhism is too mature, too positivist to be shrewd like this.”³⁵¹ According to Nietzsche, whereas Christianity engenders misery and depression, the Buddha “insists on ideas that produce either calm or amusement.”³⁵² This is explained, in turn, by the further fact that Buddhism is

...based on *two* physiological facts that it always keeps in mind: *first*, an excessively acute sensitivity that is expressed as a refined susceptibility to pain, and *second*, having lived all too long with concepts and logical procedures, an over-spiritualization that has had the effect of promoting the ‘impersonal’ instincts at the expense of the personal ones... These physiological conditions [which Nietzsche believes afflict Christianity and other religions, but not Buddhism] give rise to *depression*.³⁵³

In other words, Nietzsche asserts that Buddhism appreciates the problems associated with the self-sacrificing nature of other slavish religions. Thus, he suggests that “the Buddha detects a spiritual fatigue that manifests itself in an all-too-great ‘objectivity’ (which is to say an

³⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 20.

³⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 20.

³⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 20.

³⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 23.

³⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 23.

³⁵¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 23.

³⁵² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 20.

³⁵³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 20.

individual's diminished sense of self-interest, loss of a centre of gravity, loss of 'egoism'), he combats this by leading even the most spiritual interests directly back to the *person*."³⁵⁴ In contrast to Christianity and other popular religions, "the highest goals [of Buddhism] are cheerfulness, quiet, and an absence of desire, and these goals are *achieved*."³⁵⁵

Recall that Nietzsche thinks the priestly caste is much to blame for the falsifications he associates with religion, as discussed in Part III. Nietzsche also believes that priests are largely responsible for the unhealthy aspects of religion, including, for example, many of the difficulties he associates with common conceptions of God. Accordingly, he suggests that "the *reality* behind this pitiful lie [i.e. the idea of a moral world order] is: a parasitical type of person who thrives at the expense of all healthy developments of life—the *priest*—, abuses the name of God: he gives the name 'kingdom of God' to a state of affairs where the priests determine the value of things."³⁵⁶ When this happens, "the parasitism of the priests (or the 'moral world order') takes every natural custom, every natural institution (state, judicial order, marriage, care for the sick and the poor), everything required by the instinct of life, in short everything *intrinsically* valuable, and renders it fundamentally worthless, of *negative* value."³⁵⁷ He argues that, from this priestly perspective, people "should suffer so that they are always in need of a priest."³⁵⁸ In a similar fashion, he claims that the church "lived on distress, it *created* distress in order to eternalize *itself*;"³⁵⁹ consequently, he remarks: "parasitism as the church's only practice; drinking all the blood, all the love, all the hope out of life with its ideals of anaemia and 'sanctity'; the

³⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 20.

³⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 21.

³⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 26.

³⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 26.

³⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 49.

³⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

beyond as the will to negate every reality...against life itself.”³⁶⁰ He echoes these sentiments throughout *The Anti-Christ*, writing, for instance, that “for the type of person who wields power inside Judaism and Christianity, a *priestly* type, decadence is only a *means*: this type of person has a life-interest in making humanity *sick* and twisting the concepts ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘true’ and ‘false’ to the point where they endanger life and slander the world.”³⁶¹ Elsewhere, he reflects that “wherever the influence of theologians is felt, value judgments are turned on their heads and the concepts of ‘true’ and ‘false’ are necessarily inverted: whatever hurts life the most is called ‘true’, and whatever improves, increases, affirms, justifies life or makes it triumph is called ‘false’.”³⁶² What’s more, he believes that the problems stemming from priests are exacerbated by the fact that priests are usually viewed as praiseworthy and exemplary individuals; this causes them to become popular and viewed as necessary figures in society, thanks to which their influence becomes even more pronounced. Conversely, since Nietzsche himself thinks that “every type of anti-nature is a vice,”³⁶³ he concludes in the final section of *The Anti-Christ* that “the priest is the most vicious type of person: he *teaches* anti-nature. Priests are not to be reasoned with, they are to be locked up.”³⁶⁴ In sum, priests denature reality by promulgating supernatural notions, which are thought to be nihilistic and unhealthy. Not surprisingly, then, Nietzsche thinks that the priest “should be ostracized, starved, driven into every type of desert.”³⁶⁵

I should note that, as was the case regarding his portrayal of the relationship between religion and truth, many will find Nietzsche’s depiction of the relationship between religion and

³⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

³⁶¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 24.

³⁶² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 9.

³⁶³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

³⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

³⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

health inadequate and unwarranted. To be sure, some will deny his assertion that Christianity engenders misery, and there are, after all, many Christian writers who talk about and emphasize joy. While Nietzsche may be right to suggest that some religious individuals are prone to misery, there are certainly religious individuals—including Christians—who are not (as will become clear in Chapter 3). Moreover, while Nietzsche suggests that religion is unhealthy and detrimental to earthly life, there are clearly some cases of religious individuals who inspired positive effects in this life. Take, for example, the instances of positive social reform initiated by prominent religious thinkers, such as the well-known case of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was a Christian minister. Finally, one could argue that, in his juxtaposition of Christianity with Buddhism, Nietzsche compares Christianity at its worst with Buddhism at its best. Despite such concerns, Nietzsche clearly believes religion is antithetical to health and to earthly life, constituting a kind of psychological disease. In view of this, he offers a remedy: what most human beings, especially the religious, need, Nietzsche advises, is a “revaluation of all values.”

V. Nietzsche’s Remedy: Revaluation of All Values

As I’ve intimated throughout this chapter, Nietzsche seems to view himself as being, first and foremost, a kind of psychologist, primarily interested in the science of human nature. Consider, for instance, some of his topics in *The Anti-Christ*, where he discusses, among other things: the “psychology of the redeemer,”³⁶⁶ the psychology and constitution of Jesus Christ,³⁶⁷ the psychology of redemption,³⁶⁸ “the psychology of the ‘evangel’,”³⁶⁹ “the psychology of every

³⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 28.

³⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 29.

³⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 30.

³⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 33.

Chandala morality,”³⁷⁰ the “psychology of the opposing concepts of *noble* morality and *ressentiment* morality,”³⁷¹ and the psychology of faith.³⁷² Also consider the title of Kaufmann’s celebrated classic on Nietzsche: *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*. What’s more, Wicks, when reflecting on Nietzsche’s final work, *Ecce Homo*, suggests that, in view of his own aptitude for psychological observation, “Nietzsche claims to be wise as a consequence of his acute aesthetic sensitivity to nuances of health and sickness in people’s attitudes and characters.”³⁷³ In fact, as Wicks points out, many interpret Nietzsche’s famous notion of “eternal recurrence” as both a measure of psychological health and as a means for promoting it.³⁷⁴ In this vein, Wicks observes that “the doctrine also functions as a measure for judging someone’s overall psychological strength and mental health, since Nietzsche believed that the doctrine of eternal recurrence was the hardest world-view to affirm,”³⁷⁵ and he points out that some scholars believe that the doctrine of eternal recurrence offers “one way to interpret the world among many

³⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 45.

³⁷¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 24.

³⁷² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 50.

³⁷³ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 5.

³⁷⁴ There is no consensus among scholars regarding the true meaning behind Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence, and there is much debate over whether Nietzsche primarily intended for it to 1) express a cosmological theory about how the world is or, instead, 2) serve as a kind of life-affirming instrument. Those endorsing a cosmological interpretation claim Nietzsche is suggesting that the universe consists of a finite number of physical entities and that time is infinite, in which case every possibility will inevitably become actualized and everything actualized will eventually occur again and again, eternally. There does seem to be some support for this interpretation; consider, for example, what Zarathustra says in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “must not whatever *can* walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before?” (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Section 2 (“On the Vision and the Riddle”) of the Third Part). Alternatively, other scholars suggest that the idea of eternal recurrence is best viewed as a kind of instrument for affirming one’s life in this world. Along these lines, Wicks writes that “Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence (sections 285 and 341) serves to draw attention away from all worlds other than the one in which we presently live, since eternal recurrence precludes the possibility of any final escape from the present world” (Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 3). Similarly, in his acclaimed history of Western philosophy, Frederick Copleston claims that “the theory of the eternal recurrence was a test of strength, of Nietzsche’s power to say ‘yes’ to life instead of the Schopenhaurian ‘no’” (Frederick Copleston, *A History Of Philosophy (Volume 7, Part 2): Schopenhauer To Nietzsche* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1965), 169), and that “the theory of eternal recurrence expresses Nietzsche’s resolute will to this-worldliness” (Copleston, *Schopenhauer to Nietzsche*, 190). On this account, we see how Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence is thought to counteract the unhealthy influence of religion and its nihilistic, other-worldly emphases.

³⁷⁵ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 3.

others, which if adopted therapeutically as a psychologically healthy myth, can help us become stronger.”³⁷⁶ In essence, Nietzsche seems to fancy himself a kind of doctor who specializes in mental health. There can be no doubt that Nietzsche believes he has a penchant for health, as he routinely says things like, “it is my privilege to have the finest sense for all signs of healthy instincts. I do not have any sickly features.”³⁷⁷ Provided Nietzsche truly is adept at diagnosing sickness in people’s attitudes and characters, it remains to be seen whether his potential cure for these mental ills—the revaluation of all values—actually proves to be an effective remedy.

Contrary to the anti-natural and nihilistic values of Christianity and other religions (as well as of atheism as practiced by Schopenhauer and others), Nietzsche himself advocates natural values and adamantly preaches the “affirmation of life” throughout his works. In Nietzsche’s view, life is never something to bemoan, and his life-affirming mentality is at odds with the pessimistic perspective of the slave.^{378, 379} This is why, in describing the viewpoint of the free and noble kind of individual (i.e. masters like himself), he writes that “nothing can be tolerated less in this type than ugly manners or a pessimistic look, an eye that *makes things ugly*,”³⁸⁰ and “the critic of Christianity cannot help but make Christianity look *despicable*.”³⁸¹ From the perspective of Nietzsche and other masters, “‘*the world is perfect*’—this is how the instinct of the most spiritual people speaks, the yes-saying instinct.”³⁸² Not surprisingly, Nietzsche concludes *The Anti-Christ* by officially condemning Christianity, saying, “I condemn

³⁷⁶ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 3.

³⁷⁷ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 10 of “Why I Am So Clever”.

³⁷⁸ Interestingly, Nietzsche suffered a great deal of pain during his life; in fact, he was often violently ill and suffered from migraine headaches, as well as numerous other chronic ailments, throughout his life. If anyone had a reason to embrace Schopenhauer’s pessimism and to dwell on the pain and suffering implicit in life, it would be Nietzsche.

³⁷⁹ In Chapter 3, Nietzsche’s optimistic demeanor toward life compels me to question James’s contention that Nietzsche is overly brooding and *pessimistic*.

³⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 57.

³⁸¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 57.

³⁸² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 57.

Christianity, I indict the Christian church on the most terrible charges an accuser has ever had in his mouth. I consider it the greatest corruption conceivable.”³⁸³ What’s more, he adds that “the Christian church has not left anything untouched by its corruption,”³⁸⁴ and says “I call Christianity the one great curse.”³⁸⁵

Making matters worse for Nietzsche, slaves disrupt the appearance and flourishing of masters, and he routinely points out how the interests of masters and slaves are at odds with each other. Accordingly, in Section 3 of *The Anti-Christ*, he writes:

This more valuable type has appeared often enough already: but only as a stroke of luck, as an exception, never as *willed*. In fact *he* was precisely what people feared most; so far, he has been practically the *paradigm* of the terrible;--and out of terror, the opposite type was willed, bred, *achieved*: the domestic animal, the herd animal, the sick animal: man,—the Christian.³⁸⁶

Also, he suggests that Christian values and noble values provide “the greatest opposition of values there is,”³⁸⁷ given that “Christianity is a rebellion of everything that crawls on the ground against everything that has *height*”³⁸⁸ and that the church forms a “deadly hostility to everything honest, to every *height* of the soul, to every discipline of spirit, to everything kind and candid in humanity.”³⁸⁹ It should not be surprising that, since “the grand poses struck by these *sick* spirits, these conceptual epileptics, can affect the great masses,”³⁹⁰ “Christianity won, and with this, a *nobler* sensibility was destroyed,”³⁹¹ which leads Nietzsche to conclude that “Christianity has been the worst thing to happen to humanity so far.”³⁹² In fact, he puts Christians on par with

³⁸³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

³⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

³⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

³⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 3.

³⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 37.

³⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 43.

³⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 37.

³⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 54.

³⁹¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 54.

³⁹² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 51.

anarchists, suggesting that “both are decadents, neither one can do anything except dissolve, poison, lay waste, *bleed dry*, both have instincts of *mortal hatred* against everything that stands, that stands tall, that has endurance, that promises life a future.”³⁹³ Nietzsche goes so far as to suggest Christians rendered “the entire work of the ancient world *in vain*,”³⁹⁴ expounding on this idea, he writes:

Greeks! Romans! The nobility of the instincts and of taste... defiled by sly, secretive, invisible, anaemic vampires! Not defeated,--just sucked dry!...The hidden need for revenge, petty jealousy come to *power*! Everything miserable, suffering from itself, plagued by bad feelings, the whole *ghetto world* of the soul risen *to the top* in a single stroke!³⁹⁵

In general, Nietzsche alleges that “the church waged moral combat on everything noble on earth.”³⁹⁶

Furthermore, Nietzsche expresses contempt for his contemporaries, who he believes have become aware of the lies and falsities associated with the church and yet continue to allow priests and other forms of religious decadence to persist and dominate society. In fact, he feels so incensed by this religious tolerance that he describes his feelings toward it as “blackest melancholy.”³⁹⁷ While he suggests that he is “careful not to hold humanity responsible for its mental illnesses,”³⁹⁸ he clearly is not so patient when it comes to his contemporaries, writing that “our age *knows better*”³⁹⁹ and that “what used to be just sickness is indecency today.”⁴⁰⁰ He adds that “the concepts ‘beyond’, ‘Last Judgment’, ‘immortality of the soul’, the ‘soul’ itself; these are instruments of torture, these are systems of cruelty that enable the priests

³⁹³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 58.

³⁹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 59.

³⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 59.

³⁹⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 60.

³⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 38.

³⁹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 38.

³⁹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 38.

⁴⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 38.

to gain control, maintain control... Everyone knows this: *and yet everything goes on as before.*⁴⁰¹ He is particularly upset with his fellow Germans, suggesting that “if we do not get rid of Christianity, it will be the fault of the *Germans*,”⁴⁰² and that Germans “have robbed Europe of the last great cultural harvest that it still could have brought home,--the *Renaissance*.”⁴⁰³ Nietzsche believes that the Renaissance offered an invaluable opportunity for “the *revaluation of all Christian values*, an attempt using all means, all instincts, all genius, to allow the *opposite values, noble values* to triumph,”⁴⁰⁴ which “would have been the victory that I am the only one demanding these days--: with this, Christianity was *abolished!*”⁴⁰⁵ According to Nietzsche, this opportunity was wasted with the arrival of Martin Luther; as he puts it: “What happened? A German monk, Luther, came to Rome.”⁴⁰⁶ Nietzsche claims that Luther “had all the vindictive instincts of a wounded priest”⁴⁰⁷ and “flew into a rage in Rome *against* the Renaissance.”⁴⁰⁸ Moreover, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche expresses similar concerns about slave moral theories (which, again, most religions incorporate), writing:

In all “sciences of morals” so far one thing was *lacking*, strange as it may sound: the problem of morality itself; what was lacking was any suspicion that there was something problematic here. What the philosophers called “a rational foundation for morality” and tried to supply was, seen in the right light, merely a scholarly variation of the common *faith* in the prevalent morality; a new means of *expression* for this faith... certainly the very opposite of an examination, analysis, questioning, and vivisection of this very faith.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 38.

⁴⁰² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 61.

⁴⁰³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 61.

⁴⁰⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 61.

⁴⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 61.

⁴⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 61.

⁴⁰⁷ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 61.

⁴⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 61.

⁴⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 186.

The implication here is that moral philosophers (who are themselves slaves) have done nothing but reinforce the slave mentality. Indeed, the slave mentality seems to be present in all walks of life, and this is a point that Nietzsche painfully recognizes.

However, in *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche does express hope regarding the prospects of masters, suggesting, for instance, the following:

There is a continuous series of individual successes in the most varied places on earth and from the most varied cultures; here, a *higher type* does in fact present itself, a type of overman in relation to humanity in general. Successes like this, real strokes of luck, were always possible and perhaps will always be possible. And whole generations, families, or peoples can sometimes constitute this sort of bull's eye, *right on the mark*.⁴¹⁰

Also, Nietzsche believes that the illusory nature of supernatural religions is becoming increasingly apparent thanks to society's increased interest in science, suggesting that "there might still be no shortage of people who are unaware of the extent to which 'faith' is indecent—or a mark of decadence, of a broken will to life--, but people will certainly be aware of this tomorrow."⁴¹¹ Here, Nietzsche intimates that the fraudulent nature of religion will become more readily apparent as interest in science continues to increase (I will elaborate on this shortly). As this occurs, Nietzsche thinks that the continued endorsement of religion turns from somewhat innocent self-deception to something more egregious and devious, suggesting that "the criminality of being Christian increases with your proximity to science."⁴¹² In the end, Nietzsche's prescription ultimately requires the abandonment of the slave mentality and the implementation of the master mentality, and I now turn to an analysis of what this process entails.

⁴¹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 4.

⁴¹¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 50.

⁴¹² Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 62.

Most instances of nihilism and the slave mentality are essentially rooted in what Nietzsche calls “idealism.” When faced with philosophical quandaries regarding their existence, and perhaps feeling helpless and/or hopeless as a result, slaves fabricate ideals (traditional conceptions of morality, traditional philosophy, and religions) in order to cope with existence, generating the various forms of idealism. Nietzsche despises idealism, which, for him, denotes beliefs in various ideals that are thought to take on some kind of “real” or “objective” significance, that signal something “above” or “beyond” the natural world, for the sake of which believers often live their lives. In religious instances, for example, earthly life can be viewed as a kind of test to see who is worthy of eternal bliss in a life hereafter. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche expounds on what he thinks happens as a result: “the truth of the matter is that the highly conscious *conceit of being chosen* is putting on airs of modesty here: people firmly put *themselves*, the ‘congregation’, the ‘fair and the good’ on one side, the side of ‘truth’—and everything else, ‘the world’, on the other.”⁴¹³ While these ideals are thought to constitute “the truth,” they are, in reality, deceptions. This, in turn, is why Michael Haar suggests that “nihilism...is thus for Nietzsche the manifestation of an enormous lie, of delusion, and ultimately, of despair.”⁴¹⁴ For Nietzsche, idealism reflects, among other things: 1) “the real catastrophe” of his life;⁴¹⁵ 2) “the greatest objection to existence;”⁴¹⁶ 3) “vice” and “anti-nature;”⁴¹⁷ 4) “life preserving errors”⁴¹⁸ and “a *means for preservation*;”⁴¹⁹ 5) ignorance of

⁴¹³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 44.

⁴¹⁴ Michel Haar, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, trans. Michael Gendre, ed. Michael Gendre (New York: State University Of New York Press, 1996), 141.

⁴¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 2 of “Why I Am So Clever”.

⁴¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 3 of “Why I Am So Clever”.

⁴¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 5 of “Why I Write Such Good Books”.

⁴¹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 110 in Book Three.

⁴¹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 4.

oneself;⁴²⁰ 6) “the real riddle that the animal ‘man’ poses for the philosopher;”⁴²¹ 7) “a source of misfortune and man’s loss of value;”⁴²² 8) “*lies* arising from the bad instincts of sick natures who were harmful in the deepest sense;”⁴²³ and, in sum, 9) “poisons.”⁴²⁴ Ultimately, Nietzsche considers idealism to be not only illusory, but, more importantly, unhealthy.

Nietzsche considers the revaluation of all values essential on the road to recovery from idealism/nihilism. But what, precisely, is this revaluation of all values and, more importantly, how is it thought to cure nihilism? According to Nietzsche, the revaluation of all values is the “formula for an act of humanity’s highest self-examination”⁴²⁵ and indicates “a courageous becoming-conscious.”⁴²⁶ Hence, while “not to know oneself” is the “prudence of the idealist,”⁴²⁷ the revaluation of all values provides Nietzsche’s patient with a strong dose of *self-knowledge*, or *self-consciousness*. Nietzsche’s patients must adopt a strict regimen of self-analysis, and Nietzsche maintains that his task is to prepare “for humanity’s moment of highest self-examination, a *great noon*.”⁴²⁸ What does self-knowledge or self-examination entail? In one word: honesty. First and foremost, this will require that Nietzsche’s patient not be deceived by illusions but, instead, unearth what lies behind them. Hence, Nietzsche’s patient must evaluate these ideals critically and, in a sense, “see through himself and history,”⁴²⁹ as “he who lets concepts, opinions, past events, and books, step between himself and things...will never have an

⁴²⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 344.

⁴²¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 39.

⁴²² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 80.

⁴²³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 10 of “Why I Am So Clever”.

⁴²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 223.

⁴²⁵ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 1 of “Why I Am a Destiny”.

⁴²⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 1007.

⁴²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 344.

⁴²⁸ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 2 of “Daybreak”.

⁴²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 68.

immediate perception of things and will never be an immediately perceived thing himself.”⁴³⁰ On Nietzsche’s view, *all* “convictions are prisons.”⁴³¹ In essence, Nietzsche’s patient must become a master, and he or she must cease indulging in the illusions of idealism. I will express some doubts regarding the efficacy of Nietzsche’s prescription (i.e. the revaluation of all values), but first I want to briefly discuss Nietzsche’s views regarding the evolution of idealism and the stages of nihilism that correspond to this evolution, which I first alluded to in Part IV.

Indeed, Nietzsche speaks as if there is a natural progression pertaining to nihilism, which can be likened to a play consisting of three acts: 1) the onset of idealism (what Gilles Deleuze, another prominent Nietzsche scholar, refers to as “negative nihilism”); 2) the devaluation of idealism (which is brought about, in large part, by increased interest in science, and involves the self-destruction of negative nihilism); and 3) the devaluation of all values (what Deleuze calls “reactive nihilism”). All three stages are nihilistic in that they entail depreciation of earthly life, but, for Nietzsche, the third stage reflects the decisive danger⁴³²—a complete disregard for life itself, and the loss of all values. The first stage of nihilism consists of the onset of idealism. Again, Deleuze refers to this stage as “negative nihilism,” which “signifies the value of nil taken on by life, the fiction of higher [i.e. other-worldly] values which give it this value and the will to nothingness which is expressed in these higher values.”⁴³³ The second stage of nihilism consists of the devaluation of these (often other-worldly) ideals, such as heaven and hell. This stage marks a transition between negative nihilism and reactive nihilism, the final act in the nihilistic drama, and it is similar to Nietzsche’s own revaluation of all values. In this second stage, the

⁴³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 181.

⁴³¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 54.

⁴³² As we will see, this is why Nietzsche’s often-misunderstood utterance “God is dead!” is an expression of his apprehensions regarding an ideal- and religion-less future.

⁴³³ Gilles Deleuze. *Nietzsche & Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 147.

higher ideals posited in the first act are questioned, and, ultimately, negated. As Deleuze puts it, the “supersensible world and higher values are reacted against, their existence...denied.”⁴³⁴ Heidegger suggests that, at this point, the “decrepitude of the upper-most values edges toward consciousness.”⁴³⁵ Finally, instead of negating unearthly ideals and affirming earthly life itself, reactive nihilism—Deleuze’s term for the final act of the nihilistic drama—consists of negating both (à la Schopenhauer). Whereas negative nihilism depreciates worldly values while esteeming other-worldly values, reactive nihilism deprecates *all* values, and, consequently, the earth is no longer even valuable as a means to some higher end, let alone as an end in itself. The conclusion of the nihilistic drama demarcates nihilism in its most acute sense, as life is deemed completely devoid of value. This is why Nietzsche suggests that the death of idealism, “which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism.”⁴³⁶ Now, “everything lacks meaning,” and “the untenability of one interpretation of the world [i.e. idealism], upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that *all* interpretations of the world are false.”⁴³⁷ In turn, contempt and resentment toward life emerge thanks to this sense of futility (this is, again, reminiscent of Schopenhauer). With this, the drama has unfolded. In the beginning, the slave is faced with the confusing and chaotic abyss that defines his or her existence and the suffering implicit in it. Feeling helpless, the slave fabricates ideals by which he or she attempts to justify his or her existence. Inevitably, the process backfires, and the slave ultimately questions his or her own idealism. As a result, the slave then rejects these ideals and negates all values.

⁴³⁴ Deleuze. *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, 147.

⁴³⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche (Volume IV): Nihilism*, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1982), 32.

⁴³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 1.

⁴³⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 1.

As I suggested, Nietzsche stresses that, as science becomes more influential in our everyday lives, the true nature of the slave's illusions will inevitably be revealed for what they really are, and, as his derision for his contemporaries suggests, he thinks this has already happened to some extent. Indeed, Nietzsche predicts that the eventual demise of idealism will come as greater emphasis is placed on science and logic, and that a great noontide of consciousness will eventually arise. Additionally, he believes that this will serve as a significant apex in human history, thanks to which his philosophy will attract a larger audience of potential free spirits. Ironically, the self-destruction of idealism is inherent in its own structure, most notably in the ideals of science and truth. Nietzsche believes that science itself entails idealism insofar as its adherents possess "the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being."⁴³⁸ As a result, science "speeds irresistibly toward its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck,"⁴³⁹ and finally "logic coils up...and bites its own tail."⁴⁴⁰ Ultimately, the truth about reality—that there are no underlying objective truths, as existence is chaos and flux—is revealed, and there is a reaction against the futile nature of all forms of idealism.

What occurs at this stage of the drama—that is, when idealism naturally self-destructs—is very similar to Nietzsche's own prescription: the revaluation of all values, which serves as "the axe that will chop at the root of humanity's 'metaphysical need'."⁴⁴¹ Nietzsche's revaluation of all values occurs when all predominant values are destroyed, or transcended, *and* new positive and life-affirming ones are constructed to replace them. Unfortunately, unless those involved in the second act of the nihilistic drama "see the light"—that is, unless they execute something like

⁴³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 95.

⁴³⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 97.

⁴⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *The Birth Of Tragedy*, 98.

⁴⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 6 of "Human, All Too Human".

Nietzsche's own revaluation of all values—and begin to value the earth (the antithesis of nihilism), the axe they wield will not sever the root of the problem (the deprecation of earthly life) and their efforts will actually generate a condition far worse than the one from which they began. Nietzsche himself is just as leery about this stage of the nihilistic drama because it generally leads to the third and final act, and he certainly does not consider the transition from negative nihilism to reactive nihilism to be a healthy one. How, then, are Nietzsche's "patients" to avoid this exact same fate?

Optimally, Nietzsche's prescription—the revaluation of all values—is supposed to destroy all predominant values (i.e. nihilistic ones), and then construct new, life-affirming values to replace them, whereas the normal course of the disease will result in the absence of all values. But might this idolization of—and aspiration for—life-affirmation be nothing more than a hopeful *ideal*? Does Nietzsche offer any additional instructions to help his patients avoid the typical nihilistic fate resulting from the second stage of the nihilistic drama? Kaufmann expresses his doubts, writing that “the result is less a solution of the initial problem than a realization of its limitations.”⁴⁴² If Nietzsche cannot ensure that this dissolution of idealism does not yield reactive nihilism, then what was previously a minor infection could become far worse. Kaufmann puts the point rather well: “Now it may be asked: if Nietzsche thus criticizes and helps to destroy prevalent values, does he not hasten the advent of nihilism...does he not help to bring about that catastrophic vacuum which he is prophesying?”⁴⁴³ Expressing similar concerns, Copleston wonders whether there is “in him and his philosophy the embodiment of the very nihilism for which he professed to supply a remedy.”⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴² Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*, 82.

⁴⁴³ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*, 109.

⁴⁴⁴ Copleston. *Schopenhauer To Nietzsche*, 191.

To his credit, Nietzsche was not blind to the difficult nature of treating nihilism. Nietzsche recognized that, for many, lacking an ideal means lacking a sense of direction, and this can certainly be problematic. This is why he refers to idealism as entailing “life preserving errors”⁴⁴⁵ and as “a *means for preservation*,”⁴⁴⁶ and it explains the concern underlying his famous admonition, “God is dead!” This is an expression he utters at various points in his works, including *The Gay Science*⁴⁴⁷ and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,⁴⁴⁸ and it is reflected in the following well-known passage from *The Gay Science*:

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?”⁴⁴⁹

The proclamation “God is dead!” is often misinterpreted because readers fail to take notice of what Nietzsche is referring to when making it—namely, the problems that would likely plague an atheistic society, which the madman hints at here. Again, these are problems that Nietzsche himself was very aware of and extremely concerned about. Indeed, while Nietzsche was certainly a non-believer and a persistent critic of religion, he anticipated a great void that would be left behind in the wake of God’s death (i.e. the cessation of belief in God). Although religious individuals value life on Earth for insufficient and invalid reasons, at least they still value life to some extent (insofar as it is necessary for the afterlife). Ultimately, Nietzsche is afraid that, with

⁴⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 110 in Book Three.

⁴⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Section 4.

⁴⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, sections 108 and 125 in Book Three and Section 343 in Book Five.

⁴⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Section 2 in “Zarathustra’s Prologue” and Section 3 (“On the Pitying”) of the Second Part.

⁴⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 125 in Book Three.

God's death, life will lose any value it once had for these believers. Interestingly, many hastily write Nietzsche off as a nihilist because they assume that, by eradicating all prior ideals and announcing that God is dead, Nietzsche implicitly denounces all value. However, as many scholars, such as Copleston, are quick to point out, "he does not mean to imply that all respect for values should be abandoned and all self-restraint thrown overboard."⁴⁵⁰ Again, in Nietzsche's opinion, we ought to ideally renounce all forms of nihilism, and emphasize life itself. However, how, if at all, Nietzsche can avoid crushing all values—given the death of God and of idealism in general—must be duly considered.

While Nietzsche's concept of the "overman" has been the subject of much debate in Nietzsche scholarship, it seems to me that the concept might be of use when trying to elucidate how Nietzsche hopes to promote a healthy reevaluation of all values while avoiding the similar devaluation of values inherent in the transition from negative nihilism to reactive nihilism. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra tells a herd of men at the marketplace the following:

*I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?...The overman is the meaning of the earth...I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so let them go.*⁴⁵¹

We see here that the overman signifies, in essence, Nietzsche's master type; the overman rejects the idealism plaguing the slave mentality and, instead, remains faithful to the earth, embracing Nietzsche's naturalism and nothing more. Indeed, the overman is able to resist the usual temptations associated with his or her existential anxieties, such as indulging in illusions of ultimate purposes and objective standards. Consequently, the overman designates "a type that

⁴⁵⁰ Copleston. *Schopenhauer To Nietzsche*, 177.

⁴⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Section 3 of "Zarathustra's Prologue".

has the highest constitutional excellence, in contrast to ‘modern’ people, to ‘good’ men, to Christians and other nihilists.”⁴⁵² Wicks, reflecting specifically on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, suggests the following with respect to Nietzsche’s notion of the overman:

Nietzsche also filled the work with nature metaphors, almost in the spirit of pre-Socratic naturalist philosophy, which invoke animals, earth, air, fire, water, celestial bodies, plants, all in the service of describing the spiritual development of Zarathustra, a solitary, reflective, exceedingly strong-willed, sage-like, laughing and dancing voice of heroic self-mastery who, accompanied by a proud, sharp-eyed eagle and a wise snake, envisions a mode of psychologically healthier being beyond the common human condition. Nietzsche refers to this higher mode of being as “superhuman” (*ü bermenschlich*), and associates the doctrine of eternal recurrence — a doctrine for only the healthiest who can love life in its entirety — with this spiritual standpoint, in relation to which all-too-often downhearted, all-too-commonly-human attitudes stand as a mere bridge to be crossed and overcome.⁴⁵³

In a sense, the overman overcomes what it means to be a human being, insofar as Nietzsche suggests in *The Gay Science* that a human being has “one additional need—the need for the ever new appearance of such teachers and teachings of a ‘purpose’.”⁴⁵⁴

Indeed, whereas Nietzsche describes a human being as “a fantastic animal” who “*has* to believe, to know, from time to time *why* he exists,”⁴⁵⁵ his overman must cease to ask the question “Why?” altogether, as this is what then spawns the problematic purposes and standards inherent in idealism. Only in this case does one cease to falsely judge the earth and truly value and represent earthly life as it is—as unstructured and at each moment becoming something entirely different. Ultimately, the overman no longer feels the need to judge life at all, and, in the process, Nietzsche thinks he or she ascribes to life its greatest value. Hence, Nietzsche’s overman accepts and embraces earthly life exactly as it is, and, in doing so, exemplifies

⁴⁵² Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 1 of “Why I Write Such Excellent Books”.

⁴⁵³ Wicks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Section 4.

⁴⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 1 in Book One.

⁴⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 1 in Book One.

Nietzsche's formula for human greatness: "*amor fati*: that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just to tolerate necessity...but to love it."^{456, 457} Nietzsche himself confesses, "I do not have the slightest wish for anything to be different from how it is."⁴⁵⁸ Thus, Nietzsche's overman provides us with a recipe for avoiding reactive nihilism while rejecting all instantiations of idealism, including the religious: namely, by ignoring existential anxiety and the question "Why?", as well as the "answers" provided by various forms of idealism. Naturally, it seems prudent to examine the practicality of this cure. Assuming his patient has already relinquished his diseased values, can Nietzsche convince his patient to stop asking "Why?" altogether? Can he preclude the possibility that his patient will relapse into a reactive, nihilistic stupor? How realistic are the prospects of becoming an overman?

VI. Conclusion

Interestingly, Nietzsche suggests that the honest pursuit of truth is frequently at odds with the pursuit of happiness, and that, in turn, the tension between these two pursuits underlies the prevalence of faith and other examples of deception that he associates with religion (and with idealism in general). In this vein, he writes the following in a letter to his sister Elisabeth in 1865:

Every true faith is indeed infallible; it performs what the believing person hopes to find in it, but it does not offer the least support for the establishing of an objective truth. Here the ways of men divide. If you want to achieve peace of

⁴⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 10 of "Why I Am So Clever".

⁴⁵⁷ I find it interesting that this presents almost a mirror image of Søren Kierkegaard's formula for *faith* in *The Sickness Unto Death*: "By relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the Power which constituted it" (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 262).

⁴⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 9 of "Why I Am So Clever".

mind and happiness, then have faith; if you want to be a disciple of truth, then search.⁴⁵⁹

James echoes Nietzsche's sentiments about the power and allure of happiness when it comes to considerations of truth, writing that "with such relations between religion and happiness, it is perhaps not surprising that men come to regard the happiness which a religious belief affords as a proof of its truth. If a creed makes a man feel happy, he almost inevitably adopts it."⁴⁶⁰

Ultimately, Nietzsche makes it clear that he thinks the pursuit of truth is not an easy or pleasurable path, and, as we have seen, he thinks it is a path seldom travelled as a result. Hence, "it requires greatness of soul: the service of truth is the hardest service."⁴⁶¹ In fact, in *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes, "it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the 'truth' one could still barely endure—or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would *require* it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified."⁴⁶² Presumably writing for those who are capable of traversing the more difficult path, Nietzsche asserts in the preface to *The Anti-Christ* that "this book belongs to the very few,"⁴⁶³ and he warns his readers that "when it comes to spiritual matters, you need to be honest to the point of hardness just to be able to tolerate my seriousness, my passion."⁴⁶⁴ Finally, the juxtaposition of religion with science also reflects the divergent paths of happiness and truth. On the one hand, in the case of religion, the emphasis is thought to be on happiness and comfort, while, on the other hand, in the case of science, truth is thought to be the highest priority.

⁴⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Christopher Middleton, ed. Christopher Middleton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1969), 7.

⁴⁶⁰ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 78.

⁴⁶¹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 50.

⁴⁶² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 39.

⁴⁶³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Preface.

⁴⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Preface.

Since Nietzsche suggests that a sincere concern for truth can come at the expense of happiness, the deception he associates with slaves should not come as much of a surprise. Nietzsche himself identifies the psychological impetus for such dishonesty: since they cannot accept life on earth as it really is, they must cope by inventing lies and falsehoods that allay the discomfort associated with this reality. That is, without these deceptions their lives would be filled with misery and dread. Oddly enough, then, the slave's self-deception turns out to be a kind of necessity, in which case it would also seem *natural*. After all, on Nietzsche's own account, the slave cannot survive without such deceptions (they are "life preserving errors" and "a means for preservation"), and he acknowledges that there is a reason human beings adopt such convictions, suggesting that "it is the profound, suspicious fear of an incurable pessimism that forces whole millennia to bury their teeth in and cling to a religious interpretation of existence."⁴⁶⁵ Hence, engaging in idealism is by no means a superfluous endeavor, but is, instead, seemingly necessary for their *health*—some human beings *need* religion and idealism in order to avoid despair and, thus, *survive!*

As a result, I cannot help but question the practicality of Nietzsche's cure. While Nietzsche claims that "*we ourselves, we free spirits, already constitute a 'revaluation of all values', a living declaration of war on and victory over all old concepts of 'true' and 'untrue',*"⁴⁶⁶ I'm skeptical that Nietzsche's overman is practically feasible for the vast majority of human beings. As I suggested a moment ago, becoming an overman seems to require us to overcome what it means to be human in the first place—to cease asking "Why?" and to ignore our existential anxieties. A psychologist like Nietzsche ought to acknowledge and respect, first and

⁴⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 59.

⁴⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Section 13.

foremost, what it means to actually be human, and thus recognize, among other things, the very trait that distinguishes human beings from all other modes of existence: spirit, or self-reflective being (self-consciousness). What's more, the health a psychologist is concerned with entails the health of this spirit or self-reflective nature (i.e. *mental* health). For better or worse, it is our *nature* not to be content with simply existing, given our consciousness of our existence. Hence, given the self-conscious existence human beings inherit, asking "Why?" seems inevitable. So too, indulging in idealism in order to satiate this existential reflection seems like a natural response, since existential anxieties can otherwise yield despair. The upshot is that being human is dangerous and extremely uncomfortable, and, as a result, a human being "needs a vision, a goal, a sense of direction."⁴⁶⁷ In my estimation, Nietzsche failed to grasp the extent to which the need to ask "Why?" and to satiate the existential anxiety associated with our self-reflective nature are defining characteristics of what it means to be human; hence, they cannot be so easily ignored. Unfortunately, Nietzsche conceptualizes health under the assumption that such necessary byproducts of our self-reflective nature can be ignored. In fact, for Nietzsche, it seems that good health comes to mean precisely this: overcoming a human being's natural inclination to question existence (and to then subsequently indulge in idealism). However, since this does not seem very realistic, it looks as though Nietzsche's notion of health is misleading and problematic.

Furthermore, mental health (or lack thereof) can have significant effects on physical well-being (as e.g. suicide and stress), and when it comes to *human* beings *mental* health is vital for flourishing. Mental health is, in turn, directly related to one's sense of security and well-being with respect to the existential anxieties arising from self-consciousness. In my view, Nietzsche

⁴⁶⁷ Copleston, *Schopenhauer To Nietzsche*, 174.

fails to appreciate and acknowledge the mental stability religions (and other instances of idealism) can help facilitate. While Nietzsche frequently suggests that idealism is negatively correlated with health, it would seem that idealism, if anything, positively impacts one's health. After all, the idealist is, in a sense, less troubled by the question "Why?", or even ceases to ask it altogether, since he or she allows him- or herself to indulge in answers. At the very least, one must wonder whether those like Nietzsche, who actively downplay the significance of a human being's existential reflections, are able to foster the kind of peace of mind that religions, and other instances of idealism, seem to offer. I argue that, by proposing his revaluation of all values, what Nietzsche actually does is jeopardize the mental stability of slaves, because their existential reflections and anxieties are brought back into focus. They must face the chaos once more, only to ask the question "Why?" all over again, as this is what they are *naturally* inclined to do. Yet, Nietzsche supposes this regression to be healthy, because he minimizes the importance of alleviating and satisfying the existential needs that religions and other instances of idealism provide. In sum, I contend that Nietzsche's brand of thoroughgoing naturalism would prove unsatisfactory for the vast majority of people—namely, those Nietzsche would label as "slaves." For this reason, I must conclude that Nietzsche's prescription for a revaluation of all values and for a submission to his brand of naturalism is simply not a promising or realistic option for most people; regardless of whether Nietzsche is right to suggest that they are too weak for it, the fact remains that "slaves," by definition, find the master mentality, and the thoroughgoing naturalism upon which it rests, unsatisfactory, and they simply will not—or cannot—settle for it.

Moreover, when it comes to the issue of health, and, perhaps even more importantly, to Nietzsche's advice for how to go about adopting a healthy, life-affirming attitude, we should not

forget to consider Nietzsche's own health. I have already alluded to Nietzsche's pervasive physical ailments in Footnote 378, and there is good reason to believe that his mental health was suspect throughout much of his life as well. In addition to the ten-year period of insanity at the end of his life, Nietzsche documents bouts of melancholy and existential crises throughout his life. Consider, for example, the following samples:

“There were dark moments meanwhile, whole days and nights when I did not know any longer how to go on living and when a black despair attacked me, worse than I have ever known before.”⁴⁶⁸

“I am a half-madman who suffers in the head and whom long solitude has confused completely.”⁴⁶⁹

“I no longer see why I should live for another six months—everything is boring, painful.”⁴⁷⁰

“A few times I also thought of the opposite: driving my solitude and renunciation to its ultimate point and—”⁴⁷¹

“The barrel of a revolver is for me now a source of relatively pleasant thoughts.”⁴⁷²

“I confess, I am even more pleased about my non-readers, people who have never heard either my name or the word ‘philosophy’.”⁴⁷³

While most would admit to having their own personal problems, and to having experienced great melancholy on occasion, Nietzsche was clearly unable to master the art of life-affirmation, and he can hardly be considered a model for healthy living, or a person worth approaching for any kind of related advice. In fairness, perhaps he was merely trying to embody an ideal that he

⁴⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 282.

⁴⁶⁹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*, 58.

⁴⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 203.

⁴⁷¹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*, 59.

⁴⁷² Nietzsche, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 206.

⁴⁷³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Section 2 of “Why I Write Such Good Books”.

believed to be the best one, without ever thinking or maintaining that he had, in fact, fully realized it.

In conclusion, I concur with many of Nietzsche's views regarding the illusory nature of various forms of idealism, including, most notably, many of those instantiated in religion. However, I question the sagacity of the prescriptive implications arising from his take on the relationship between religion (and idealism in general) and health, as well as his celebrated espousal of the revaluation of all values. Thus, I am ultimately inclined to agree with Kaufmann, who argues that "Nietzsche attains greatness through his diagnoses rather than through his prescriptions."⁴⁷⁴ Despite what Nietzsche suggests, religion does not seem to be inherently counterproductive to the well-being of individuals. In the next chapter, I explore the thesis advanced by James that religion is, in fact, vitally useful to individuals insofar as it delivers a kind of existential satisfaction that is otherwise unattainable.

⁴⁷⁴ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*, 146.

CHAPTER 3:

William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

I. Introduction

William James is a central figure in many contemporary discussions of the philosophy of religion, and for good reason: one of his many notable works, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (hereafter “*Varieties*”), provides us with one of the most thorough investigations of religious phenomena ever conducted. Transcriptions of 20 lectures James presented in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1901 and 1902 comprise *Varieties*; he was tasked with presenting the material for these lectures thanks to an honorary appointment at the University of Edinburgh. James, who is just as much a psychologist as he is a philosopher, offers a penetrating analysis of the psychological nature of religious beliefs in particular, expounding on what he takes to be the many effects, both good and bad, of such beliefs for the individuals who subscribe to them. Indeed, James is a psychologist by training, a fact which he alludes to in the very beginning of *Varieties*, where he suggests that this discipline yields the one vantage point from which he feels he can make fruitful contributions to the topic at hand, asserting, among other things, that “psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed.”⁴⁷⁵

As we shall see, of the three thinkers discussed in this dissertation, James offers by far the most sympathetic perspective of religion’s utility. Interestingly, he himself was not especially religious—as Wayne Proudfoot points out, James’s “background provided him with an interest

⁴⁷⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Introduction and Notes by Wayne Proudfoot (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 16. All subsequent references to “*Varieties*” refers to this edition of the text unless otherwise noted.

in religion without affiliation with any particular religious community. His was very much a Protestant culture, but he came to the study of religion with neither commitment to nor cultivation in any doctrinal tradition.”⁴⁷⁶ While not particularly religious, James is able to appreciate what he takes to be the genuine spiritual and existential value religion holds for others. Perhaps it is for these reasons that James is able to present a generally well-reasoned, even-handed perspective of the utility of religion.

The *utility* of religion is certainly of interest to James, as his emphasis on the practical effects of religion is palpable throughout *Varieties*, where he offers a robust and fair account of the significant effects, both good and bad, religion has in everyday life. Of course, such an emphasis on the practical effects of religion should not come as a surprise to those familiar with James, as it would seem to be an obvious byproduct of the pragmatism he is known for championing. James has become almost universally associated with pragmatism, and he explicitly adopts it as his own methodology for approaching religion in *Varieties*. In his lecture on philosophy,⁴⁷⁷ James outlines the inadequacies of the philosophy of religion, which emphasizes rational demonstration of religious belief, suggesting it ought to be transformed into what he calls “science of religion.” Rather than rational demonstrations of religious beliefs, this science of religion concerns itself with the practical consequences of religious beliefs. In establishing his own pragmatic approach to religion, James also appeals to the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, regarded by most as the father of pragmatism.⁴⁷⁸

In addition to his general espousal of pragmatism, key distinctions introduced by James highlight his emphasis on the utility of religion. For example, his distinction between existential

⁴⁷⁶ James, *Varieties*, xv.

⁴⁷⁷ I am referring to Lecture XVIII in *Varieties*, which is titled “Philosophy”.

⁴⁷⁸ James, *Varieties*, 383-384.

judgments and propositions of value illustrates his emphasis on the utility of religion. He couches this distinction in the form of two questions: “What are the religious propensities?” and “What is their philosophic significance?”⁴⁷⁹ He stresses that keeping these questions clear and distinct is vital to his own project, and that he is chiefly concerned with the latter. The first question has to do with facts about religion’s origins and history, and the latter pertains to its usefulness or value to us. James asks, “how can such an existential account of facts of mental history decide in one way or another upon their spiritual significance?”⁴⁸⁰ He points out that many positive results can emerge from a belief with a questionable or suspect origin, and he concludes: “you see that the existential facts by themselves are insufficient for determining the value.”⁴⁸¹ To be sure, the difference between the source or origin of a religious belief and its value for the individual subscribing to it is a common theme throughout *Varieties*. James also suggests that it shouldn’t matter whether a religious individual’s belief is ultimately inspired by a natural and organic cause or a supernatural one—all that ought to matter are the effects of such belief. “When we think certain states of mind superior to others,” he asks us to consider, “is it ever because of what we know concerning their organic antecedents?”⁴⁸² James answers with an emphatic “No!” and claims, instead, that we believe they are superior for one of two reasons: either “we take an immediate delight in them; or else it is because we believe them to bring us good consequential fruits for life.”⁴⁸³ James’s emphasis on the utility of religion, as opposed to its underlying cause, is encapsulated by the “empirical criterion” he defends: “by their fruits ye

⁴⁷⁹ James, *Varieties*, 17.

⁴⁸⁰ James, *Varieties*, 18.

⁴⁸¹ James, *Varieties*, 18.

⁴⁸² James, *Varieties*, 26.

⁴⁸³ James, *Varieties*, 26.

shall know them, not by their roots.”⁴⁸⁴ Clearly, given the nature of his analysis and his own points of emphasis, James’s reflections are germane to my assessment of the utility of religion.

Much of *Varieties*, especially the first half of the book, consists of James describing the phenomenon of religion and detailing its multifarious types; for the most part, extended discussions about religion’s utility don’t appear until the second half of the book, and, even then, extensive description and case studies are interspersed. Indeed, in *Varieties*, James spends significant time explicating what he means to indicate by “religion,” as well as describing the varieties of religious experience arising out of such a conception. What’s more, I think that due consideration of James’s description of what he takes to be religious phenomena is vitally important when analyzing what he says regarding religion’s utility. As we shall see later, this is no small matter—I will suggest that different conceptions of religion constitute a confounding variable for any survey of what thinkers such as Mill, Nietzsche, and James suggest regarding religion’s utility, and that they specifically underlie some of the apparent differences between James’s and Nietzsche’s perspectives regarding religion’s utility. In view of this, I begin the chapter with a discussion of James’s descriptive account of religion (Part II) before then proceeding to an analysis of what he says regarding religion’s utility (Part III), and I conclude by offering some general reflections on *Varieties* (Part IV). I now turn to Part II, where I outline what James means by “religion,” demarcate what specific aspects of religion he proposes to analyze in *Varieties*, and detail his primary and well-known categorizations of religious experience.

⁴⁸⁴ James, *Varieties*, 30.

II. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

A. James's Definition of "Religion" and the Scope of His Inquiry

James is well aware of the difficulty associated with trying to offer a definition of religion, and he only settles on his own definition after acknowledging and emphasizing the difficulty of the exercise. Accordingly, he writes, "most books on the philosophy of religion try to begin with a precise definition of what its essence consists of," yet "the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name."⁴⁸⁵ Having said this, he continues, "yet this need not prevent me from taking my own narrow view of what religion shall consist in *for the purpose of these lectures*... This, in fact, is what I must do."⁴⁸⁶ And so, in his empirical, pragmatic, and psychological approach to religious experience, James defines religion as "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*"⁴⁸⁷ He then elaborates on this basic definition, refining it for his purposes throughout much of the first half of *Varieties*.

He acknowledges that "controversy comes up over the word 'divine',"⁴⁸⁸ and he seeks to further clarify what he means by the term as a result. Not surprisingly, this discussion quickly turns to the notion of "God" as traditionally conceived (i.e. as a being possessing supernatural qualities), and whether belief in such a God is a necessary ingredient in religion. James suggests that belief in God is *not* a necessary component of religious experience. Indeed, on his account, Buddhism and Transcendentalism both qualify as religions, despite the fact that neither of them

⁴⁸⁵ James, *Varieties*, 35.

⁴⁸⁶ James, *Varieties*, 37.

⁴⁸⁷ James, *Varieties*, 39.

⁴⁸⁸ James, *Varieties*, 39.

entails belief in God. Because “the sort of appeal that Emersonian optimism, on the one hand, and Buddhistic pessimism, on the other, make to the individual and the sort of response which he makes to them in his life are in fact indistinguishable from, and in many respects identical with, the best Christian appeal and response,”⁴⁸⁹ James argues that we have good reason to call them “religious.” After characterizing Transcendentalism and quoting Emerson, James writes, “it would be too absurd to say that the inner experiences that underlie such expressions of faith as this and impel the writer to their utterance are quite unworthy to be called religious experiences.”⁴⁹⁰ Ultimately, he concludes that, from his “experiential point of view,” he must “call these godless or quasi-godless creeds ‘religions’” and “interpret the term ‘divine’ very broadly, as denoting any object that is *godlike*, whether it be a concrete deity or not.”⁴⁹¹ I should note that, although he includes belief systems some might not be so inclined to call religious, James is not alone in thinking of religion so broadly. Recall, for instance, my earlier discussion of J.S. Mill’s similar conception of religion.⁴⁹²

There are some important implications associated with James’s broad view of religion that I think warrant attention here. Proudfoot raises some valid concerns about James’s broad conception of religion, suggesting that, “as is, it allows us to call a madman’s delusion of having kissed the Virgin Mary his religion.”⁴⁹³ Proudfoot further speculates that one whose “relation to the divine is one of skepticism” might, on James’s definition, also be construed as religious.⁴⁹⁴ Moreover, while many—and perhaps most—would associate religion with belief in a supernatural God, James clearly does not limit himself to cases where this belief is present.

⁴⁸⁹ James, *Varieties*, 41.

⁴⁹⁰ James, *Varieties*, 41.

⁴⁹¹ James, *Varieties*, 44.

⁴⁹² See Part I of Chapter 1.

⁴⁹³ James, *Varieties*, 464.

⁴⁹⁴ James, *Varieties*, 464.

Therefore, he does not require what is, at least for many who contemplate the nature of religion, an *essential* ingredient of it. However, while there may be a general tendency to associate religion with belief in a supernatural God, James points out that many nonetheless do associate atheistic belief systems, such as those mentioned above, with religion. He suggests that “there are systems of thought which the world usually calls religious, and yet which do not positively assume a God. Buddhism is in this case.”⁴⁹⁵ Ultimately, since James does not confine himself to an analysis of phenomena where belief in a supernatural God is present, we ought to be on guard against conflating what he says regarding religion’s utility with assessments of religion’s utility incorporating narrower and exclusively-supernatural conceptions of God (e.g. Nietzsche’s)—to do so would obviously be a mistake. In Section B of Part III, the significance of James’s conception of religion is amplified by my juxtaposition of his notion of religion with Nietzsche’s.

Naturally, one of the chief byproducts of James’s broad conception of religion is that the term comes to denote a wide range of experiences. Indeed, the diverse nature of religious experience is a central theme throughout *Varieties*, as James clearly makes it a point to emphasize this aspect of religion. When beginning to define religion, for example, he says, “let us rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion.”⁴⁹⁶ Later, he suggests:

The whole outcome of these lectures will, I imagine, be the emphasizing to your mind of the enormous diversities which the spiritual lives of different men exhibit. Their wants, their susceptibilities, and their capacities all vary and must be classed under different heads. The result is that we have really different types of religious experience.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁵ James, *Varieties*, 39.

⁴⁹⁶ James, *Varieties*, 40.

⁴⁹⁷ James, *Varieties*, 104.

In fact, despite the extraordinary breadth of James's own survey of religious experience in *Varieties*, this wide-ranging nature of religion compels him to stress that "the field of religion being as wide as this, it is manifestly impossible that I should pretend to cover it."⁴⁹⁸ As a result, James readily admits that he cannot possibly hope to offer an adequate analysis of all aspects of religion, and the extremely diverse nature of the subject requires him to focus on a more clearly defined portion of it.

To this end, James tries to better define the scope of his own inquiry by articulating what he does *not* intend to discuss—i.e. to "say what aspects of the subject we leave out."⁴⁹⁹ It is at this point that James offers his well-known distinction between individual religious experiences and organized religion. Specifically, he speaks of "one great partition which divides the religious field," where "on the one side of it lies institutional, on the other personal religion."⁵⁰⁰ He associates theology and ecclesiasticism with institutional religion, and reserves the designation of personal religion for the original and personal religious experiences of individuals, which have less to do with outside influences, such as the traditions of a church. He describes institutional religion as a kind of externally-oriented experience, suggesting that, "were we to limit our view to it, we should have to define religion as an external art, the art of winning the favor of gods."⁵⁰¹ Personal religion, on the other hand, entails the opposite and reflects a kind of internally-oriented experience; here, it is "the inner dispositions of man himself which form the centre of interest."⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁸ James, *Varieties*, 36.

⁴⁹⁹ James, *Varieties*, 37.

⁵⁰⁰ James, *Varieties*, 37.

⁵⁰¹ James, *Varieties*, 37.

⁵⁰² James, *Varieties*, 37.

Having distinguished individual religion from institutional religion, James then narrows the scope of his inquiry by opting to focus solely on individual religion. “I propose to ignore,” he says, “the institutional branch entirely...to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple.”⁵⁰³ In a similar vein, he asserts, “the immediate personal experiences will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all.”⁵⁰⁴ What’s more, when evaluating the fruits of “saintliness,” which he takes to refer to “the ripe fruits of religion in a character”⁵⁰⁵ (and which I will return to in Section A of Part III), James reminds his readers that, “in critically judging of the value of religious phenomena, it is very important to insist on the distinction between religion as an individual personal function, and religion as an institutional, corporate, or tribal product” and that “the religious experience which we are studying is that which lives itself out within the private breast.”⁵⁰⁶ Note that this emphasis on individual religious experiences is in his basic definition of religion, according to which he chooses to focus on “the feelings, acts, and experiences of *individual men in their solitude*.”

Aside from needing to narrow the scope of his inquiry in order to make his task more manageable, James makes it clear that he has additional reasons for leaving out the institutional elements of religion from his purview. For one, he argues that many of the ill effects commonly associated with religion are the result of its institutional elements, and he suggests that these negative effects can make it difficult for some people to glean the advantages associated with more private religious experiences. On this point he reflects that “when we hear the word ‘religion’ nowadays, we think inevitably of some ‘church’ or other; and to some persons the word ‘church’ suggests so much hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of

⁵⁰³ James, *Varieties*, 37.

⁵⁰⁴ James, *Varieties*, 39.

⁵⁰⁵ James, *Varieties*, 220.

⁵⁰⁶ James, *Varieties*, 267.

superstition that in a wholesale undiscerning way they glory in saying that they are ‘down’ on religion altogether.”⁵⁰⁷ In emphasizing the personal aspects of religion, James hopes to avoid this kind of rash and unwarranted dismissal of religion. Furthermore, James believes institutional religion offers a watered-down version of religious experience, whereas private religion is more authentic and informative. Along these lines, he suggests that an examination of individual religious experiences will prove more revelatory and enriching to those investigating the nature of religion than an examination of its institutional elements. Accordingly, he writes, “it would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life [i.e. the products of institutional religion]. We must make search rather for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct.”⁵⁰⁸

Proudfoot points out that “*Varieties* has been criticized for its individualism, and for James’s lack of attention to ritual, doctrine, and the social and institutional contexts of religious experiences. Each of these is a function of the deliberately ahistorical character of his inquiry.”⁵⁰⁹ Granting that he must limit himself to certain aspects of religion, given his wide-reaching definition of it, I, too, want to mention some reservations I have regarding James’s exclusion of the institutional elements of religion. To begin with, one commonly finds that the way in which a religious individual comes to be religious (i.e. the impetus for his or her individual religious experience) is, for better or worse, significantly affected by institutional and social elements of religion. After all, many—if not most—adults who consider themselves religious were raised going to church services regularly, participated in the social and other events affiliated with a church, and would acknowledge that their perspectives on a number of

⁵⁰⁷ James, *Varieties*, 267.

⁵⁰⁸ James, *Varieties*, 19.

⁵⁰⁹ James, *Varieties*, xxvii.

important issues were shaped by the various church doctrines they were taught at these services and events. Daniel Dennett echoes my point here, suggesting that one “could hardly deny that those social and cultural factors hugely affect the content and structure of the individual’s experience.”⁵¹⁰ If this is the case, it would seem that one cannot hope to adequately address individual religion without also touching upon the social and institutional elements that so often inspire it. Proudfoot echoes this point, asking “how are we able to properly identify and describe an experience [of an individual] that is reported in a particular text without attention to the specific language and historical and social context of the text and of the event to which it testifies?”⁵¹¹ Suffice it to say that partitioning the social and the private elements of religion from one another, as James proposes to do, is not an easy matter.

Also, by excluding the institutional element of religion from his investigation, James seems to be ignoring what many take to be an essential ingredient of religion. After all, when we hear the word “religion,” many of us automatically conjure up images of churches and church doctrines (not to mention temples, synagogues, mosques, shrines, holy sites, etc.), just as James himself suggests. Thus, just as there are those who think of religion as entailing belief in a supernatural God, many are naturally inclined to include institutional elements in any discussion of religion. For them, what it means to be religious is implicitly tied to these institutions. Therefore, in proposing “to ignore the institutional branch entirely,” I would argue James is, in a sense, proposing to ignore what many of us take to be a very integral part of religion. One could then suggest that, in explicitly choosing to ignore the institutional component of religions, what James has to say no longer seems to reflect religion, per se, but something more akin to the

⁵¹⁰ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 11.

⁵¹¹ James, *Varieties*, xxvii.

private, spiritual experience of individuals. We ought, once again, to bear these considerations in mind when considering what James says about the utility of religion. Also, both sides of the religious partition affect human beings in significant ways, and, contrary to James, I am not limiting myself to a discussion of individual religion. One can't deny (nor does James try to) that religious institutions introduced throughout history have had significant and long-lasting effects on the welfare of human beings, and, where utility of religion is the concern, it seems prudent to consider such effects. I will offer a more extended discussion of this point in Section A of Part III.

B. James's Characterization and Categorization of Religious Experience

Having offered his general definition of religion early on in *Varieties* and established that he seeks to concern himself only with individual religion, James continues to flesh out what he means by religious experience throughout the remainder of the lectures. In doing so, he expounds on two chief characteristics of religious experience: 1) belief in the reality of the unseen (i.e. the *godlike*) and 2) a significant adjustment to that reality. Accordingly, when describing "religion in the broadest and most general terms possible," James says it amounts to "belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul."⁵¹² He elaborates on each of these hallmarks of religion, beginning with the "belief in an object which we cannot see."⁵¹³ When it comes to religion's essential belief in the reality of the unseen, James

⁵¹² James, *Varieties*, 57.

⁵¹³ James, *Varieties*, 57.

starts by observing that such belief comes in many forms and by way of many objects of belief. On this point, he is quick to mention that these objects of belief result from abstract ideas, not from any kind of physical experience or sensation. These objects of belief vary in terms of their abstractness, according to James, but the entire spectrum of religious objects of belief, including those that are more “concrete,” stem from the realm of ideas, not from physical sensation or observation. Hence, as James observes, even in “the more concrete objects of most men’s religion, the deities whom they worship, are known to them only in idea.”⁵¹⁴ Additionally, James claims that “the absence of definite sensible images is positively insisted on by the mystical authorities in all religions.”⁵¹⁵

What’s more, despite having not originated in the corporeal realm of our everyday experience, these objects of religious worship still inspire significant changes within it, and even in the case of more abstract objects of worship, such as “God’s holiness” and “God’s justice,” the effect of such belief on the physical world can be just as potent; in this respect, “religion is full of abstract objects which prove to have an equal power.”⁵¹⁶ In his explication of this point, James offers an extended discussion of Immanuel Kant, whom he thinks shares his perspective regarding the ability of objects of belief arising from “pure ideas” to inspire practical effects in the physical world; he concludes this discussion by observing:

Theoretically speaking they [i.e. words and phrases like “God,” “the design of creation,” and “the soul”] are words devoid of any significance. Yet strangely enough they have a definite meaning *for our practice*. We can act *as if* there were a God; feel *as if* we were free; consider Nature *as if* she were full of special designs; lay plans *as if* we were immortal; and we find then that these words do make a genuine difference in our moral life...So we have the strange phenomenon, as Kant assures us, of a mind believing with all its strength in the

⁵¹⁴ James, *Varieties*, 57.

⁵¹⁵ James, *Varieties*, 58.

⁵¹⁶ James, *Varieties*, 58.

real presence of a set of things of no one of which it can form any notion whatsoever.⁵¹⁷

We see, then, that religious belief in the reality of the unseen is thought to elicit significant changes in both the physical and psychological realms of experience. To be sure, while they may arise from “pure ideas,” such religious objects of belief are nevertheless an essential part of reality for those who believe in them. Hence, “beings they are,” James observes, “beings as real in the realm which they inhabit as the changing things of sense are in the realm of space.”^{518, 519} In fact, James claims, “they are as convincing to those who have them as any direct sensible experiences can be, and they are, as a rule, much more convincing than results established by mere logic ever are.”⁵²⁰

Interestingly, James suggests that belief in the reality of the unseen is usually not a byproduct of any kind of intellectual analysis, but, rather, tends to stem from something more akin to sensation or feeling. On this point, he claims:

We may now lay it down as certain that in the distinctively religious sphere of experience, many persons (how many we cannot tell) possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended... The feeling of reality may be something more like a sensation than an intellectual operation properly so-called.⁵²¹

Hence, the source for religious belief in the reality of the unseen is not something we hear, smell, taste, touch, or see, yet James suggests it is more akin to these kinds of sensations than it is to any kind of analytical thought process. According to James, “it is as if there were in the human

⁵¹⁷ James, *Varieties*, 58.

⁵¹⁸ James, *Varieties*, 60.

⁵¹⁹ At this point in his analysis, James references Plato, whom he suggests “gave so brilliant and impressive a defense of this common human feeling, that the doctrine of the reality of abstract objects has been known as the platonic theory of ideas ever since” (James, *Varieties*, 60).

⁵²⁰ James, *Varieties*, 73.

⁵²¹ James, *Varieties*, 66.

consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call ‘*something there,*’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed.”⁵²² James goes so far as to say that this sense of the unseen is sometimes felt to be even stronger than ordinary sensation,⁵²³ and he concludes that, in this regard, “we are dealing with a well-marked natural kind of fact.”⁵²⁴

James juxtaposes mysticism with rationalism during his examination of the relationship between the feelings and intellectual processes (or lack thereof) underlying religious belief in the reality of the unseen. On James’s account, mysticism reveals a more private kind of truth and is rooted in inarticulate feelings and sensations, while rationalism advocates a version of truth that can be fully articulated and verified via intellectual analysis; he puts the point as follows: “the opinion opposed to mysticism in philosophy is sometimes spoken of as *rationalism*. Rationalism insists that all our beliefs ought ultimately to find for themselves articulate grounds.”⁵²⁵ He then defends the merits of mysticism from the frequent intrusions of rationalism, suggesting that, when it comes to many phenomena of life, and not just religious ones, feelings actually precede and rule over logic and reason.⁵²⁶ As a result, he concludes that “if you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits,” and he suggests that “this inferiority of the rationalistic level in founding belief is just

⁵²² James, *Varieties*, 61.

⁵²³ James, *Varieties*, 62.

⁵²⁴ James, *Varieties*, 63.

⁵²⁵ James, *Varieties*, 74.

⁵²⁶ This notion is supported by many passages in *Varieties*, such as the following: “So with fear, with indignation, jealousy, ambition, worship. If they are there, life changes. And whether they shall be there or not depends almost always upon non-logical, often on organic conditions. And as the excited interest which these passions put into the world is our gift to the world, just so are the passions themselves *gifts*” (James, *Varieties*, 138).

as manifest when rationalism argues for religion as when it argues against it.”⁵²⁷ Ultimately, James believes, religious belief, like many other elements of life, will only “make sense” to an individual if it is already rooted in a deeper-seated feeling or sensation, which can be known only by the individual. Hence, he suggests, “the truth is that in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion.”⁵²⁸ For those who do have this kind of religious feeling, logic and reason usually pose little threat to the religious beliefs that arise from it. On this point, he observes, “if you do have them [i.e. religious sensations], and have them at all strongly, the probability is that you cannot help regarding them as genuine perceptions of truth, as revelations of a kind of reality which no adverse argument, however unanswerable by you in words, can expel from your belief.”⁵²⁹ In sum, when it comes to religious beliefs, as well as many other kinds of beliefs, “instinct leads, intelligence does but follow. If a person feels the presence of a living God after the fashion shown by my quotations, your critical arguments, be they never so superior, will vainly set themselves to change his faith.”⁵³⁰

In addition to belief in the reality of an unseen power, James claims religion entails a significant adjustment to this reality. In this sense, it engenders a significant existential reaction, thanks to which religion delivers existential relief to believers. As James says, “religion, whatever it is, is a man’s total reaction upon life.”⁵³¹ James characterizes this element of the religious experience as “that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence,” and he claims “this sense of the world’s presence” makes us react “about life at

⁵²⁷ James, *Varieties*, 74.

⁵²⁸ James, *Varieties*, 75.

⁵²⁹ James, *Varieties*, 74.

⁵³⁰ James, *Varieties*, 75

⁵³¹ James, *Varieties*, 42.

large.”⁵³² Moreover, this existential reaction is something the religious individual takes very seriously. Hence, James claims that, “for common men ‘religion,’ whatever more special meanings it may have, signifies always a serious state of mind.”⁵³³ Further characterizing this sentiment imbedded in religion, he suggests, “if any one phrase could gather its universal message, that phrase would be, ‘All is *not* vanity in this Universe, whatever the appearances may suggest.”⁵³⁴ Similarly, he states, “the divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest.”⁵³⁵

James’s fairly well-known distinction between once-born and twice-born religious types is rooted in this essential adjustment to the higher, unseen power. The division of these two types ultimately stems from their different perspectives of “evil,” which is to be taken here in both a moral and a natural sense (i.e. in addition to moral wrongs, it incorporates natural pain and suffering associated with earthly life). Generally speaking, if the evil aspects of life are not considered to be a major concern to the religious individual, he or she is deemed “once-born.” The basic idea is that such an individual receives the good religion is thought to deliver immediately, without any deliberations on evil and prolonged preoccupation with pain and suffering. The once-born type still undergoes a kind of existential transformation as a result of his or her religious beliefs, after which he or she sees existence in a new, reinvigorating light, but it is not necessary to venture beyond the bounds of this earthly world to solicit such relief. If, on the other hand, the religious individual suffers significantly first, going through trials and tribulations before receiving deliverance via religion, he or she is said to be “twice-born.” On

⁵³² James, *Varieties*, 42.

⁵³³ James, *Varieties*, 44.

⁵³⁴ James, *Varieties*, 44.

⁵³⁵ James, *Varieties*, 45.

James's account, the twice-born cannot find salvation within the confines of earthly life, and so they must travel beyond it, into the supernatural realm, in order to alleviate their fixation on the ills of life. In the case of the once-born type, the existential reaction central to religious experience is of a more rudimentary kind, while for the twice-born type it is of a more complex nature and involves overcoming a significant "existential crisis." In turn, these two religious types are born out of two kinds of natural dispositions toward evil: the healthy-minded and the morbid-minded. Describing these two kinds of attitudes and how they influence religious development, James says:

The sanguine and healthy-minded live habitually on the sunny side of their misery-line, the depressed and melancholy live beyond it, in darkness and apprehension. There are men who seem to have started in life with a bottle or two of champagne inscribed to their credit; whilst others seem to have been born close to the pain-threshold, which the slightest irritants fatally send them over... Does it not appear as if one who lived more habitually on one side of the pain-threshold might need a different sort of religion from one who habitually lived on the other?⁵³⁶

Interestingly, James maintains that the twice-born type offers a more developed or genuine kind of experience, which I will say more about shortly. First, however, I shall offer a bit more detail regarding each of these important religious types.

Thanks to his or her religious belief, the once-born type recognizes the good inherent in earthly life and is happy with his or her natural conditions therein. Therefore, the pain and suffering implicit in natural existence do not constitute any considerable difficulty for the once-born type, and any concerns about evil are short-lived. In fact, this type often proactively seeks to minimize such concerns, and an aversion to evil is a central tenet of religious belief for this type. While James thinks there is something lacking in the once-born type, he does appreciate

⁵³⁶ James, *Varieties*, 125-126.

some benefits of this particular type, most notably the healthy-mindedness and optimism it is founded on. He asks, “what can be more base and unworthy than the pining, puling, mumping mood, no matter by what outward ills it may have been engendered?”⁵³⁷ The once-born type presents us with the opposite kind of reaction, namely, one of unreserved optimism, which helps individuals overcome any evil lying in their way. Ultimately, thanks to a religious transformation, the once-born type is awakened to a greater sense of meaning born out of natural, earthly life.

As a result of the once-born type’s refusal to entertain depressing thoughts about evil, it is said to be rooted in a “healthy-minded” attitude, reflecting “those who, when unhappiness is offered or proposed to them, positively refuse to feel it, as if it were something mean and wrong.”⁵³⁸ Along these lines, while summarizing his account of the healthy-minded, James says, “we saw how this temperament may become the basis for a peculiar type of religion, a religion in which good, even the good of this world's life, is regarded as the essential thing for a rational being to attend to.”⁵³⁹ James also alludes to the popularity of this kind of attitude toward evil, suggesting “it is probable that there never has been a century in which the deliberate refusal to think ill of life has not been idealized by a sufficient number of persons to form sects, open or secret, who claimed all natural things to be permitted.”⁵⁴⁰

James further develops his notion of the healthy-minded type by discussing two sub-types within it: the simple and the complex. The simple healthy-minded type acknowledges death, suffering, and evil in the world, but easily reconciles these ills with the good in life; it offers a simple, involuntary way of feeling happy about things, which James associates with some of the

⁵³⁷ James, *Varieties*, 87.

⁵³⁸ James, *Varieties*, 79.

⁵³⁹ James, *Varieties*, 119.

⁵⁴⁰ James, *Varieties*, 79.

Greeks and Romans.⁵⁴¹ The complex healthy-minded type, on the other hand, consciously tries to refuse to acknowledge death and suffering at all; for this type, a concerted effort is made to view everything as good, thanks to which evil is not recognized at all. James characterizes this more complex type as more systemic and voluntary, and cites Walt Whitman,⁵⁴² Baruch Spinoza,⁵⁴³ the Mind-cure movement⁵⁴⁴ (what nowadays might be referred to as the “positive thinking” school of thought), and naturalism⁵⁴⁵ as prime examples of it. James describes the difference between the simple involuntary type and the more complex voluntary type in the following:

If, then, we give the name of healthy-mindedness to the tendency which looks on all things and sees that they are good, we find that we must distinguish between a more involuntary and a more voluntary or systematic way of being healthy-minded. In its involuntary variety, healthy-mindedness is a way of feeling happy about things immediately. In its systematical variety, it is an abstract way of conceiving things as good. . . Systematic healthy-mindedness, conceiving good as the essential and universal aspect of being, deliberately excludes evil from its field of vision.^{546, 547}

⁵⁴¹ James, *Varieties*, 86.

⁵⁴² James suggests “Walt Whitman owes his importance in literature to the systematic expulsion from his writings of all contractile elements” (James, *Varieties*, 84). James observes it’s because Whitman held that “all things are divinely good” that “it has come about that many persons to-day regard Walt Whitman as the restorer of the eternal natural religion” (James, *Varieties*, 84).

⁵⁴³ James says, for example, “Spinoza's philosophy has this sort of healthy-mindedness woven into the heart of it, and this has been one secret of its fascination” (James, *Varieties*, 119). He also quotes a passage from Spinoza that speaks to the advantages of reason and love and warns against fear, anxiety and remorse (James, *Varieties*, 120).

⁵⁴⁴ Regarding the Mind-cure movement, James writes, “it is a deliberately optimistic scheme of life, with both a speculative and a practical side,” and he argues “it must now be reckoned with as a genuine religious power” (James, *Varieties*, 91)—“you see already by such records of experience how impossible it is not to class mind-cure as primarily a religious movement” (James, *Varieties*, 101).

⁵⁴⁵ James talks about “a new sort of religion of Nature,” thanks to which “we find ‘evolutionism’ interpreted thus optimistically and embraced as a substitute for the religion they were born in, by a multitude of our contemporaries who have either been trained scientifically, or been fond of reading popular science, and who had already begun to be inwardly dissatisfied with what seemed to them the harshness and irrationality of the orthodox Christian scheme” (James, *Varieties*, 89).

⁵⁴⁶ James, *Varieties*, 86.

⁵⁴⁷ James offers a similar description of this kind of attitude that reminds me of something a cognitive psychologist might say regarding “evil” things: “refuse to admit their badness; despise their power; ignore their presence; turn your attention the other way; and so far as you yourself are concerned at any rate, though the facts may still exist, their evil character exists no longer. Since you make them evil or good by your own thoughts about them, it is the ruling of your thoughts which proves to be your principal concern” (James, *Varieties*, 87).

Interestingly, in pointing out the virtues of this cheery disposition, James makes a point very similar to the one Nietzsche made regarding pity.⁵⁴⁸ He suggests that dwelling on the evil in the world, which manifests itself in the form of fear and anxiety, “but fastens and perpetuates the trouble which occasioned it, and increases the total evil of the situation.”⁵⁴⁹ This is practically the mantra of the systemic healthy-minded, once-born religious type, who, as James suggests, propose that “evil is a disease; and worry over disease is itself an additional form of disease, which only adds to the original complaint.”⁵⁵⁰

As opposed to the once-born, the twice-born are not so easily saved from the evils of the natural world, and they must venture beyond this natural world in order to gain their salvation. Indeed, the twice-born type struggle mightily with the weight of evil, and, as a result, they do not share the healthy-mindedness belonging to the once-born type. As James says, “in contrast with such healthy-minded views as these, if we treat them as a way of deliberately minimizing evil, stands a radically opposite view, a way of maximizing evil, if you please so to call it, based on the persuasion that the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence, and that the world's meaning most comes home to us when we lay them most to heart.”⁵⁵¹ Again, this points to the fundamental difference between the two types: the once-born type espouses evasion of evil, while the twice-born type deems it an essential element of our experience. According to James, from the perspective of the twice-born type, to dismiss evil is to ignore an unavoidable and ever-palpable feature of existence. Contrasting the existential reaction of the twice-born type with that of the once-born type, James suggests that, in the case of the twice-born type, “the process is one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved

⁵⁴⁸ See Part IV of Chapter 2.

⁵⁴⁹ James, *Varieties*, 87.

⁵⁵⁰ James, *Varieties*, 119.

⁵⁵¹ James, *Varieties*, 122.

by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before.”⁵⁵² In fact, for the twice-born, “natural good is not simply insufficient in amount and transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being.”⁵⁵³ From the perspective of the twice-born, “there are two lives, the natural and the spiritual, and we must lose the one before we can participate in the other.”⁵⁵⁴

Contrary to the healthy-minded type, James suggests that those who cannot so easily dismiss the evils of the world inherit a kind of “morbid-mindedness,” exhibiting, as he says, a “more morbid way of looking at the situation.”⁵⁵⁵ The idea here is that, for the morbid-minded, the pain and suffering inherent in life are accentuated, and, as Proudfoot points out, someone who is morbid-minded and religious “is constantly reminded of her sinfulness and estrangement from God.”⁵⁵⁶ Those who are morbid-minded may be able to experience occasional bouts of positive energy and happiness, but such occasions are inevitably short-lived, for the reality of doom and despair still lurks behind everything for them. In commenting on examples he has given of morbid-mindedness (one of which is based on his own personal experience), James suggests, “one of them gives us the vanity of mortal things; another the sense of sin; and the remaining one describes the fear of the universe; -- and in one or other of these three ways it always is that man's original optimism and self-satisfaction get leveled with the dust.”⁵⁵⁷

As he did with the healthy-minded type, James discusses sub-types of the morbid-minded type, observing that “just as we saw that in healthy-mindedness there are shallower and profounder levels...so also are there different levels of the morbid mind, and the one is much

⁵⁵² James, *Varieties*, 143.

⁵⁵³ James, *Varieties*, 151.

⁵⁵⁴ James, *Varieties*, 151.

⁵⁵⁵ James, *Varieties*, 122.

⁵⁵⁶ James, *Varieties*, xxi.

⁵⁵⁷ James, *Varieties*, 147.

more formidable than the other.”⁵⁵⁸ Accordingly, he details two basic kinds of morbid-mindedness: mild and extreme. He associates “anhedonia” with the mild sub-type, which he defines as “mere passive joylessness and dreariness, discouragement, dejection, lack of taste and zest and spring.”⁵⁵⁹ He describes the mild morbid-minded type as having a general “sense of incapacity for joyous feeling.”⁵⁶⁰ “A much worse form of the morbid-minded type,” James claims, “is positive and active anguish, a sort of psychical neuralgia wholly unknown to healthy life,”⁵⁶¹ which can offer “a pitch of unhappiness so great that the goods of nature may be entirely forgotten.”⁵⁶² This extreme morbid-minded type exhibits a sense of loathing, and “for this extremity of pessimism to be reached, something more is needed than observation of life and reflection upon death. The individual must in his own person become the prey of a pathological melancholy.”⁵⁶³

James makes it quite clear that cases of melancholy on the very extreme end of the spectrum, without any sense of hope whatsoever, do not constitute religion. In fact, he says, “melancholy, according to our ordinary use of language, forfeits all title to be called religious,” and he suggests that “religion is equally hostile to heavy grumbling and complaint.”⁵⁶⁴

Ultimately, two possibilities emerge for those destined to this kind of extreme morbid-mindedness: prolonged melancholy or religious salvation. James cites Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche as examples of individuals who exude this kind of extreme melancholy, deeming them too pessimistic and downtrodden to legitimately represent religious types.

⁵⁵⁸ James, *Varieties*, 124.

⁵⁵⁹ James, *Varieties*, 133.

⁵⁶⁰ James, *Varieties*, 135.

⁵⁶¹ James, *Varieties*, 135.

⁵⁶² James, *Varieties*, 133.

⁵⁶³ James, *Varieties*, 133.

⁵⁶⁴ James, *Varieties*, 44.

According to James, people like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche “lack the purgatorial note which religious sadness gives forth.”⁵⁶⁵ Thus, James argues, the cantankerous temper associated with some extremer versions of the morbid-minded type is not of the religious type and these counterfeit forms must be duly distinguished from more genuine forms of religion. Reflecting on an example cited, James says:

You see how the querulous temper of his misery keeps his mind from taking a religious direction. Querulousness of mind tends in fact rather towards irreligion; and it has played, so far as I know, no part whatever in the construction of religious systems...Religious melancholy must be cast in a more melting mood.⁵⁶⁶

Alternatively, James cites Leo Tolstoy as a legitimate example of the twice-born religious type. Tolstoy endures an existential crisis and qualifies, on James’s account, as morbid-minded. “In Tolstoy's case,” he observes, “the sense that life had any meaning whatever was for a time wholly withdrawn. The result was a transformation in the whole expression of reality.”⁵⁶⁷ However, all is not lost for Tolstoy, and he is not destined to prolonged bouts of extreme melancholy, thanks to a religious transformation. According to James, this is typical of the twice-born type: as a result of an existential crisis, “an urgent wondering and questioning is set up, a poring theoretic activity, and in the desperate effort to get into right relations with the matter, the sufferer is often led to what becomes for him a satisfying religious solution.”⁵⁶⁸ In sum, through their discovery of the higher, unseen power and their subsequent adjustment thereto, the twice-born are able to overcome what might have otherwise become a crippling and debilitating awareness of the evils inherent in life.

⁵⁶⁵ James, *Varieties*, 44.

⁵⁶⁶ James, *Varieties*, 137.

⁵⁶⁷ James, *Varieties*, 138.

⁵⁶⁸ James, *Varieties*, 139.

Clearly, there are significant differences between James's once-born and twice-born religious types. Not surprisingly, James describes a fundamental tension between the two mentalities that results from their incongruent views of evil. Accordingly, he observes:

We can see how great an antagonism may naturally arise between the healthy-minded way of viewing life and the way that takes all this experience of evil as something essential. To this latter way, the morbid-minded way, as we might call it, healthy-mindedness pure and simple seems unspeakably blind and shallow. To the healthy-minded way, on the other hand, the way of the sick soul seems unmanly and diseased.⁵⁶⁹

Nor should it be surprising that, "in their extreme forms, of pure naturalism and pure salvationism, the two types are violently contrasted."⁵⁷⁰ What is surprising, in my opinion, is that James expresses a much more favorable impression of the twice-born type, insofar as he suggests it offers a more penetrating and genuine kind of perspective. The twice-born type is thought to be more genuine in that it acknowledges reality as it really is. According to James, since evil is undeniably real and the once-born type doesn't fully acknowledge this, as the twice-born type does, the once-born type's minimization of evil constitutes a kind of shortcoming, the cost of which, as Proudfoot points out, "is not to take seriously, and even to deny, an important part of experience, that not everything is good."⁵⁷¹ In highlighting the disingenuous nature of the once-born type's unbridled optimism and failure to adequately deal with the reality of evil, James claims "it is impossible to carry on this discipline in the subjective sphere without zealously emphasizing the brighter and minimizing the darker aspects of the objective sphere of things at the same time."⁵⁷² By contrast, in acknowledging and dealing with evil, the twice-born type is thought to represent a broader spectrum of human experience. Hence, James ultimately

⁵⁶⁹ James, *Varieties*, 148.

⁵⁷⁰ James, *Varieties*, 151.

⁵⁷¹ James, *Varieties*, xix.

⁵⁷² James, *Varieties*, 88.

suggests “it seems to me that we are bound to say that morbid-mindedness ranges over the wider scale of experience, and that its survey is the one that overlaps.”⁵⁷³ Thus, James characterizes once-born religious individuals as being simple-minded, if not dishonest, in this regard, failing to adequately acknowledge or appreciate the stark reality of evil in earthly life. The twice-born, on the other hand, are said to have greater awareness of the true nature of reality. Ultimately, as Proudfoot suggests, “to James this position is much more realistic than that of the healthy-minded type. It is not predicated on the denial of evil and thus on self-deception.”⁵⁷⁴

Not surprisingly, James offers an explanation of the religious adjustment to the higher, unseen power in psychological terms. On his account, a human being is equipped with a mind, which he defines as “a system of ideas, each with the excitement it arouses, and with tendencies impulsive and inhibitive, which mutually check or reinforce one another.”⁵⁷⁵ When the ideas and propensities within an individual strongly conflict, internal discord and unhappiness are the result. Consequently, as James says, “unhappiness is apt to characterize the period of order-making and struggle.”⁵⁷⁶ Those suffering from this kind of discord either continue on in this maladapted way, or they undergo a process James calls “unification,” which resolves the internal discord by unifying the disparate psychological tendencies responsible for the internal strife. Once tormented by conflicting emotions and drives, an individual spared by unification no longer experiences their wrath.

“Conversion” is the term James uses to describe this process of unification in cases of religious (both once- and twice-born) experience. James conceptualizes conversion as follows:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or

⁵⁷³ James, *Varieties*, 148.

⁵⁷⁴ James, *Varieties*, xxi.

⁵⁷⁵ James, *Varieties*, 177.

⁵⁷⁶ James, *Varieties*, 154.

sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.⁵⁷⁷

Moreover, according to James, “to say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.”⁵⁷⁸ While conversion comes in many forms, the result is always the same: “sanctification.” According to James, sanctification signals the newfound sense of ease that replaces the internal discord formerly present within the converted individual. He describes the process of sanctification in the following passage:

What is attained is often an altogether new level of spiritual vitality, a relatively heroic level, in which impossible things have become possible, and new energies and endurances are shown. The personality is changed, the man is born anew, whether or not his psychological idiosyncrasies are what give the particular shape to his metamorphosis. "Sanctification" is the technical name of this result.⁵⁷⁹

According to James, sanctification yields several significant effects: 1) a sense of higher control, 2) the loss of worry, 3) a sense of enlightenment, 4) a change in attitude toward life, and, most notably, 5) an “ecstasy of happiness.”⁵⁸⁰ These effects of sanctification will be addressed in more detail in Section A of Part III, where I address what James has to say regarding the fruits of “saintliness.”

James also notes that the process of conversion remains a mystery (e.g. why some individuals are converted while others are not), and he observes that “some persons, for instance, never are, and possibly never under any circumstances could be, converted. Religious ideas cannot become the centre of their spiritual energy.”⁵⁸¹ What’s more, some begin with religion,

⁵⁷⁷ James, *Varieties*, 171.

⁵⁷⁸ James, *Varieties*, 177.

⁵⁷⁹ James, *Varieties*, 214.

⁵⁸⁰ James, *Varieties*, 215-225.

⁵⁸¹ James, *Varieties*, 183.

only to abandon it later (although James thinks that this is rare), while others only find religion much later in life; no doubt, as James notes, “even late in life some thaw.”⁵⁸² While admittedly uncertain of its roots, James thinks that the subconscious likely plays a significant role in the process of conversion. Indeed, the subconscious is a theme frequently invoked by James throughout *Varieties*, and he makes it clear that manifestations of religious life “frequently connect themselves with the subconscious part of our existence.”⁵⁸³

According to James, there are two general methods of conversion: the voluntary type (which is thought to be consciously triggered) and the involuntary type (which is thought to be subconsciously triggered).⁵⁸⁴ In the case of the voluntary type, a conscious and concerted effort is made to resolve the internal stress, which eventually happens in due time. In the case of the involuntary type, on the other hand, virtually the opposite takes place: rather than try to fix things, the subject of the conversion “surrenders,” and the conversion is triggered suddenly by subconscious influences, not by any conscious effort on the part of the subject. James claims that the voluntary type “are as a rule less interesting than those of the self-surrender [i.e. involuntary] type, in which the subconscious effects are more abundant and often startling.”⁵⁸⁵ Interestingly, James suggests that self-surrender, which is the trademark of the involuntary type, is actually involved in both types. While the voluntary type consciously strives to reach a resolution, James claims some degree of self-surrender is ultimately needed to “get them over the hump.” Thus, he concludes:

⁵⁸² James, *Varieties*, 184.

⁵⁸³ James, *Varieties*, 411.

⁵⁸⁴ These are my terms for the distinction. James doesn’t seem to use fixed terms for the two types; however, he does suggest that “we find both ways exemplified in the history of conversion, giving us two types, which Starbuck calls the *volitional type* and the *type by self-surrender* respectively” (James, *Varieties*, 185), and he employs these descriptors himself at times.

⁵⁸⁵ James, *Varieties*, 186.

The difference between the two types is after all not radical. Even in the most voluntarily built-up sort of regeneration there are passages of partial self-surrender interposed; and in the great majority of all cases...it seems that the very last step must be left to other forces and performed without the help of its [i.e. the individual's own will] activity. In other words, self-surrender becomes then indispensable.⁵⁸⁶

The upshot is that, in all instances, conversion ultimately entails the assistance of what the converted believes to be the higher, unseen power. Consequently, "you see why self-surrender has been and always must be regarded as the vital turning-point of the religious life,"⁵⁸⁷ and why "it always seems, after the surrender of the personal will, as if an extraneous higher power had flooded in and taken possession."⁵⁸⁸

In addition to a fundamental belief in the reality of an unseen, higher power and an adjustment to this power, James references three additional features commonly associated with religion: sacrifice, confession and prayer.⁵⁸⁹ While James believes that sacrifice and confession are indeed common features of religious experience, he suggests that prayer is an especially vital feature of religious phenomena. According to James, in its "widest sense," prayer signals "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine."⁵⁹⁰ As such, it "is the very soul and essence of religion," as "the religious phenomenon, studied as an inner fact, and apart from ecclesiastical or theological complications, has shown itself to consist everywhere, and at all its stages, in the consciousness which individuals have of an intercourse between themselves and higher powers with which they feel themselves to be related."⁵⁹¹ Hence,

⁵⁸⁶ James, *Varieties*, 186.

⁵⁸⁷ James, *Varieties*, 188.

⁵⁸⁸ James, *Varieties*, 203.

⁵⁸⁹ "In most books on religion," he observes, "three things are represented as its most essential elements. These are Sacrifice, Confession, and Prayer" (James, *Varieties*, 398).

⁵⁹⁰ James, *Varieties*, 399.

⁵⁹¹ James, *Varieties*, 400.

prayer reflects the religious individual's essential belief in the reality of the unseen and is a manifestation of the individual's reaction or adjustment to it.

Now, before proceeding to an examination of what James specifically says regarding the utility of religion, I want to first summarize his more general description of it, which I have outlined in this part of the chapter. I can think of no better way to do this than to quote James himself, who offers his own summary in his final lecture. Religion, he says, involves the following beliefs and psychological characteristics:

1. That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance;
2. That union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end;
3. That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof -- be that spirit "God" or "law" -- is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world. Religion includes also the following psychological characteristics: --
4. A new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism.
5. An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections.⁵⁹²

III. The Utility of Religion

A. James's Case for the Utility of Religion

In addition to offering an extensive description of religious phenomena, James is expressly concerned with gauging the usefulness of religion. The fourteenth and fifteenth lectures in *Varieties*, for example, are specifically devoted to an analysis of the value of saintliness (which, for James, signifies the fruits of religion); accordingly, he prefaces these lectures by saying:

We have now passed in review the more important of the phenomena which are regarded as fruits of genuine religion and characteristics of men who are devout. Today we have to change our attitude from that of description to that of

⁵⁹² James, *Varieties*, 418.

appreciation; we have to ask whether the fruits in question can help us to judge the absolute value of what religion adds to human life.⁵⁹³

As we see here, James is clearly interested in ascertaining the utility of religion. To his credit, he is also cautious when proposing to assess the fruits of religion, and he meticulously outlines his own methodology before proceeding. In doing so, he develops his “empirical method,” which he carefully distinguishes from theological approaches to religion, saying:

What I then propose to do is, briefly stated, to test saintliness by common sense, to use human standards to help us decide how far the religious life commends itself as an ideal kind of human activity. If it commends itself, then any theological beliefs that may inspire it, in so far forth will stand accredited. If not, then they will be discredited, and all without reference to anything but human working principles. It is but the elimination of the humanly unfit, and the survival of the humanly fittest, applied to religious beliefs.⁵⁹⁴

James also makes it a point to stress that we are all unique characters, and that those who are religious require—and benefit from—different elements of religion. Indeed, he suggests, we must raise the question, “are different functions in the organism of humanity allotted to different types of man, so that some may really be the better for a religion of consolation and reassurance, whilst others are better for one of terror and reproof?”⁵⁹⁵ In turn, he argues that it is becoming clearer with time that this is, in fact, befitting of religious experience. Interestingly, one consequence of this is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to try to judge the fruits of religion in any kind of objective and impartial manner. As James says, “if it be so, how can any possible judge or critic help being biased in favor of the religion by which his own needs are best met? He aspires to impartiality; but he is too close to the struggle.”⁵⁹⁶ To be sure, this is something anyone interested in studying the usefulness of religion ought to be cognizant of, and James

⁵⁹³ James, *Varieties*, 287.

⁵⁹⁴ James, *Varieties*, 291.

⁵⁹⁵ James, *Varieties*, 292.

⁵⁹⁶ James, *Varieties*, 292.

should be commended for highlighting this difficulty associated with assessing the prospects of religion's utility.

I want to stress that, as was the case with his descriptive account of religious phenomena, James is chiefly interested in the utility of *individual* religion. Having said this, James does make some suggestions regarding the utility of institutional religion that I think deserve mention before proceeding to his more extensive analysis of individual religion. Most notably, he points out that, unlike instances of individual religion, corporate ambitions become prominent and problematic in cases of institutional religion. James notes that, in their institutional form, religions “become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing.”⁵⁹⁷ Hence, according to James, as religion is institutionalized it becomes less genuine and more corrupted by societal and corporate influences. By contrast, individual religion is not thought to be tainted by such external influences. For this reason, James thinks it also provides a better indication of the legitimate fruits of religion, given that it entails a purer and unadulterated form of belief. Subsequently, James suggests that many of the harms typically associated with religion do not properly belong to it, but, instead, result from the corrupting influences associated with institutional religion. Accordingly, he observes that “the basenesses so commonly charged to religion's account are thus, almost all of them, not chargeable at all to religion proper, but rather to religion's wicked practical partner, the spirit of corporate dominion,”⁵⁹⁸ and that “for many of the historic aberrations which have been laid to her charge, religion as such, then, is not to blame.”⁵⁹⁹ In sum, James implores us not to lose sight of this

⁵⁹⁷ James, *Varieties*, 293.

⁵⁹⁸ James, *Varieties*, 296.

⁵⁹⁹ James, *Varieties*, 296.

critical distinction between individual and institutional religion when assessing the utility of religion, saying, “I beseech you never to confound the phenomena of mere tribal or corporate psychology which it [i.e. institutional religion] presents with those manifestations of the purely interior life which are the exclusive object of our study.”⁶⁰⁰

I believe James’s reflections on the effects of institutional religion are mostly accurate, and I am willing to grant that the more deleterious qualities of religion likely stem from its institutionalization. However, while James is concerned exclusively with individual religion, which is, no doubt, a significant qualification, this dissertation is not limited in such a manner. Therefore, the consequences—both good and bad—associated with institutional religion must be incorporated into the present analysis of religion’s utility. Recall my discussion of a similar point in Chapter 1, where I mentioned that Mill emphasizes that the negative consequences associated with some forms of religion (e.g. violence) “do not belong to religion in itself, but to particular forms of it, and afford no argument against the usefulness of any religions except those by which such enormities are encouraged.”⁶⁰¹ As I suggested there, the fact that some forms of religion may be devoid of the negative effects associated with other forms does not give us license to ignore the negative effects associated with those other forms, just as it would not be appropriate to exclude the benefits of some forms of religion simply because other forms fail to produce them. What’s more, as I suggested in Section A of Part II, institutional religion likely plays a significant role in most religious experience—as I have argued, it’s hard to imagine an individual having a religious experience devoid of its influence. In which case, there’s reason to worry that the perceived harms James associates with institutional religion are prevalent as well.

⁶⁰⁰ James, *Varieties*, 296.

⁶⁰¹ Mill, *Collected Works*, 405-406.

Some philosophers, like Sam Harris, suggest that these harms are significant, too. Harris argues, for example, that extreme divisiveness and violence are inherent in any faithful observance of the world's most popular creeds, such as Islam and Christianity.⁶⁰² All of this goes to show why I emphasize that the present analysis incorporates all varieties of religious experience, without any kind of qualification or exclusion.

In the process of evaluating the utility of religion, James develops his notion of "saintliness." "The collective name for the ripe fruits of religion in a character," James suggests, "is Saintliness."⁶⁰³ According to James, saintliness exhibits four key features, which, in turn, are said to yield four natural consequences. Those four key features are: 1) a sense of a higher, ideal purpose or power, 2) a willing submission to this higher purpose or power, given its benevolent nature, 3) a newfound kind of joy and freedom that results from divorcing oneself from private and individual concerns, and 4) a more loving and harmonious demeanor toward others.⁶⁰⁴ More specifically, James describes the sensation of a higher, ideal purpose or power as "a feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power."⁶⁰⁵ Again, James makes it clear that this process need not involve a supernatural God, saying that "in Christian saintliness this power is always personified as God; but abstract moral ideals, civic or patriotic utopias, or inner versions of holiness or right may also be felt as the true lords and enlargers of our life, in ways which I described in the lecture on the Reality of the Unseen."⁶⁰⁶ Interestingly, James even seems to speak to Mill's "Religion of Humanity," which I discussed in Chapter 1.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰² This is arguably the main thesis of Harris's controversial *The End of Faith*.

⁶⁰³ James, *Varieties*, 239.

⁶⁰⁴ James, *Varieties*, 240-241.

⁶⁰⁵ James, *Varieties*, 240.

⁶⁰⁶ James, *Varieties*, 240.

⁶⁰⁷ Accordingly, James mentions "the enthusiasm of humanity" in a footnote in *Varieties* (James, *Varieties*, 240).

Additionally, four natural consequences are said to arise from the four features of saintliness, and these are: 1) asceticism, 2) strength of soul, 3) purity, and 4) charity. In the religious, according to James, we see minimization of worldly pleasures (i.e. asceticism), as communion with the higher, ideal reality exposes the insignificance of such pleasures. The souls of the religious are also said to be strengthened as a result, which James describes as follows:

The sense of enlargement of life may be so uplifting that personal motives and inhibitions, commonly omnipotent, become too insignificant for notice, and new reaches of patience and fortitude open out. Fears and anxieties go, and blissful equanimity takes their place. Come heaven, come hell, it makes no difference now!⁶⁰⁸

At the same time, religious experience yields a newfound sense of internal purity and resolution of psychological discord that stems from the process of conversion, which I outlined in Section B of Part II. Finally, the religious are said to be amicable and good-natured. In James's view, there is no doubt that these consequences can be beneficial, and he asserts that "the best fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show."⁶⁰⁹ Indeed, according to James, "the highest flights of charity, devotion, trust, patience, bravery to which the wings of human nature have spread themselves have been flown for religious ideals."⁶¹⁰ However, he thinks that the consequences of saintliness can prove to be problematic when found in excess. I will say more about this problem of excess in a moment, but first I want to say more about the specific ways in which James thinks these consequences of saintliness can be beneficial.

On James's account, it would seem that the most obvious benefit of religion is the significant existential or psychological relief it provides to the individual. To put the point in the simplest terms possible, religion makes us happy. In describing the general process of

⁶⁰⁸ James, *Varieties*, 241.

⁶⁰⁹ James, *Varieties*, 230.

⁶¹⁰ James, *Varieties*, 230.

unification within the will of an individual (which, again, James calls “conversion” in religious instances), whereby a kind of psychological harmony is attained, James says, “however it come, it brings a characteristic sort of relief; and never such extreme relief as when it is cast into the religious mould. Happiness! happiness!”⁶¹¹ According to James, the sense of God (i.e. of a higher, unseen power), coupled with God’s benevolent nature, affords the religious individual a sense of ease otherwise unattainable. “Easily, permanently, and successfully,” James claims, “it often transforms the most intolerable misery into the profoundest and most enduring happiness.”⁶¹² James grants that the existential ease associated with religion takes various forms, suggesting that “the temper of the tranquil-mindedness differs, of course, according as the person is of a constitutionally sombre or of a constitutionally cheerful cast of mind. In the sombre it partakes more of resignation and submission; in the cheerful it is a joyous consent.”⁶¹³ In either case, religion is thought to provide “a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life,”⁶¹⁴ and “the transition from tenseness, self-responsibility, and worry, to equanimity, receptivity, and peace, is the most wonderful of all those shiftings of inner equilibrium.”⁶¹⁵ It is important to note that the happiness James attaches to religion is not merely momentary relief from whatever ails us in our daily lives; rather, religion is said to engender a more enthusiastic and lasting endorsement of life. On this point, James observes, “the more commonplace happinesses which we get are ‘reliefs,’ occasioned by our momentary escapes from evils either experienced or threatened. But in its most characteristic embodiments, religious happiness is no mere feeling of escape.”⁶¹⁶

⁶¹¹ James, *Varieties*, 159.

⁶¹² James, *Varieties*, 159.

⁶¹³ James, *Varieties*, 251.

⁶¹⁴ James, *Varieties*, 377.

⁶¹⁵ James, *Varieties*, 255.

⁶¹⁶ James, *Varieties*, 54.

Not only does James suggest that religion makes people happy and thereby improves their psychological wellbeing, he alleges that the kind of existential or psychological relief it produces is one-of-a-kind. After pointing out that “the essence of religious experiences, the thing by which we finally must judge them, must be that element or quality in them which we can meet nowhere else,”⁶¹⁷ he ultimately argues that the kind of positive impulse he associates with religion comprises this quality. He elaborates on the unique nature of religious happiness in the following illuminating passage:

There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God... Fear is not held in abeyance as it is by mere morality, it is positively expunged and washed away... it adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else.⁶¹⁸

James insists that this difference in attitude toward life is significant, claiming that “it makes a tremendous emotional and practical difference to one whether one accept the universe in the drab discolored way of stoic resignation to necessity, or with the passionate happiness of Christian saints.”⁶¹⁹

In this vein, James extensively discusses the relationship between morality and religion in an effort to elucidate what it is that he thinks is uniquely beneficial about religion, suggesting at the outset that religion “will prove to contain some elements which morality pure and simple does not contain.”⁶²⁰ While “at bottom the whole concern of both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe,”⁶²¹ what stands out about religion, he argues, is that it entails a significantly more optimistic and cheerful attitude toward life than morality. “For

⁶¹⁷ James, *Varieties*, 50.

⁶¹⁸ James, *Varieties*, 52.

⁶¹⁹ James, *Varieties*, 47.

⁶²⁰ James, *Varieties*, 38.

⁶²¹ James, *Varieties*, 47.

religion,” he says, “in its strong and fully developed manifestations, the service of the highest never is felt as a yoke.”⁶²² As a result, he concludes:

If religion is to mean anything definite for us, it seems to me that we ought to take it as meaning this added dimension of emotion, this enthusiastic temper of espousal, in regions where morality strictly so called can at best but bow its head and acquiesce...this sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion.⁶²³

In making his case, James compares Marcus Aurelius, whom he associates with the moral character, with a medieval German Christian writer and, after quoting excerpts from each, he observes “how much more active and positive the impulse of the Christian writer to accept his place in the universe is! Marcus Aurelius agrees *to* the scheme—the German theologian agrees *with* it.”⁶²⁴ In a later lecture, James articulates another important difference between morality and religion: he suggests that morality demands a kind of active mental strenuousness from its adherents, whereas religion is said to yield a kind of passive mental relaxation. Along these lines, the teachings associated with many religions, such as the mind-cure movement, is thought to be at odds with moral teachings. On this point, he writes:

Official moralists advise us never to relax our strenuousness...But the persons I speak of find that all this conscious effort leads to nothing but failure and vexation in their hand...the way to success...is by an anti-moralistic method, by the "surrender" of which I spoke in my second lecture. Passivity, not activity; relaxation, not intentness, should be now the rule.⁶²⁵

In other words, moralists tell us to always be thinking about what we ought to do, but, for the religious, all is in God’s hands. As I indicated in my earlier discussion of conversion, religion entails surrender to the higher power. This, in turn, yields an appreciable sense of freedom and

⁶²² James, *Varieties*, 47.

⁶²³ James, *Varieties*, 53.

⁶²⁴ James, *Varieties*, 49.

⁶²⁵ James, *Varieties*, 104.

joy, on James's account, since the religious no longer feel bogged down by worries regarding the difficulties of their everyday lives. Both morality and religion are thought to be concerned with happiness, but "even more in the religious life than in the moral life, happiness and unhappiness seem to be the poles round which the interest revolves."⁶²⁶ Hence, in distinguishing religion from morality, James suggests that what is unique about religion is its decidedly optimistic outlook on life and the more pronounced sense of happiness it produces. Furthermore, he is quick to point out that religion's unique ability to engender a higher kind of happiness should weigh significantly in its favor when considering its utility, as indicated by the following:

We are in the end absolutely dependent on the universe...in those states of mind which fall short of religion, the surrender is submitted to as an imposition of necessity, and the sacrifice is undergone at the very best without complaint. In the religious life, on the contrary, surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused: even unnecessary givings-up are added in order that the happiness may increase. *Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary*; and if it be the only agency that can accomplish this result, its vital importance as a human faculty stands vindicated beyond dispute. It becomes an essential organ of our life, performing a function which no other portion of our nature can so successfully fulfill.⁶²⁷

Another benefit of religion is the charitable nature it engenders. James raises concerns about the tendencies of the religious to be overly charitable (more on this in a moment), but he clearly lauds the tenderness and charity he associates with them and expresses his misgivings about the opposite mentality of hardness and suspicion found in some non-religious characters (e.g. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche). According to James, in the case of the saint, "the ordinary motives to antipathy, which usually set such close bounds to tenderness among human beings, are inhibited. The saint loves his enemies, and treats loathsome beggars as his brothers."⁶²⁸

⁶²⁶ James, *Varieties*, 78.

⁶²⁷ James, *Varieties*, 55-56.

⁶²⁸ James, *Varieties*, 242.

James thinks that this is especially noteworthy insofar as it seems to run counter to our natural instincts,⁶²⁹ and for this reason he thinks it constitutes a kind of paradox. Moreover, he speaks to the ability of the religious individual's charitable nature to enact positive change in others: "treating those whom they met, in spite of the past, in spite of all appearances, as worthy, they have stimulated them to *be* worthy, miraculously transformed them by their radiant example and by the challenge of their expectation."⁶³⁰ What's more, he purports "we never can be sure in advance of any man that his salvation by the way of love is hopeless."⁶³¹ James thinks that the charitable backbone of religion underlies other important aspects of society as well, suggesting that "this belief in the essential sacredness of every one expresses itself to-day in all sorts of humane customs and reformatory institutions, and in a growing aversion to the death penalty and to brutality in punishment."⁶³² Ultimately, the charitable and loving nature of religion is said to be, at its core, regenerative: "force destroys enemies; and the best that can be said of prudence is that it keeps what we already have in safety. But non-resistance, when successful, turns enemies into friends; and charity regenerates its objects."⁶³³

Perhaps most interestingly, James discusses a benefit of religion stemming from its inherent asceticism. Asceticism, on James's account, entails a kind of disentanglement from the shallow interests of everyday worldly affairs. As he says, "the man who lives in his religious centre of personal energy, and is actuated by spiritual enthusiasms, differs from his previous carnal self in perfectly definite ways."⁶³⁴ Hence, the suggestion is that saints reveal that there is

⁶²⁹ As we saw in Chapter 2, being at odds with our natural instincts is why Nietzsche thinks the "slave mentality" underlying religions is so problematic.

⁶³⁰ James, *Varieties*, 311.

⁶³¹ James, *Varieties*, 311.

⁶³² James, *Varieties*, 311.

⁶³³ James, *Varieties*, 312.

⁶³⁴ James, *Varieties*, 236.

more to life than is typically suggested in our everyday lives, and James claims “this practical proof that worldly wisdom may be safely transcended is the saint's magic gift to mankind.”⁶³⁵ One outgrowth of asceticism is an embracing of poverty, which James maintains is “felt at all times and under all creeds as one adornment of a saintly life.”⁶³⁶ He marvels at this element of religion, since, once again, it runs so contrary to our natural inclinations.⁶³⁷

He argues that this divorce from worldly affairs and material pursuits can be seen as a virtue of religion, because, if for no other reason, “lives based on having are less free than lives based either on doing or on being, and in the interest of action people subject to spiritual excitement throw away possessions as so many clogs.”⁶³⁸ James emphasizes that money-minded individuals face a litany of worries that don't apply to individuals who can free themselves from the clutches of materialism. On this point, he observes, “there are thousands of conjunctures in which a wealth-bound man must be a slave, whilst a man for whom poverty has no terrors becomes a freeman.”⁶³⁹ Indeed, James is Socrates-like in his disdain for the materialism that tends to run rampant in any typical human society.⁶⁴⁰ Religious asceticism serves as a kind of antidote for this undesired element of human nature. “When one sees,” he observes, “the way in which wealth-getting enters as an ideal into the very bone and marrow of our generation, one wonders whether a revival of the belief that poverty is a worthy religious vocation may not be ‘the transformation of military courage,’ and the spiritual reform which our time stands most in

⁶³⁵ James, *Varieties*, 312.

⁶³⁶ James, *Varieties*, 277.

⁶³⁷ More specifically, James calls this affinity for poverty a paradox (James, *Varieties*, 277) and a “seemingly unnatural opinion” (James, *Varieties*, 279).

⁶³⁸ James, *Varieties*, 281.

⁶³⁹ James, *Varieties*, 320.

⁶⁴⁰ In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates suggests that when an individual pursues material wealth he or she is feeding an unnecessary desire (as opposed to a necessary desire, such as wanting food, sleep, etc.), which is implicitly harmful to the individual. In pursuing such unnecessary desires, Socrates believes we feed the baser element of our soul (i.e. desire) at the expense of the higher one (i.e. reason). On Socrates's account, internal discord and, ultimately, unhappiness are the inevitable consequences of this unhealthy practice.

need of.”⁶⁴¹ In fact, James even claims that “it is certain that the prevalent fear of poverty among the educated classes is the worst moral disease from which our civilization suffers.”⁶⁴²

Moreover, James argues that living a life of poverty can help satisfy another basic need: namely, a need to overcome challenge and adversity. According to James, we all need some basic tension in our life, some degree of strenuousness, to add some “color” to it. James suggests that war is an example of something that ordinarily fulfills this need. Unfortunately, war comes with obvious terrible consequences, and James asserts that “what we now need to discover in the social realm is the moral equivalent of war: something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible.”⁶⁴³ “May not voluntarily accepted poverty,” James asks, “be ‘the strenuous life,’ without the need of crushing weaker peoples?”⁶⁴⁴

As I mentioned earlier, James believes that prayer constitutes the very essence of religion, insofar as it manifests the religious individual’s belief in a higher power, as well as his or her adjustment to this higher power. According to James, prayer indicates belief on the part of the individual praying that there is someone or something there to hear the prayer and, further, that the endeavor is not a futile one (i.e. praying will, in fact, bring about change). Along these lines, he suggests the following:

Religion, in the vital sense in which these lectures study it, must stand or fall by the persuasion that effects of some sort genuinely do occur. Through prayer, religion insists, things which cannot be realized in any other manner come about: energy which but for prayer would be bound is by prayer set free and operates in some part, be it objective or subjective, of the world of facts.⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴¹ James, *Varieties*, 319.

⁶⁴² James, *Varieties*, 320.

⁶⁴³ James, *Varieties*, 319.

⁶⁴⁴ James, *Varieties*, 319.

⁶⁴⁵ James, *Varieties*, 401.

To be sure, the efficacy of prayer has been debated for centuries, and James himself has much to say regarding the practical effects of prayer. He suggests that, while prayer certainly proves ineffective in some cases, it does yield positive results in other cases, and he specifically addresses two cases to support his view: prayer for better weather and prayer for the recovery of sick people. He claims that, in the case of praying for better health, prayer really does effect change for the better, while in the case of weather it does not. Accordingly, he asserts, “as regards prayers for the sick, if any medical fact can be considered to stand firm, it is that in certain environments prayer may contribute to recovery, and should be encouraged as a therapeutic measure;” however, “the case of the weather is different.”⁶⁴⁶ In his view, a lot ultimately rides on the effectiveness of prayer, as indicated by the following:

If it be not effective; if it be not a give and take relation; if nothing be really transacted while it lasts; if the world is in no whit different for its having taken place; then prayer, taken in this wide meaning of a sense that *something is transacting*, is of course a feeling of what is illusory, and religion must on the whole be classed, not simply as containing elements of delusion -- these undoubtedly everywhere exist -- but as being rooted in delusion altogether, just as materialists and atheists have always said it was.⁶⁴⁷

James points out that prayer can be said to effect change in one of two ways: in the objective natural world and in the subjective realm of the praying individual’s private experience. Accordingly, he suggests, “it may well prove that the sphere of influence in prayer is subjective exclusively, and that what is immediately changed is only the mind of the praying person.”⁶⁴⁸ In view of this, James claims that, if nothing else, prayer certainly does yield palpable consequences for the individual who prays. Hence, “the outward face of nature need

⁶⁴⁶ James, *Varieties*, 399.

⁶⁴⁷ James, *Varieties*, 401.

⁶⁴⁸ James, *Varieties*, 401.

not alter, but the expressions of meaning in it alter,”⁶⁴⁹ and “when we see all things in God, and refer all things to him, we read in common matters superior expressions of meaning.”⁶⁵⁰

Ultimately, regardless of whether change in the more public and objective sphere of life is effected, “existence as a whole appears transfigured”⁶⁵¹ to the praying individual. He characterizes the specific ways in which prayer affects the private experience of the praying individual, suggesting, for example, that “when one's affections keep in touch with the divinity of the world's authorship, fear and egotism fall away,” and that “we meet a new world when we meet the old world in the spirit which this kind of prayer infuses.”⁶⁵² In the end, James suggests, the impact prayer has on the subjective experience validates the notion that something is, in fact, “transacted” during prayer. “So long as this operativeness is admitted to be real,” he contends, “it makes no essential difference whether its immediate effects be subjective or objective. The fundamental religious point is that in prayer, spiritual energy, which otherwise would slumber, does become active, and spiritual work of some kind is effected really.”⁶⁵³

In addition to the benefits associated with religious belief in general, James speaks to a benefit exclusive to the once-born religious type. More specifically, the minimization of evil, which is a defining feature of the once-born type, feeds a natural desire that James claims is latent in all of us. This is evident in the following passage, which I first alluded to in Chapter 2:

The systematic cultivation of healthy-mindedness as a religious attitude is therefore consonant with important currents in human nature, and is anything but absurd. In fact, we all do cultivate it more or less... We divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-houses and indecencies without end on which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is

⁶⁴⁹ James, *Varieties*, 408.

⁶⁵⁰ James, *Varieties*, 409.

⁶⁵¹ James, *Varieties*, 409.

⁶⁵² James, *Varieties*, 408.

⁶⁵³ James, *Varieties*, 411.

a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world that really is.⁶⁵⁴

While James clearly suggests that the once-born types offer a less genuine kind of experience, he still readily acknowledges the usefulness of marginalizing one's sense of evil. By contrast, "if we admit that evil is an essential part of our being and the key to the interpretation of our life, we load ourselves down with a difficulty that has always proved burdensome in philosophies of religion."^{655, 656} Indeed, the utility of this marginalization of evil explains the spread and longevity of the once-born type. Accordingly, James observes that "the adequacy of their message to the mental needs of a large fraction of mankind is what gave force to those earlier gospels. Exactly the same adequacy holds in the case of the mind-cure message, foolish as it may sound upon its surface."⁶⁵⁷ Ultimately, since it is, by its very nature, positive and uplifting, James claims that "no one can fail of the regenerative influence of optimistic thinking, pertinaciously pursued."⁶⁵⁸

Clearly, James believes there is much to be said in religion's favor when it comes to an analysis of its utility. However, he also addresses religion's disadvantages, too. For the most part, James roots these disadvantages in extravagance. He acknowledges that all the consequences associated with saintliness can be carried to excess, suggesting that "we find that error by excess is exemplified by every saintly virtue."⁶⁵⁹ Hence, "the fruits of religion, in other words, are, like all human products, liable to corruption by excess."⁶⁶⁰ As always, James offers a number of examples for each kind of religious excess. For instance, a religious individual may

⁶⁵⁴ James, *Varieties*, 88.

⁶⁵⁵ James, *Varieties*, 122.

⁶⁵⁶ James proceeds to survey related problems, many of which were discussed in Section C of Part III in Chapter 1.

⁶⁵⁷ James, *Varieties*, 103.

⁶⁵⁸ James, *Varieties*, 102.

⁶⁵⁹ James, *Varieties*, 297.

⁶⁶⁰ James, *Varieties*, 297.

become so consumed by his or her desire for a life of purity that he or she completely withdraws from ordinary daily life altogether, “one form of contact with the outer life being dropped after another, to save the purity of inner tone.”⁶⁶¹ “When the craving for moral consistency and purity is developed to this degree,” James explains, “the subject may well find the outer world too full of shocks to dwell in, and can unify his life and keep his soul unspotted only by withdrawing from it.”⁶⁶² Similarly, extreme asceticism proves problematic, as the individual indulging in it can engage in self-torture and other unhealthy forms of self-denial. Likewise, “fanaticism” denotes excessive devotion, a kind of “loyalty carried to a convulsive extreme.”⁶⁶³ Unfortunately, a “consequence of this condition of mind is jealousy for the deity's honor” and “the slightest affront or neglect must be resented, the deity's enemies must be put to shame.”⁶⁶⁴ Ultimately, “crusades have been preached and massacres instigated for no other reason than to remove a fancied slight upon the God.”⁶⁶⁵ Finally, James explores the effects of excessive religious tenderness and charity, which is reflected by injunctions such as “resist not evil” and “love your enemies” from the Sermon on the Mount. Once again, James is quick to note that such advice would seem to be at odds with our natural impulses, and, in an effort to gauge the effects of excessive religious charity, James makes a distinction between the world as it actually is and an ideal world. While “saintly conduct would be the most perfect conduct conceivable in an environment where all were saints already [i.e. in an ideal world]...in an environment where few are saints, and many the exact reverse of saints, it must be ill adapted.”⁶⁶⁶ Thus, James concludes, “in the world that actually is, the virtues of sympathy, charity, and non-resistance may

⁶⁶¹ James, *Varieties*, 305.

⁶⁶² James, *Varieties*, 261.

⁶⁶³ James, *Varieties*, 298.

⁶⁶⁴ James, *Varieties*, 299.

⁶⁶⁵ James, *Varieties*, 299.

⁶⁶⁶ James, *Varieties*, 310.

be, and often have been, manifested in excess.”⁶⁶⁷ Hence, the primary concern in cases of excess religious charity is that the saint can be taken advantage of in the world as it actually is. As James suggests, “the saint may simply give the universe into the hands of the enemy by his trustfulness. He may by non-resistance cut off his own survival.”⁶⁶⁸ Yet, even in his statement of its disadvantages, James remains sympathetic to religion, as is evidenced in the case of excessive charity. After all, even in excess, he suggests that there is an admirable quality to saintly tenderness, as it can still be “a genuinely creative social force...The saints are authors, auctores, increasers, of goodness.”⁶⁶⁹ Hence, James reckons, “the saint may waste his tenderness and be the dupe and victim of his charitable fever, but the general function of his charity in social evolution is vital and essential.”⁶⁷⁰

Interestingly, James argues that religious excess is correlated with lower intelligence. On this point, he suggests, “what gives the impression of extravagance proves usually on examination to be a relative deficiency of intellect. Spiritual excitement takes pathological forms whenever other interests are too few and the intellect too narrow.”⁶⁷¹ In much the same way, he asserts that one’s conception of God plays a factor in religious excess. Accordingly, a god most closely identified with honor and justice yields a greater likelihood of excess than a god more associated with love and humility. In this vein, James observes: “Fanaticism must then be inscribed on the wrong side of religion's account, so long as the religious person's intellect is on the stage which the despotic kind of God satisfies. But as soon as the God is represented as less intent on his own honor and glory, it ceases to be a danger.”⁶⁷² According to James, we have

⁶⁶⁷ James, *Varieties*, 310.

⁶⁶⁸ James, *Varieties*, 310.

⁶⁶⁹ James, *Varieties*, 311.

⁶⁷⁰ James, *Varieties*, 312.

⁶⁷¹ James, *Varieties*, 298.

⁶⁷² James, *Varieties*, 300.

seen a general historical refinement of the concept of god, thanks to which crass and problematic attributes of God naturally become less popular over time. For instance, once a staple of religious deities, the notion of a God who assigns eternal punishments and rewards and who provides salvation to some but not to others has grown less popular over time. As James suggests, “any God who, on the one hand, can care to keep a pedantically minute account of individual shortcomings, and on the other can feel such partialities, and load particular creatures with such insipid marks of favor, is too small-minded a God for our credence.”⁶⁷³ The upshot is that, in instances of religious excess, inferior intellects immune to this general trend of religious refinement continue to endorse older visions of god, in which case they often fail to produce the usual fruits of religious belief outlined earlier. In fact, James claims, “we feel that saintliness of character may yield almost absolutely worthless fruits if it be associated with such inferior intellectual sympathies.”⁶⁷⁴

Once again, James seems to fear that the more problematic elements of religious belief associated with its less intelligent forms will cloud the judgment of one seeking to gauge religion’s overall utility and unduly affect any subsequent assessment of it as a result. Just as he makes it clear that we ought to divorce the ills associated with institutional elements of religion from religion proper, he urges us to do the same with respect to less intelligent forms of religious belief. Accordingly, he suggests, “we must not confound the essentials of saintliness, which are those general passions of which I have spoken, with its accidents, which are the special determinations of these passions at any historical moment.”⁶⁷⁵ While I think James is justified in distinguishing the essential byproducts of religion from those that are more “accidental,” I think

⁶⁷³ James, *Varieties*, 304.

⁶⁷⁴ James, *Varieties*, 302.

⁶⁷⁵ James, *Varieties*, 321.

it would be a mistake to eliminate the latter from our survey of religion's utility altogether, for these accidents still arise as a result of religion and would not have emerged otherwise.

Accidental or not, these less magnanimous forms of belief still manifest bona fide effects of religion. So long as less intelligent people continue to populate the Earth and espouse religious views, we shall have to deal with such unwanted consequences.

In a similar fashion, James reflects on the relationship between religion and pathology and expresses concern that religion may be discounted due to the relationship between them. He certainly believes that they can coincide, suggesting early on in *Varieties* that, "as a matter of fact a religious life, exclusively pursued, does tend to make the person exceptional and eccentric."⁶⁷⁶ Further, he adds, "religious geniuses have often shown symptoms of nervous instability" and they are "creatures of exalted emotional sensibility."⁶⁷⁷ For this reason, he is worried some might dismiss religion on account of the fact that it can often stem from pathological origins, which is why he makes it a point to distinguish between the existential facts associated with religion and its spiritual value (see Part I). Religion may, at times, be rooted in pathology, but James does not think that this gives us license to do away with it. "Judge the religious life by its results exclusively," he writes, "and I shall assume that the bugaboo of morbid origin will scandalize your piety no more."⁶⁷⁸ Hence, on his account, that religion and pathology may cross paths is no mark against religion. What's more, James implies that there is likely a greater sense of significance associated with an individual's experience when they do cross paths, and he claims that religious experience rooted in pathology makes it more likely that an individual "will make his mark and affect his age, than if his temperament were less

⁶⁷⁶ James, *Varieties*, 19.

⁶⁷⁷ James, *Varieties*, 19.

⁶⁷⁸ James, *Varieties*, 31.

neurotic.”⁶⁷⁹ However, he does clearly maintain that there is a point at which the pathological ceases to be religious. Consider, for instance, extreme melancholy, which is a form of pathology thanks to which the person afflicted by it cannot see any good in existence. As I indicated in Section B of Part II, James is careful to distinguish extreme melancholics from the twice-born religious type, whom they tend to closely resemble; he does this by asserting that the religious are unequivocally optimistic in the long run and are always able to appreciate the good in life, though this might take some time in the case of the twice-born type.

B. James’s Case for the Utility of Supernatural Religion

Speaking of the twice-born type of religious experience, James believes it offers a benefit not found in cases of the once-born type of religious experience. Namely, it offers hope, by way of its supernatural goods, to those who are greatly troubled by evil and who would otherwise have no hope. In Section B of Part II, I pointed out that James suggests that the once-born type is disingenuous insofar as it fails to adequately acknowledge the reality of evil. I think Proudfoot is right when he suggests that “this reminder of the reality of suffering is an important theme that runs through James’s writings on morality and religion.”⁶⁸⁰ This emphasis is indeed evident in many of James’s reflections throughout *Varieties*. *Pain and suffering are inevitable, and death threatens us in our every waking moment. Evil is everywhere, and it’s ultimately inescapable, despite any concerted efforts to convince ourselves otherwise.* These are typical points of emphasis one comes across when examining *Varieties*. As a result, James speaks as if there is reason to fear that, at any given time, the once-born type may, themselves, sense the hollow

⁶⁷⁹ James, *Varieties*, 32.

⁶⁸⁰ James, *Varieties*, xix.

nature of their own belief, which fails to adequately acknowledge the reality of evil, thanks to which “the healthy-minded consciousness is left with an irremediable sense of precariousness.”⁶⁸¹ In some cases, the once-born mentality may prove successful, but its efficacy is never guaranteed, even in these successful cases—tragedy or serious reflection can undermine it at any time. “Within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution,” James suggests, “but it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes.”⁶⁸² Consider, also, that the reality of evil can become so overwhelming for some that it spoils the prospects of even fleeting moments of happiness. On this point, James observes, “make the human being's sensitiveness a little greater, carry him a little farther over the misery-threshold, and the good quality of the successful moments themselves when they occur is spoiled and vitiated.”⁶⁸³ Therefore, for many—and perhaps even most—individuals, a much stronger remedy is in order than the once-born type, working within the confines of this natural, earthly life, is able to provide; as James suggests, “our troubles lie indeed too deep for *that* cure.”⁶⁸⁴ The supernatural re-birth of the twice-born type offers hope in the form of supernatural promises: one need not despair over the inevitable loss of all natural goods any longer if even better goods await in a world or existence beyond this one. In the end, even supposing that the mentality of the once-born type does work for some, there are others who cannot so easily deal with the reality of evil, and the bottom line is that there are many people for whom the mentality of the once-born type simply will not suffice. For such people, religion of the twice-born type offers the only form of hope available to them—without it, they simply could not deal with the reality of evil.

⁶⁸¹ James, *Varieties*, 126.

⁶⁸² James, *Varieties*, 148.

⁶⁸³ James, *Varieties*, 128.

⁶⁸⁴ James, *Varieties*, 129.

James's more favorable impression of the twice-born type is rooted in his own skepticism regarding the prospects of a purely-natural worldview, and, if it weren't for the inadequacy of natural goods to elicit a reliable and authentic kind of happiness, the twice-born type would cease to appear so advantageous. According to James, no matter what joys we may be fortunate enough to experience during our natural lives, almost all of us are ultimately destined to feel a sense of failure and general unease. "Take the happiest man," he says, "the one most envied by the world, and in nine cases out of ten his inmost consciousness is one of failure."⁶⁸⁵ Furthermore, on James's account, death lurks behind our every experience, and it is thought to be necessarily at tension with any profit we gain from our natural lives. Unfortunately, as he puts it, "everything is the great spectre of universal death, the all-encompassing blackness."⁶⁸⁶ Additionally, the better your life is, the more bittersweet the situation becomes—the more, in a way, you stand to lose. On this point, he claims, "the merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation."⁶⁸⁷ For James, such considerations necessarily spawn a sort of sadness, an existential melancholy, and he thinks that, if we are being honest with ourselves about our situation here on Earth, we cannot help but feel pangs of sadness knowing that everything will inevitably be taken away. The upshot is that, at least for the reflecting person, James does not seem to believe it is possible to be genuinely happy without the prospects of some good lying beyond the natural world, which is why he thinks that the once-born type manifests a kind of shortcoming. Accordingly, he avows

⁶⁸⁵ James, *Varieties*, 127.

⁶⁸⁶ James, *Varieties*, 128.

⁶⁸⁷ James, *Varieties*, 130.

“healthy-mindedness pure and simple, with its sentimental optimism, can hardly be regarded by any thinking man as a serious solution.”⁶⁸⁸

In this vein, he discusses the historical failures of the once-born type. He considers the ancient Greeks, who are often associated with naturalistic optimism, and suggests that they ultimately succumb to pessimism and sadness upon due reflection. Hence, although “the early Greeks are continually held up to us in literary works as models of the healthy-minded joyousness which the religion of nature may engender,” we see that “even in Homer the reflective passages are cheerless, and the moment the Greeks grew systematically pensive and thought of ultimates, they became unmitigated pessimists.”^{689, 690} For James, then, serious and candid consideration of the reality of our natural life on Earth necessarily engenders a kind of skepticism regarding the prospects of a purely-natural worldview. Confined to the natural goods of this earthly world, James argues purely naturalistic outlooks can only end in sadness. “Old age,” he suggests, “has the last word: the purely naturalistic look at life, however enthusiastically it may begin, is sure to end in sadness.”⁶⁹¹ In fact, “this sadness lies at the heart of every merely positivistic, agnostic, or naturalistic scheme of philosophy.”⁶⁹² Thus, at least with respect to the prospects of a purely-natural kind of happiness, James must be deemed a skeptic.

While I grant that the mentality of the once-born type may prove insufficient for some, I must say that I think James is too dismissive of the once-born type. Is it really impossible, as James seems to suggest, to acknowledge the pains associated with earthly life (e.g. our unavoidable death), and yet still find genuine happiness within the confines of this life,

⁶⁸⁸ James, *Varieties*, 316.

⁶⁸⁹ James, *Varieties*, 131.

⁶⁹⁰ James proceeds to examine Epicurean and Stoic philosophies in particular, concluding that “each of these philosophies is in its degree a philosophy of despair in nature’s boons” (James, *Varieties*, 132).

⁶⁹¹ James, *Varieties*, 130.

⁶⁹² James, *Varieties*, 130.

embracing a purely-natural view of existence? I am inclined to think not. I think it is possible for the once-born type to have a kind of genuine appreciation for all that our existence entails, including the evil that the twice-born type are said to accentuate, and to nonetheless resolutely choose to ignore and minimize this evil as much as possible. Why must death be thought of as eliciting a kind of necessary tension with our earthly lives, as James thinks it must?⁶⁹³ Perhaps, instead, it actually amplifies the meaning and significance of our natural lives. One could reasonably argue that the prospects of an unavoidable death enhance the sense of import we associate with the life we are fortunate enough to live during our finite existence. After all, don't we gain a greater appreciation of life after we reflect on death? Moreover, our finite existence likely impels more immediate and invested action, ripe with a greater sense of urgency. On the other hand, the alternative, immortality, could arguably spawn apathy and general malaise.⁶⁹⁴ Why worry about anything *now* when the rest of eternity awaits us?

Moreover, while it seems unfortunate that death brings an end to our earthly goods, there is something to be said for the possibility of goods associated with death. Indeed, it very well might be the case that death brings about its own kind of goods. At the very least, death will bring an end to earthly pain and suffering, which the twice-born type is so apt to dwell on. Recall my extended discussion of the possible goods associated with death in Section C of Part III in Chapter 1. Among other things, I pointed out how Mill suggests that immortality, and not a finite existence, might actually be the more dreadful of the two alternatives. Should death bring this kind of good, and if, as Socrates claims, we have no reason to fear it, then it does not,

⁶⁹³ James is certainly not alone in viewing death this way. I have referenced two other like-minded thinkers, Martin Heidegger and Soren Kierkegaard, in this dissertation, and death is, no doubt, a thorn of life for many people. The issue here, however, is whether death has to be viewed this way, and my contention is that it does not.

⁶⁹⁴ I do not mean to deny that there are cases in which the notion of immortality inspires courage and even happiness in dealing with this life; I am only suggesting that contrary reactions are reasonable, too.

in fact, seem that rational reflection on our inevitable demise need elicit the kind of despair James associates with it. All of this goes to show that James's suggestion that due reflection on death, and the termination of our earthly goods that it signals, necessarily yields existential despair and dissatisfaction with purely-natural worldviews is a bit suspect. It seems quite possible to reflect extensively on existence and yet consistently embrace the healthy-mindedness endorsed by the once-born type. Hence, contrary to James, I do not believe that serious reflection regarding life on Earth necessarily generates dissatisfaction with a purely-natural worldview.

I think it is interesting that James characterizes Nietzsche, who obviously holds a much more favorable view of purely-natural worldviews, as pessimistic, when Nietzsche explicitly advocates the merits of life-affirmation and despises the kind of down-trodden mentality James attaches to him. James describes the mood of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as "peevishness running away with the bit between its teeth," and he suggests that "the sallies of the two German authors remind one, half the time, of the sick shriekings of two dying rats."⁶⁹⁵ Nietzsche certainly could be deemed pessimistic insofar as he accentuates the shortcomings of most human beings (i.e. his contention that most do not acknowledge reality as it actually is because they cannot cope with it) and is excessively critical of them for these shortcomings, but he clearly is not pessimistic with respect to his attitude toward our natural life on Earth. Moreover, in a certain and carefully-qualified sense, James ought to be considered more pessimistic than Nietzsche, given what he says in *Varieties*. Specifically, he is more pessimistic about the prospects of thoroughgoing naturalism.⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹⁵ James, *Varieties*, 44.

⁶⁹⁶ I characterize James's view as more pessimistic here with a bit of caution, as it may seem strange to suggest that James is pessimistic in any respect given his generally-optimistic character, and his generally-positive pragmatic views of freedom and other philosophical concepts (just as it may seem strange to label Nietzsche an optimist given

I must say that I find the relationship between Nietzsche and James fascinating, as there are many significant similarities in terms of their values and the conceptualizations underlying their analyses of religion, and yet they reach starkly different conclusions regarding its utility. For example, both emphasize psychological health throughout their examinations of religion, and both emphasize the relationship between religion and health in general. As has been evident throughout this chapter, James, like Nietzsche, frequently alludes to the relationship between religion and the pain and suffering associated with human existence. As Reinhold Niebuhr suggests, “James surveys the effect of religious faith upon the health and wholesomeness of the individual, upon the capacity or incapacity to withstand the strains of life.”⁶⁹⁷ To be sure, both emphasize the relationship between religion and health, but Nietzsche and James offer very different opinions regarding the impact of religion on health. While Nietzsche suggests that religions like Christianity only engender misery by dwelling on pain and suffering (see Part IV of Chapter 2), James claims that they have quite the opposite effect, instead transfiguring such misery into optimism. In fact, as we have seen, James believes religion sometimes offers the only solution for those who would otherwise be bogged down by such pain and suffering. In sum, James suggests that endowing individuals with the ability to take on the strains of life is one of the chief virtues of religion, while Nietzsche gives his readers the impression that religion engenders weak and “diseased” individuals who cannot—and do not—accept the realities of

his excessively-critical analyses). Indeed, in many respects James is very much an optimist, and some have contended that he is even too optimistic (as I will assert regarding his essentially-optimistic depiction of religion). To be clear, I am not saying that James held a pessimistic view of life, or that his views were generally pessimistic. I am only saying that he espoused a pessimistic view of thoroughgoing naturalism, as supported by his reflections on the once-born and twice-born religious types in *Varieties*. It is a pessimistic view in the sense that he does not think it is possible for a purely-natural worldview (like Nietzsche’s) to elicit genuine happiness, while others, like myself, maintain that it is.

⁶⁹⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Introduction by Reinhold Niebuhr, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1961), 8.

their earthly lives, including the dangers and the suffering implicit in them. Although they each value the same things, namely, positive and life-affirming attitudes, effects, and individuals, James and Nietzsche completely disagree about whether religion can bring them about.

Ultimately, James asserts that religion is *fundamentally* and *essentially* positive and regenerative in nature. On James's account, if an individual does not possess the easy optimism of the once-born type or overcome a kind of existential crisis (which is, itself, a kind of optimistic outcome), he or she cannot properly be called religious in the first place. Similarly, as we have seen, one who continues to labor in extreme melancholy and pessimism cannot properly be called religious. Instead, religious experience, in both its once-born and twice-born forms, signals a positive and uplifting movement within the soul (in the case of twice-born religious individuals, a longer gestation period may be required, but the relief comes nonetheless). For James, conversion, by definition, signals a positive transformation of the soul, thanks to which internal discord is eliminated. Hence, religion engenders psychological health, insofar as it helps individuals conquer the reality of pain and suffering and helps them rid themselves of any mental dis-ease arising from this reality.

This characterization of religion is clearly at odds with Nietzsche's, as Nietzsche suggests that religion is, instead, nihilistic (i.e. it negates life and is pessimistic) and unhealthy. Indeed, Nietzsche would likely classify most religious individuals as pessimistic and unhealthy, since he thinks that the supernatural illusions and other forms of idealism religious individuals espouse are inherently unhealthy psychological practices that betray a deep-seated pessimism regarding life. Recall that, on Nietzsche's account, rather than instill optimism in the course of life, the religious instead say "no" to it, and he believes that the resentment laden (presumably unbeknownst to them) in their other-worldly (or "unseen," as James would say) ideals and other

nihilistic tendencies substantiates their pessimistic undertones and psychological dis-ease.

Therefore, rather than offer relief for mental dis-ease, Nietzsche suggests that religion constitutes a kind of mental disease.

This divergence in opinion regarding the utility of religion is also evidenced in their contradictory evaluations of religious faith. As I discussed in Part IV of Chapter 2, Nietzsche argues that religious faith is a sign of weakness and dis-ease, but James often speaks of the merits of faith; not only that, he does so in a manner that bears a strange resemblance to Nietzsche's own locution. Accordingly, he describes religious faith as "a force that re-infuses the positive willingness to live, even in full presence of the evil perceptions that erewhile made life seem unbearable."⁶⁹⁸ In this vein, Niebuhr points out that "James glories in the affirmative attitude of Luther's 'Commentary on Galatians' because the sense of forgiveness and release from the burden of guilt is essentially affirmative and healthy-minded."⁶⁹⁹ Once again, we see that James suggests that religion is optimistic and life-affirming. While the twice-born may have originally been saddled with pessimism and the power of evil, and though they may never completely lose sight of that evil, their second birth still ultimately signals a more optimistic outlook and an increase in the degree to which they are healthy-minded. Hence, given James's conception of religion, its significant utility for the individual is, in an important respect, a *defining* characteristic.

Indeed, James suggests that as soon as a particular form of religion ceases to be useful, and to generate the positive, uplifting features he associates with it, it is abandoned and replaced by one that is more valuable. Accordingly, he claims, through a discussion of the evolution of

⁶⁹⁸ James, *Varieties*, 169.

⁶⁹⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Introduction by Reinhold Niebuhr, 7.

the deities believed in, that there is a kind of natural selection at play when it comes to which of these deities, as well as religions more generally, die off and which become more permanent fixtures in the history of humankind. The upshot is that, on his account, this natural selection is essentially an account of utility. Thus, James suggests that the gods worshipped by various peoples throughout history are chosen because of “the value of the fruits...[they] seemed to them to yield. So soon as the fruits began to seem quite worthless...the deity grew discredited.”⁷⁰⁰ Hence, on his account, there is a kind of built-in testament to the utility of any extant religion. “The gods we stand by,” James continues, “are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and on one another.”⁷⁰¹ Once again, this goes to show that James views religion as inherently useful, and one finds this to be a recurring theme in *Varieties*.

Interestingly, James’s twice-born type seems akin to Nietzsche’s “slave” and his once-born type seems similar to Nietzsche’s “master.” Like Nietzsche’s master, James’s once-born type does not venture beyond the bounds of natural, earthly life, and both are thought to espouse optimism without doing so. Similarly, James’s twice-born type, like Nietzsche’s slave, dwells on the pain and suffering implicit in earthly life, and must venture beyond the natural world to find happiness. Ironically, just as James lauds the twice-born type for acknowledging an aspect of reality the once-born type does not (i.e. evil), Nietzsche speaks highly of masters for doing the very same thing. Recall that Nietzsche roots the slave’s *self-deception* in his or her preoccupation with the pain and suffering (i.e. the evil) of earthly life. This is precisely what James thinks indicates a *heightened sense of awareness* in the twice-born type! On Nietzsche’s

⁷⁰⁰ James, *Varieties*, 289.

⁷⁰¹ James, *Varieties*, 290.

account, the slave is consequently compelled to seek a supernatural remedy because he or she is unable to cope with earthly life as it actually is, and it is this supernatural move that reflects the slave's deception and inadequate view of reality. For James, on the other hand, this process of moving beyond the natural world, which we find in his twice-born type and Nietzsche's slave, actually reflects a greater awareness of reality that is found wanting in his once-born type and Nietzsche's master. According to James, the once-born type and Nietzsche's master may be able to confine themselves to a purely naturalistic outlook on life, but, in doing so, they implicitly deceive themselves about the reality of evil. As we've seen, on his account, due reflection on reality renders such a purely-natural outlook insufficient and unwanted.

One thing that I think likely contributes significantly to their divergent views regarding the effects of religion on health is that they are working with completely different conceptions of "religion." As a result, while ostensibly they may appear to be discussing the fruits of the same phenomenon, they are actually, as they say, "comparing apples and oranges." I say this because Nietzsche clearly has the world's most popular supernatural religions, especially, as we have seen, Christianity, chiefly—if not solely—in mind when advancing his criticisms, while James works with a much broader conception of religion (as I detailed in Section A of Part II). If he were to employ James's notion of religion, Nietzsche would view it more favorably, since it would arguably include his own naturalistic, life-affirming reaction to life, as well as similar manifestations of the master mentality he would not ordinarily associate with religion. Indeed, I would argue that Nietzsche's idealization of earthly life more closely resembles James's once-born type than James admits. As I have suggested, I do not think Nietzsche is properly labeled a pessimist in a way that would exclude him from the kind of optimism associated with James's once-born type, contrary to what James claims. In my view, Nietzsche holds life-affirmation up

as a kind of higher ideal in a way that is on a par with many of the examples of the once-born type that James offers.

Similarly, I think that one's estimation of religion's optimism will hang on what he or she associates with the term. If one means what Nietzsche seems to have meant, namely, being able to embrace his thoroughgoing naturalism (which signals his idea of authentic "life affirmation"), then it's easy to agree with him and say that religion is not so optimistic, since it tends to move beyond the bounds of his naturalism into the realm of the unseen. If, however, one means something more along the lines of what James seems to have meant by the concept, where it reflects being able to find peace within one's existence and to avoid existential despair, then it's easy to see why James describes religion as optimistic. I think that their view of health, in turn, hinges on their divergent views of what signals an optimistic or positive character. For Nietzsche, the healthy individual is one who bravely tackles life without recourse to supernatural notions, while, for James, the healthy individual is simply one who is able to avoid internal discord and existential crisis. In view of this significant difference in their denotation of such key concepts, it should come as no surprise that Nietzsche and James seem to arrive at such different conclusions regarding the value of religion.

I take issue with James's general conception of religion, insofar as he defines it in a manner that renders it necessarily optimistic (much like I took issue with Nietzsche for rendering religion in such a universally-negative light). I think he is right to suggest that religious experience tends to be uplifting and positive, but I'm not so sure this holds true in all cases. Surely there are individuals we would be inclined to call "religious" who are not as content and optimistic about life as James implies they must be in order to be deemed religious. Take, for example, someone who believes wholeheartedly in the prospects of heaven, but who deplors the

daily toils associated with earthly life. Surely there are individuals for whom God is at the center of their affairs and yet earthly existence is still seen as a kind of ever-present ill that must be dealt with. Such an individual wants nothing more than to get on with what really matters: the good life that awaits him or her in heaven. In the meantime, he or she reluctantly puts up with the plights of his or her natural existence, wanting nothing more than for this worldly existence to be over. To be sure, this is not a pretty picture and it seems a bit dubious to call such a life a life of optimism, but should we refrain from calling such an individual religious solely on account of the fact? If the individual continues to be bogged down by the pain and suffering implicit in earthly life, James clearly is reluctant to call them religious, given his essentially-positive rendition of religion. Yet, it seems to me that, insofar as the individual still goes to church, says his or her prayers daily, and puts God before all else in his or her life, the majority of us would still think of such an individual as religious. In a fair assessment of religion, I think we ought to include those who are not ultimately so optimistic when they otherwise seem to us to be religious, and, for this reason, I worry about James's basic conception of religion. Indeed, I wonder just how many of the individuals we are naturally inclined to call "religious" are as hopeful and optimistic as James suggests they must be.

IV. Conclusion

In sum, I believe that James offers a very illuminating analysis of the utility of individual religion, and, despite some of the problems I've alluded to throughout this chapter, I think he offers an invaluable contribution to the study of religion's utility. By and large, he makes a good case for several of the benefits he associates with religion. Nevertheless, in the preceding analysis, I have alluded to several problems with his account of religion's utility. I have argued,

for example, that a proper analysis of religion's utility must remain open to the less desirable elements of religion that James himself purposefully ignores or downplays. Hence, the institutional components of religion, which I have suggested pervade most religious experience and have palpable consequences (which James does not deny), must not be ignored. I have also voiced concerns about the feasibility of James's distinction between individual and institutional religion. His notion of "individual religion" requires the existence of "pattern-setters," but I suggested that there is good reason to wonder whether such pattern-setters actually exist. Furthermore, less intelligent forms of individual religion, which spawn more detrimental consequences thanks to their excesses, should not be minimized, which James seems inclined to do. Similarly, I have expressed concerns regarding his exclusively-optimistic interpretation of religion—in point of fact, some who we would naturally call religious do not seem so optimistic (granted many do). Additionally, I have mentioned my concerns regarding his broad conception of religion throughout the chapter, which echoes much of what I said regarding Mill's similar conception in Chapter 1.

Finally, I have contended that James is too dismissive of the prospects of pure naturalism. This is probably what I find most problematic regarding James's analysis. I am not convinced that the kind of existential relief he says can only be found by way of religion (especially the twice-born type) cannot, in fact, be found elsewhere. Clearly, to say that religion engenders happiness is one thing and to say that it yields a higher kind of happiness that can be found nowhere else is quite another. The latter is a much stronger claim, and, subsequently, it is much tougher to defend than the former claim. In my view, while James is careful in trying to distinguish a certain pitch of optimism belonging solely to religion, separating it from morality and naturalism, he does not adequately demonstrate that the religious are, in fact, capable of a

unique or higher kind of happiness. I think he is right when he suggests that religion can engender greater happiness than morality, but I do not think he makes a good case against naturalism. James is clearly skeptical of the prospects of pure naturalism when it comes to making people happy and satisfying their self-reflective nature, but, contrary to what he suggests, I do believe naturalism can work for some and that it is not destined to sadness and despair. Nor is it shallow, as James contends, and I believe it can—and does—suffice for some, proving capable of generating a kind of happiness rivaling the relief he associates with supernatural religion. Hence, in much the same way Nietzsche undervalues twice-born religious experience, James undervalues once-born religious experience. As we saw in Section B of Part III in Chapter 1, Mill certainly has his doubts about James’s position, too.⁷⁰² He claims, for example, that, “history, so far as we know it, bears out the opinion, that mankind can perfectly well do without the belief in a heaven.”⁷⁰³ While James contends that the Greeks “knew no joys comparable in quality of preciousness to those which we shall ere long see that Brahmans, Buddhists, Christians, Mohammedans, twice-born people whose religion is non-naturalistic, get from their several creeds of mysticism and renunciation,”⁷⁰⁴ Mill counters that “we neither find that the Greeks enjoyed life less, nor feared death more, than other people.”⁷⁰⁵ On this point, I ultimately agree with Mill. As I suggested, if it turns out that the supernatural goods religion promises are not necessary for the kind of optimism and existential relief James suggests religion solely engenders, then the case for religion’s utility surely loses some of its force.

⁷⁰² As I indicated in this same section of Chapter 1, Sigmund Freud argues science can yield the same kind of satisfaction religion is thought to engender.

⁷⁰³ Mill, *Collected Works*, 427.

⁷⁰⁴ James, *Varieties*, 131.

⁷⁰⁵ Mill, *Collected Works*, 427.

However, I believe James does an admirable job of demonstrating how religion does yield significant existential relief to some who would otherwise remain hopeless in the face of evil. Indeed, *Varieties* is, in a sense, one long testament to this particular fruit of religion. James believes, as do I, that Nietzsche's naturalism will prove insufficient and generally unsatisfactory for many—perhaps even most—people. As I argued in Chapter 2, I think that Nietzsche fails to properly estimate the value of twice-born religious experience (i.e. the supernatural religions associated with his slave), insofar as he categorically condemns it and, thus, fails to appreciate that, as his own philosophy suggests, some *require* such experience in order to be healthy. Without it, some would be unable to cope with the pain and suffering inherent in earthly life, just as he himself suggests. This is a point that James clearly recognizes, as I hope to have shown throughout this chapter, and, as a result, he offers a much more sympathetic perspective of religion than Nietzsche does in this regard, which I think is warranted. Religion may not produce a unique kind of happiness, as James contends it does, but it surely can engender happiness; and, for some individuals, it may prove to be a requirement for happiness. If nothing else, *Varieties* offers a thorough defense of these points, and religion ought to be credited accordingly as a result. I now turn to the Conclusion of this dissertation, where I form some conclusions regarding the utility of religion that I think are warranted based on the foregoing textual analyses.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Mill, Nietzsche, and James have much to say about the utility of religion, and attempting to formulate conclusions based on their extensive—and often conflicting—reflections is not a very straightforward task. Nevertheless, despite the difficulty of the undertaking, I am convinced that some conclusions regarding the utility of religion can be defended. In the following, I briefly summarize my primary observations from each chapter and establish what I think we may generally conclude from these observations. I end by articulating the need for a more sustained study of the utility of religion, à la James’s call for a “science of religion,” and by offering suggestions regarding how to best facilitate this study in the future.

Let me begin by saying that I think James makes a good point in suggesting that we ought to try to develop a “science of religion” in an effort to analyze religion in a more useful way. I agree with much of his criticism of the philosophy of religion and his conclusion that it is generally unable to adequately assess the value of religion. As Proudfoot suggests, “a ‘science of religions’ can tell us which faiths have worked best, in a way that no rationalist analysis can. In *Varieties* James proposes that philosophy of religion be replaced by such a science of religions, and he hopes that the book will make a contribution to it.”⁷⁰⁶ Moreover, I think the impetus for much of the animosity toward religion is likely the dubious philosophical and dogmatic intellectual arguments offered on its behalf, which James focuses on and, in my opinion, rightly derides in his lecture on philosophy.⁷⁰⁷ In my judgment, some are so put off by the lack of a sound intellectual basis for such religious belief (which is further compounded by

⁷⁰⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Introduction and Notes by Wayne Proudfoot (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), xvii.

⁷⁰⁷ I.e. Lecture XVIII in *Varieties*.

the insistence on the part of some theologians and philosophers that there is one) that they fail to recognize that it might nevertheless prove useful despite any intellectual shortcomings. Thus, I certainly appreciate James's desire to emphasize the effects of religion on our everyday lives, as his science of religion is intended to do, rather than to toil in the intellectual discussions comprising the philosophy of religion.

In Chapter 1, we saw how Mill distinguishes between religion's social utility and its individual utility. I think this is a useful distinction with which to start an analysis of the utility of religion, as it reflects what are arguably the two most common claims offered in support of religion's usefulness: 1) religion is morally useful and 2) religion makes individuals happy. Interestingly, we saw how differently Mill viewed the utility of religion from the perspective of society as opposed to the perspective of individuals. As I suggested, I believe Mill makes a very strong case against the thesis that religion is morally useful. I agree with his assertion that religion often receives credit for teaching and enforcing morality when, in fact, deeper underlying forces are likely responsible for these effects, and I think he makes a strong case for why religion can even be morally problematic. Additionally, I discussed research on the relationship between religion and morality which, at best, fails to substantiate any positive correlation between religion and morality. I do not mean to suggest that religion is altogether incapable of inspiring moral behavior, but I do believe, as Mill argued, that most people probably vastly overstate the moral utility of religion. In my view, Mill is justified in trying to divorce religion from the good moral consequences so often associated with it, and I believe he is generally successful in his attempt to undermine arguments in favor of religion's social utility.

However, we also saw how Mill was not so inclined to dismiss arguments in favor of the individual utility of religion. Indeed, he conceded that religion produces existential relief for

individuals (i.e. religion makes some individuals happy), but he questioned whether *supernatural* religion is necessary and/or optimal for this kind of relief. In turn, he suggested that supernatural religion is neither necessary nor optimal for such relief, and, in the process, he elaborated on other viable alternatives, such as patriotism and his own Religion of Humanity. While I think that his alternatives might prove to be generally effective, I expressed concerns about their adequacy in all cases. That is, I granted that Mill's alternatives can suffice for some, but I suggested that there might be others for whom a supernatural remedy is still required.

Ultimately, I concluded Chapter 1 by agreeing with Mill that the case for religion's social utility is unconvincing, and, in subsequent chapters, I turned to a more detailed analysis of the case for its individual utility, which seemed much more promising.

In Chapter 2, I presented Nietzsche's case against religion's individual utility. On his account, religion is problematic for individuals because it entails self-deception and is unhealthy. Nietzsche, a thoroughgoing naturalist, decries religion on the basis of its anti-natural and supernatural tendencies, which appeal to something beyond the natural world and, thus, entail deception. In lieu of religious values, which he believes propagate weakness and disease, Nietzsche maintains that individuals ought to instead uphold more natural and life-affirming values, which are said to spawn a more vigorous and healthy mentality. While I agreed that religion is commonly associated with deception, I expressed my doubts regarding Nietzsche's contention that it is implicitly unhealthy. I cited, among other things, his own reflections on the slave mentality, which seem to suggest that supernatural religion is a natural consequence of the human condition. In other words, some—and perhaps many—may require supernatural religion in order to cope with earthly life, in which case it would seem to be a necessary component in their prescription for a healthy life. Thus, I concluded Chapter 2 by arguing that Nietzsche's

conception of health is inadequate and that, as a result, his categorical misgivings about the utility of religion for individuals are unfounded. Having granted that it may entail deception, I remained unconvinced that religion is necessarily unhealthy for individuals, and, in turning to Chapter 3, I began to wonder whether the opposite might, in fact, be the case. Perhaps, as James maintains, religion is, instead, necessarily healthy and regenerative.

In Chapter 3, I presented James's case for religion's individual utility, which is predicated on his notion that religion is, by definition, a healthy and optimistic phenomenon. On his account, although it is complicated and multifaceted, religion is always essentially positive and regenerative, thanks to the process of conversion implicit in it, which reflects the elimination of psychological discord within an individual. James expounds on the many benefits he associates with individual religion, and he downplays the harms he links to it. According to James, some people are plagued by an overwhelming fixation on the evils of earthly life that can only be alleviated by religion, and others who may not require religion in order to be happy are still happier as a result of their religion. He suggests that the harms associated with religion can usually be traced back to the excesses of overindulgent and inferior intellects, and that, as humanity continues to become more refined, these excesses will become less prevalent and problematic. Ultimately, I argued that James makes a very good case for religion's individual utility, but I expressed my concerns that he is nevertheless overstating his case against the prospects of purely-natural worldviews. While I agreed that he demonstrated the usefulness of supernatural religion for some individuals, I suggested he nevertheless underestimates the prospects for happiness without it. Recall that James submits that a serious and reflective individual cannot help but experience sadness when thinking about the evils inherent in earthly life, and that long-lasting happiness and existential peace require him or her to appeal to

something beyond the natural world. I suggested that James's view seems to reflect his own unduly skeptical view of purely-natural worldviews, and I argued that, while making supernatural appeals might be necessary for existential relief in some cases, it still nevertheless seems possible in other cases to secure a similar kind of relief without making such appeals. Hence, Nietzsche's naturalism may not prove to be satisfactory for the majority of people (as I argued in Chapter 2 and as James suggests), but I do believe it is, in fact, satisfactory in some cases (as I argued in Chapter 3 and contrary to what James suggests). I also expressed concerns about James's notion that religion is always positive and regenerative in nature, since there seem to be individuals that we are inclined to classify as "religious" who do not fit his optimistic description.

In this dissertation, I have aimed to catalogue some of the harms and benefits properly ascribed to religion. I hope to have established that, although religion yields little moral utility and even seems to be morally problematic, it proves useful for some individuals insofar as it provides significant existential relief. Now, contrary to what James suggests and in accordance with what Mill and Nietzsche assert, I maintain that some people are nevertheless capable of experiencing similar existential relief and happiness by purely natural means. Still, I believe James is right to emphasize that there are those who seem to require supernatural religion in order to experience such relief. In this case, supernatural religion is vitally useful for the mental wellbeing of these individuals, which I think Mill (to a lesser extent) and Nietzsche (to a greater extent) fail to adequately appreciate. Ultimately, I am not sure that we will ever have an answer to the question "why?" (i.e. why is there something and not nothing?). Until we do, I believe that religion will continue to exert a significant positive influence on the lives of some (perhaps most) people, which surely merits consideration in an analysis of the utility of religion.

However, while there may be, as I have argued, individuals who profit from religion in this manner, the harms associated with religion must still be considered. Specifically, I am worried that religion may be morally problematic (as Mill suggested) and I am concerned about some of the deception and intellectual difficulties linked to religion, which Mill and Nietzsche referred to. Hence, granting that religion produces positive effects for many individuals, potential harms associated with religion must still be factored into an assessment of its overall utility, and I believe that weighing these benefits and harms against each other is the primary task awaiting those who wish to contribute to James's science of religion in the future. If, for example, it were established that religion is actually negatively correlated with morality, then that consideration would need to be duly weighed against the individual utility of religion.

With this in mind, consider, for a moment, the "religion-causes-violence" thesis that was mentioned many times throughout the dissertation. Although I am not fully committed to the notion that religion is positively correlated with violence, I have expressed concerns that it may be. To be sure, there are those who assert religion does propagate violence; for instance, I have referenced Sam Harris, who claims religion is inherently divisive. While examining the merits of Harris's arguments for this position lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, I do believe his initial worry is warranted. Hence, although I think the relationship between religion and violence is anything but clear, I do believe it is worthwhile to investigate the relationship further in order try to shed light on the matter, contrary to what William T. Cavanaugh suggests in his article "Does Religion Cause Violence: Behind the Common Question Lies a Morass of Unclear Thinking."⁷⁰⁸ Cavanaugh challenges the notion that religions like "Christianity, Islam, and other

⁷⁰⁸ William T. Cavanaugh, "Does Religion Cause Violence: Behind the Common Question Lies a Morass of Unclear Thinking," *Harvard Divinity School: Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, vol. 35, no. 2 & 3 (Spring/Summer 2007), <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/harvard-divinity-bulletin/articles/does-religion-cause-violence> (accessed 11 May 2011).

faiths are *more* inclined toward violence than ideologies and institutions that are identified as ‘secular’,”⁷⁰⁹ and he suggests that the problem with those advancing the religion-causes-violence argument is their “inability to find a convincing way to separate religious violence from secular violence.”⁷¹⁰

Briefly, Cavanaugh contends that it is difficult—if not impossible—to disentangle religion from other social processes and institutions, and he suggests that “religion was not considered something separable from such political institutions until the modern era.”⁷¹¹ As a result, substantiating that religion, in particular, is the root of violence becomes problematic. He also alludes to the disparate conceptions of religion, which he argues makes it all the more difficult to establish a meaningful link between religion and violence. To be sure, I think much of what Cavanaugh says is fair and well-reasoned. He raises some excellent points that must be addressed by anyone advocating the position that religion causes violence. And, as we have seen, religion is indeed a notoriously vague concept, which makes it more difficult for religion-causes-violence theorists to substantiate their arguments. Cavanaugh is also right to suggest that it is hard to isolate religion from the other social factors with which it seems so intertwined, like politics, culture, and education. Cavanaugh’s concerns are even more global and worrisome than they initially seem, as his analysis calls into question the very prospects of analyzing the utility of religion at all, since the upshot of his argument is that we cannot clearly distinguish what religion even is or adequately separate it from other potential causal factors. As he puts the point: “what does or does not count as religion is based on subjective and indefensible assumptions.”⁷¹² In this case, Cavanaugh’s concerns also threaten the very foundation of

⁷⁰⁹ Cavanaugh, *Does Religion Cause Violence*.

⁷¹⁰ Cavanaugh, *Does Religion Cause Violence*.

⁷¹¹ Cavanaugh, *Does Religion Cause Violence*.

⁷¹² Cavanaugh, *Does Religion Cause Violence*.

James's science of religion. After all, how can we propose to measure the effects of religion on our daily lives if we cannot establish what religion even is?

Throughout this dissertation, I have echoed some of Cavanaugh's concerns and referred to many conceptual difficulties associated with defining "religion." In Chapter 1, for instance, I noted that Mill defines "religion" in a very general manner but then proceeds to focus on something much more specific (i.e. supernatural religion) in his actual analysis of the utility of religion. Moreover, I expressed concerns about defining religion in such a broad manner to begin with, as both Mill and James do. Specifically, such a broad definition of religion would seem to incorporate belief systems that some are hesitant to associate with religion, including many ostensibly secular commitments, such as patriotism. Cavanaugh reflects on this point, writing, "a survey of religious studies literature finds totems, witchcraft, the rights of man, Marxism, liberalism, Japanese tea ceremonies, nationalism, sports, free market ideology, and a host of other institutions and practices treated under the rubric 'religion'."⁷¹³ As opposed to Mill and James, Nietzsche works with a more specific conception of religion, focusing primarily on supernatural religions like Christianity. As I have argued, these conceptual differences surely influence these thinkers' assessments of religion's utility. If Nietzsche was working with James's broad conception of religion (which I have suggested even includes Nietzsche's own fervent naturalism), then surely he would have reached more favorable conclusions regarding religion's utility. In view of these conceptual difficulties and Cavanaugh's concerns, I think it is imperative that anyone contributing to the discussion of religion's utility stipulate what definition of "religion" they intend to work with (which, to their credit, both Mill and James do). However, Cavanaugh suggests that issues persist even if one tries to offer clear definitions:

⁷¹³ Cavanaugh, *Does Religion Cause Violence*.

If one tries to limit the definition of religion to belief in God or gods, then certain belief systems that are usually called “religions” are eliminated, such as Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism. If the definition is expanded to include such belief systems, then all sorts of practices, including many that are usually labeled ‘secular,’ fall under the definition of religion.⁷¹⁴

Nevertheless, despite such concerns, I believe it is important to keep in mind that the term “religion” is *not* vacuous. If it were, it would be difficult to ascertain how Cavanaugh can be so sure that there is, in fact, *something* that is intertwined with the other institutions he mentions (i.e. what is it that he claims cannot be isolated from these other institutions?). I agree that trying to validate any thesis related to religion is a difficult endeavor because considerable legwork is involved, but I disagree with Cavanaugh’s conclusion, which I believe is too strong. Yes, the distinction between religious and secular institutions may be “mystifying” and, at times, “misleading” if the legwork is not properly done, but that does not mean that it is altogether “unhelpful.”⁷¹⁵ Cavanaugh is essentially suggesting that the case for religion causing violence can’t be made because the term “religion” is vague. It would seem, then, that for this same reason he would have a problem with anyone invoking the term “religion” in any discussion. Shall we not permit ourselves to use the term at all? Antagonism toward the concept of “religion” itself certainly seems to be the upshot of his analysis, but I want to be sure to avoid a slippery slope fallacy here. If Cavanaugh’s position is to be interpreted less extremely, then further explanation is required regarding the point at which the term “religion” ceases to be problematic for the reasons he articulates. In other words, how can the issue he raises ever be eradicated in any discussion? If Cavanaugh wishes to avoid association with the extreme position that renders the term “religion” incapable of *ever* serving a useful purpose, then I think

⁷¹⁴ Cavanaugh, *Does Religion Cause Violence*.

⁷¹⁵ The terms inside quotation marks are the words he uses in voicing his concerns.

he owes us some explanation as to how (or when) it can be used without meeting the same pitfalls that plague it within discussions regarding the religion-causes-violence thesis.

Whether it is ultimately Cavanaugh's stance or not, I believe such an extreme position is certainly unreasonable. It is impossible to avoid vagueness altogether; there is almost always a way to phrase our thoughts more precisely (after all, even the term "vague" is vague). Clearly, we cannot—and should not—avoid speaking when vagueness is inevitable, or else we would arguably never speak. Just as clearly, we can see that, even in instances where vagueness is unavoidable, we can still convey what we mean and gain something from doing so. Hence, speaking in such circumstances is still useful, contrary to what Cavanaugh implies. Consider, for example, the following scenario. Lost while on vacation, I ask where a historic stadium is located and a stranger replies, "a long way away from here, buddy." What the stranger said is vague, and it certainly draws my ire (as I wish he'd be more specific), but it is nonetheless useful, since I had been under the impression that I was very close to the stadium. So too, just because "religion" is a vague term doesn't mean that it can't nonetheless be employed in a useful manner.⁷¹⁶ I believe we can speak of religion in a meaningful and useful manner, provided we set the necessary foundation and carefully distinguish, as best we can, what exactly we propose to signify by our employment of the term. Thus, the key to a fruitful discussion of the relationship between religion and violence, or of anything pertaining to religion, is to, once again, clarify as much as possible at the outset what we mean when we use the critical terms involved. Others may disagree with what we have decided to include or exclude by defining the terms in the manner we do, but we can still establish fruitful findings regarding the phenomenon

⁷¹⁶ Perhaps Cavanaugh wants to make the case that it is a matter of degrees (i.e. some vague terms can be useful, but "religion" is so vague that it cannot be). In this case, he still owes us more explanation. Specifically, at what point does a term become too vague to be useful? As is, his account of the connection between the vagueness of terms and their usefulness is *vague*.

of religion as we have chosen to consider it. All of this goes to show that using the empirical method championed by James in an effort to continue exploring the effects of religion is not a futile endeavor, as Cavanaugh seems to believe; rather, I believe it is a task well worth the attention of future scholarship. It is, as I have indicated, also pursuant to James's science of religion, toward which I ultimately hope this dissertation constitutes a worthy contribution.

APPENDIX:
Comprehensive Outline of Dissertation

INTRODUCTION

1. Subject: Philosophy of Religion
2. Issue: Utility (As Opposed to Truth) of Religion
3. Significance of Issue: Religion Is Especially Important because It Is So Widespread
4. The Truth of Religion Receives More Attention than the Utility of Religion
5. The Utility of Religion Is an Important and Underappreciated Issue
6. Historical Context and Scholarship
7. Introduction of Primary Philosophical Texts
8. Overview of Dissertation and Thesis

CHAPTER 1: J.S. Mill and *Utility of Religion*

I. Introduction

1. General Introduction
2. *Utility of Religion* Is Concerned with the Utility of Religion, Not with Its Truth
3. The Relationship between the Truth of Religion and the Utility of Religion and Mill's Warning against Unbridled Skepticism
4. Mill Defines "Religion" in a Very General Manner, but He Focuses on "Supernatural Religions" in Much of the Essay
5. Outline of Chapter

II. Religion and Morality

A. The Moral Case for the Social Utility of Religion

6. The Thesis: Religion Is Morally Advantageous
7. A Stronger Version of the Argument: Religion Is Necessary for Morality
8. A Weaker Version of the Argument: Religion Is Otherwise Morally Beneficial
9. Two Themes Underlying Arguments in Support of the Thesis: 1) Religion As an Enforcer of Morality
10. 2) Religion As a Teacher of Morality
11. The Historical Argument for Religion's Usefulness
12. Mill Rejects the Thesis, and He Also Suggests that Religion Is Morally Problematic

B. Mill's Case against the Thesis that Religion Is Morally Advantageous

13. The Relationship between Religion and Morality Is Generally Overstated
14. Morality Is Primarily Steered by Other Powers, Not by Religion
15. The Power of Authority
16. The Power of Education
17. The Power of Public Opinion
18. Religion Is Not an Effective Enforcer of Morality
19. Problems with Supernatural Consequences

20. Religion Is Not an Effective Teacher of Morality
21. There Are Inconsistent Moral Recommendations across Religious Traditions
22. There Are Inconsistent Moral Recommendations within Religious Traditions
23. Mill Grants Historical Benefit of Religion, Which Seems Suspect
24. The Benefit Has Been Gained, and Religion Is No Longer Needed

C. Mill's Case for Why Religion Is Morally Problematic

25. Mill Not Only Discounts the Thesis that Religion Is Morally Advantageous, He Suggests Ways in Which It Is Morally Inhibitory (E.g. Its Holy Nature Restricts Moral Progress)
26. The Selfish Nature of "Moral" Behavior Motivated by Supernatural Consequences
27. Lou Matz's Concern Regarding Mill, a Utilitarian, Making This Point
28. Holy Wars and the Idea that Religion Causes Violence
29. Mill Argues that Nefarious Forms of Religion Are Becoming Less Prevalent
30. Immoral Examples (E.g. Emulating a Creator that Creates a Hell)
31. Søren Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith
32. The Problem of Faith

D. Empirical Research

33. Empirical Evidence Supports Mill
34. Marc Hauser's and Peter Singer's Research: Religious and Non-religious Make Same Moral Decisions
35. Russell Middleton's and Snell Putney's Research: Two Kinds of Moral Standards (Ascetic and Social)
36. Middleton and Putney Continued: Non-religious Are Just as Likely (Even More So) to Act in Accord with Their Moral Beliefs and Standards as the Religious Are
37. Gregory S. Paul's Quantitative Cross-national Analysis
38. Paul Continued: More Religious Populations Experience Higher Frequency of Social Problems
39. Research Indicating a Positive Correlation between Religion and Moral Beliefs and Standards
40. Research Indicating a Positive Correlation between Religion and Moral Behavior

III. Religion and Personal Happiness

A. The Case for Supernatural Religions As a Source of Personal Happiness

41. Introduction
42. The Origin and Evolution of Religion
43. Two Reasons Why Religion Is So Long-lasting: 1) It Satisfies Existential Curiosity (a Trait It Shares with Poetry)
44. 2) It Offers Hope Byway of a Positive Belief in a Compensatory Afterlife (a Trait that Distinguishes It from Poetry)
45. Mill Grants that Religion Yields Personal Satisfaction, but He Wonders Whether It Is Necessary and/or Optimal for Such Personal Satisfaction

B. Mill's Case for Why Supernatural Religions Are Not Necessary for Securing Personal Happiness

46. History Has Shown That Humankind Can Prosper without Being Significantly Influenced by Belief in Heaven and Hell (E.g. Greeks and Buddhists)
47. There Are Other Substitutes Available (E.g. Patriotism)
48. Mill's "Religion of Humanity"
49. Sigmund Freud Suggests That Science Can Play This Kind of Role

C. Mill's Case for Why Supernatural Religions Are Not Optimal for Securing Personal Happiness

50. Religion of Humanity Also Avoids the Pitfalls of Supernatural Religions and Is Therefore Preferable
51. Moral Behavior Associated with Religion of Humanity Is Disinterested (Unlike Supernatural Religions) but Still Offers a Reward
52. Religion of Humanity Avoids the Intellectual Difficulties Associated with Supernatural Religions (E.g. the Problem of Faith)
53. The Problem of Evil
54. The Problem of Hell
55. The Problem of Divine Grace
56. One Advantage of Supernatural Religions: the Hope Associated with the Prospect of an Afterlife
57. This Is Becoming Less of an Advantage, and Eventually It Will Cease to Be One
58. Death Is Not an Evil or to Be Feared
59. The Evolution of Mill's Own Increasingly-optimistic View of the Belief in an Afterlife throughout His Lifetime and Writings
60. Lou Matz's Criticism of Mill's Position in *Utility of Religion*
61. The Criticism Does Not Seem Justified

IV. Conclusion

62. Mill's Arguments against the Thesis that Religion Is Morally Advantageous Are Generally Convincing
63. Mill's Arguments Regarding Religion and the Happiness of Individuals Are Also Generally Convincing
64. Mill Does Not Consider Religion's Effect on the Physical Health of Individuals
65. Dawkins and the "Placebo Effect"
66. Are Mill's Alternatives Viable for Everyone?

CHAPTER 2: Friedrich Nietzsche and *The Anti-Christ*

I. Introduction

1. General Introduction
2. Introduction to Nietzsche
3. Arthur Schopenhauer's Influence on Nietzsche
4. Introduction to *The Anti-Christ*
5. Outline of Chapter

II. Nietzsche's Naturalism

6. Introduction to Nietzsche's Naturalism
7. Traditional Conceptions of Morality
8. Nietzsche's Amoralism
9. Nietzsche's Reductionist Ontology
10. Nietzsche's Naturalism and His Reductionist Ontology Conflict with the Notions of Objective Truths and Moral Standards
11. His Amoralism Underlies His Distinction between Master and Slave Moralities
12. Slave Moralities and the Slave Mentality
13. "Good and Evil"
14. Master Moralities and the Master Mentality
15. "Good and Bad"
16. Nietzsche's Problems with Religion Stem from the Slave Mentality and the Rejection of His Thoroughgoing Naturalism He Associates with It

III. Religion and Truth

17. Nietzsche Values Honesty and Believes Religion Entails Dishonesty
18. Self-deception (and the Slave Mentality) Is Common
19. Supernatural Beliefs Entail Deception
20. The Notion of Equality Entails Deception
21. Religious Faith Entails Deception
22. Religion Is at Odds with Science, Which Is Associated with an Honest Regard for the Truth
23. Priestly Influence
24. The History of Christianity
25. Religion—Especially Christianity—Is Ultimately a "Self-misunderstanding"
26. Concerns Regarding Nietzsche's Depiction of the Relationship between Religion and Truth

IV. Religion and Health

27. The Master-Slave Distinction Reflects Psychological Attitudes toward Earthly Life
28. The Problem of Nihilism
29. Slaves Say "No" to Earthly Life (I.e. They Are Nihilistic)
30. Schopenhauer—an Atheist—Is Also Nihilistic
31. Nihilism Is Unhealthy and Nietzsche Values Health above All Else
32. Religion Is Associated with Weakness and Mental Disease
33. Religions Value and Emphasize Self-Sacrifice
34. Religious Faith Is a Sign of Weakness and Disease
35. Other-worldly Dispositions Are Unhealthy
36. Nihilistic Conceptions of God
37. Religions Value and Emphasize Pity, Which Is the "Practice of Nihilism"
38. Religions Produce Unnecessary Fear and Guilt and Lower Self-esteem
39. Christianity Is Depressive and Produces Misery, Which Distinguishes It from Buddhism
40. The Nihilistic Influence of Priests
41. Concerns Regarding Nietzsche's Depiction of the Relationship between Religion and Health

V. *Nietzsche's Remedy: Revaluation of All Values*

42. Nietzsche Fancies Himself a Psychologist
43. Nietzsche Clearly Disdains the Slave Mentality and Advocates Life Affirmation
44. Religion (and Slaves in General) Stymies the Emergence and Flourishing of Masters
45. Nietzsche's Contempt for Contemporaries
46. Science and the Prospects of Masters
47. The Problem of Idealism
48. Nietzsche's Prescription: Honesty and A Revaluation of All Values
49. The Stages of Nihilism
50. Science and the Natural and Inevitable Devaluation of Idealism
51. The Similarity between the Natural Devaluation of Idealism and Nietzsche's Own Revaluation of All Values
52. How Efficacious Is Nietzsche's Remedy?
53. "God Is Dead!" Warns of the Difficulties
54. Nietzsche's "Overman"
55. Are We "Human, All Too Human"?

VI. *Conclusion*

56. The Divergent Paths of Truth and Happiness
57. Slaves Cater to Happiness Rather Than the Truth
58. The Practicality of Nietzsche's Overman
59. The Mental Health Benefits of Religion and Idealism
60. Nietzsche's Own Mental Health
61. I Appreciate Nietzsche's Naturalism and General Descriptive Philosophy, but I Do Not Agree with His Prescription for Health

CHAPTER 3: William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

I. *Introduction*

1. Introduction to William James
2. James Offers a Relatively Sympathetic, Well-reasoned Perspective of the Utility of Religion
3. His General Pragmatism Demonstrates His Interest in the *Utility* of Religion
4. His Well-known Distinctions and Empirical Criterion Demonstrate His Interest in the *Utility* of Religion
5. The Structure of *Varieties* and Outline of Chapter

II. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

A. James's Definition of "Religion" and the Scope of His Inquiry

6. James's Definition of Religion
7. James Offers a Broad Interpretation of Religion, which Includes the "Godlike"
8. Implications of James's Broad Conception of Religion
9. The Diversity of Religious Experience
10. Institutional vs. Individual Religion
11. James Chooses to Focus on Individual Religion

12. James's Justification for Emphasis on Individual Religion
13. Concerns Regarding James's Emphasis on Individual Religion
14. Many View Institutional Religion as an Essential Part of Religion

B. James's Characterization and Categorization of Religious Experience

15. Religion Entails Belief in the Reality of the Unseen
16. Despite Arising from Ideas, Such Belief Significantly Affects the Corporeal Realm of Existence
17. This Belief Stems Primarily from Feeling and Is Not a Product of Intellectual Analysis
18. Mysticism vs. Rationalism
19. Religion Entails a Serious Existential Reaction to the Higher, Unseen Power
20. Once-born and Twice-born Religious Types
21. The Once-born Religious Type
22. Healthy-mindedness
23. The Two Types of Healthy-mindedness: Simple and Complex
24. The Twice-born Religious Type
25. Morbid-mindedness
26. The Two Types of Morbid-mindedness: Mild and Extreme
27. Some Cases of Extreme Morbid-mindedness Do Not Constitute Religion
28. The Reality of Evil Signals a Shortcoming of the Once-born Type
29. Unification
30. Conversion
31. The Mysterious Nature of Conversion and the Role of the Subconscious
32. The Two Types of Conversion: Voluntary and Involuntary
33. Sacrifice, Confession and Prayer
34. Summary of Part II

III. *The Utility of Religion*

A. James's Case for the Utility of Religion

35. James Is Interested in the Utility of Religion and Examines It Using His Empirical Method
36. An Impartial Analysis of the Utility of Religion Is Difficult to Achieve
37. The Utility of Individual Religion vs. Institutional Religion
38. The Present Analysis of Religion's Utility Does Not Ignore the Institutional Byproducts of Religion, Which Seem to Be Prevalent
39. Saintliness
40. The Consequences of Saintliness
41. Religion Makes Us Happy
42. Religion Offers a Unique and Higher Kind of Happiness
43. Religion vs. Morality
44. The Benefits of Religious Charity
45. The Benefits of Religious Asceticism
46. Asceticism Alleviates Problems Associated with Materialism
47. Asceticism Satisfies a Psychological Need for Tension and Something to Overcome
48. The Benefits of Religious Prayer

49. Regardless of Its Objective and Public Effects, Prayer Effects Positive Change in the Believer's Private and Subjective Reality
50. A Benefit of the Once-born Type: Rejection of Evil Satisfies a Natural Desire
51. The Problem of Religious Extravagance
52. Extravagance Usually Stems from Low Intelligence
53. James Minimizes the Significance of Less Intelligent Religious Belief and the Excesses Stemming from It
54. Religion and Pathology

B. James's Case for the Utility of Supernatural Religion

55. A Benefit of the Twice-born Type: Supernatural Approach to Evil Offers Hope to Some Who Would Otherwise Have None
56. James's Skepticism Regarding Thoroughgoing Naturalism
57. James Believes Any Purely-natural Account of Reality Proves Inadequate and Cites Historical Failures
58. Concerns Regarding James's Skepticism of the Once-born Type and of Purely-natural Worldviews
59. Death May Yield Goods
60. With Respect to the Prospects of the Once-born Type and of Purely-natural Worldviews, James Is More Pessimistic than Nietzsche, Whom James Associates with Pessimism
61. Similarities to Nietzsche
62. For James, Religion Is, by Definition, Optimistic and Healthy
63. For Nietzsche, Religion Is, by Definition, Pessimistic and Unhealthy
64. James and Nietzsche Offer Conflicting Views of Faith
65. The Historical Evolution of Religious Belief Reflects Its Underlying Utility
66. Both James and Nietzsche Highlight the Relationship between Religion and Existential Attitudes
67. James and Nietzsche Employ Different Concepts of "Religion"
68. James and Nietzsche Employ Different Concepts of Optimism and Health
69. James's Exclusively-optimistic Conception of Religion Is Problematic

IV. Conclusion

70. Summary of Problems associated with James's Analysis
71. James Is Too Dismissive of Purely-natural Worldviews
72. James Recognizes and Substantiates the Significant Existential Relief Religion Provides to Some Individuals

Conclusion

1. Despite Difficulties, It Is Possible to Establish Conclusions Regarding the Utility of Religion
2. The "Science of Religion"
3. Individual Utility vs. Social Utility
4. Religion and Individual Utility
5. The Case against Religion's Individual Utility

6. The Case for Religion's Individual Utility
7. Summary of Conclusions
8. The Future of the Science of Religion
9. The "Religion-causes-violence" Thesis
10. William T. Cavanaugh's Concerns Regarding the Science of Religion
11. Defining "Religion"
12. "Religion" Is Not a Vacuous Term
13. The Utility of the Science of Religion