

Mill's *The Utility of Religion* in comparative perspective

I am comparing Mill's *Utility of Religion* with David Hume's *Inquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* and William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. According to Hume, religious ideas generate useless and unpleasant behaviours, because only in this way can the believer distinguish himself or herself from those who don't have any religion and who simply want what is useful or immediately agreeable to themselves or to others. On the contrary, William James thinks that the religious experience can improve human nature and make people more generous and benevolent. In this sense, the saint is an effective ferment of goodness. What about Mill? Can we situate him right in the middle between these two thinkers? For Mill, supernatural religious belief is not necessary to mankind. Religion has been important as far as public opinion and early education are important. But belief in the supernatural could have a morally ennobling effect if it were based on the belief in a personified Principle of Good who needs us as fellow-labourers in the fight for a better world. And, in any case, for Mill what is really important is the creation of a Religion of Humanity, a perspective quite different from that of Hume or James.

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