

# Why Does Alcoholics Anonymous Work?

## A Secular Explanation

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## Section I: Introduction

The relapse rate for severe alcoholics who are trying to quit is approximately 90%. Of the remaining 10% who do succeed in quitting permanently, the vast majority have gone through Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) (Sheeren, 1988). The two basic tenets of AA are: (i) surrender to a higher power, and (ii) make amends for your wrongdoings. There is therefore no way to ‘work the program’ without ‘surrendering to a higher power.’ Most of the people who quit drinking with AA’s help are self-identified agnostics and atheists prior to starting the program (Kelly et al., 2012). Indeed, there is no evidence AA is any less effective who enter the program as non-believers than it is with those enter the program as believers (Jarusiewicz, 2000). Moreover, there is little evidence that anything other than AA works (Kelly & Abry, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

The question arises: *Why* does surrendering to a higher power work? The answer given in AA is that surrendering to a higher power works because that higher power exists and is personally helping the person in question to stop drinking. Since it is obviously a distinct possibility that this answer is false, it is worth asking whether there is a strictly secular way of explaining why surrendering to a higher power tends to have such an important role in alcohol recovery, and it is the purpose of this paper to generate just such an answer.

In our attempt to do this, we will draw heavily on the William James’ work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (‘VRE’).<sup>2</sup> In that work, James describes several cases of people who underwent religious conversions, and he gives detailed descriptions of what he believes to be the psychological concomitants of such conversions. The main contentions of VRE are similar to the main contentions of *Alcoholics Anonymous: Big Book* (BB), which was written by the founder of AA, Bill Wilson, and is its *de facto* ‘Bible.’ The main contentions of VRE are:

- Religious sentiment cannot be understood in strictly medical terms; nor can it otherwise be deconstructed.
- Religious sentiment must be understood on its own terms.
- Religious sentiment gives people the strength to do what they otherwise could not do.
- Religious sentiment also cures people of otherwise incurable psychological maladies.
- A complete absence of religious sentiment is a mark of psychopathology.
- Religious sentiment involves awareness of a “divine presence” in the world.
- This divine presence is experienced as a benevolent “invisible order.”
- Those who completely lack religious sentiment tend to be internally divided, and those who have it tend to be internally united.
- Acquiring religious sentiment—having a religious conversion, in other words—involves a “surrender” of one’s agency to some other power.
- Hypnosis and psychedelic drugs induce states similar to those that mediate religious conversions and religious sentiment generally.
- Religious conversions, and religious faith generally, are justified by their consequences: although they may initially seem irrational, they often prove to be justified by their consequences.

The main contentions of BB are:

- There is no strictly medical cure for alcoholism
- It is not possible to overcome alcoholism without having a religious conversion.
- The rationality of this conversion is justified by its consequences.

- This conversion involves surrendering to a higher power.
- Each person has his own higher power.
- Nonetheless, this higher power is real, i.e., it is external: it is not a useful fiction or a projection of some aspect of one's own mind. (It is not to be psychoanalyzed away or otherwise deconstructed.)
- Surrendering to this higher power means giving it control of one's life and therefore taking that control out of the hands of one's ego.
- Atonement is necessary to avoid relapsing.
- Constant prayer also tends to help prevent a relapse.
- Recovering from alcoholism tends to involve helping other alcoholics do so.
- A consequence of atoning and surrendering to a higher power is that one develops a "sixth sense" whereby one becomes aware of an invisible, divine presence in the world.

The similarities between these lists would not be particularly significant if Wilson had read James and simply duplicated what he said. But Wilson arrived at these principles on his own, having been led to them by his own experiences with alcoholism (Wilson, 2002, p. 28). The fact that these two works advocate such similar views therefore demands explanation, especially in light of the fact that the only proven treatment for alcoholism is based on the principles stated in BB.

Both lists contain the assertion that religious conversions are justified by their consequences. Indeed, the conceit underlying both lists is that, even though considerations of rationality would seem to demand that we reject religion, it is an empirical fact that acceptance of it has its benefits. In *The Will to Believe* (WTB), James discusses what he believes to be the

epistemological underpinnings of this supposed fact. In that work, James argues that, because empirical beliefs are necessarily underdetermined by the data, such beliefs involve an element of faith—a “will to believe”, as it were—a consequence being that empirical beliefs, when justified, are justified by their consequences (James 1896, p. 7). James further alleges that, because religious beliefs are justified by their consequences, they are not only justified but are justified in the same way as other empirical beliefs (James 1896, p. 17).

In the present paper, we will go through the main points of VRE and BB and on that basis put forth a strictly secular explanation of the fact that recovering from alcoholism so often involves surrendering to a higher power. In Section II and III, we will identify and evaluate the key contentions of BB and VRE, doing which will involve our analyzing the epistemological system put forth in WTB, and in Section IV, we will synthesize our findings.

## Section II: Alcoholics Anonymous

AA is a '12-step' program, the steps being:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The alcoholic recovers from his alcoholism by following these steps in this order. The operative term is “recover.” The alcoholic is never *cured*.<sup>3</sup> The alcoholic recovers from his alcoholism not by eliminating it but by managing it (Wilson, 2002, pp. 73-75). He does this by “working the steps.” These steps are derived from a multitude of precepts put forth in BB. We will now summarize the key chapters of BB, these being Chapters 1-7, in order to identify these precepts and understand how they underpin the 12 Steps.

[Summary of the Forward to the Fourth Edition, by William D. Silkworth, M.D.:](#) Medical science has failed to produce a cure for alcoholism, and it likely never will. There is no hope for the alcoholic unless he can undergo a complete psychological transformation (“an entire psychic change” (Wilson, 2002, p. xxvii). The necessary transformation is so radical that no person could possibly carry it out on his own, and a higher power is therefore necessary to effectuate this change.<sup>4</sup>

Summary of Chapter 1 (“Bill’s Story”): Once a successful businessman, Bill Wilson became a degenerate alcoholic and lost everything—his career, his family, and his self-respect. Wilson tried to stop drinking but couldn’t and soon lost all hope. A lifelong atheist, Wilson suddenly had a spiritual revelation. The higher power that was revealed to him, he believed, was specific to him. He surrendered to this higher power and was finally able to stop drinking (Wilson, 2002, p. 12). On this basis, Wilson arrived at the belief that the alcoholic cannot stop drinking unless he discovers his higher power and surrenders to it (Wilson, 2002, p. 14).

Summary of Chapter 2 (“There is a solution”): The alcoholic is internally divided. He knows that he cannot have one or two drinks without getting blackout drunk, but he manages to deceive himself into think that he can do so. The two defining facts about the alcoholic’s condition are his complete lack of self-control with respect to drinking and his ability to deceive himself about this fact. Because of his condition, the alcoholic is “beyond human aid” (Wilson, 2002, p. 24). But “there is a solution”, namely, surrendering to a higher power that conforms to one’s “individual conception of God” (Wilson, 2002, p. 22).

Summary of Chapter 3 (“More about Alcoholism”): Once the alcoholic has that first drink, he cannot will himself to stop. And yet, no matter how self-aware he is otherwise, the alcoholic is always able to convince himself that he can drink like other people (Wilson, 2002, p. 31). Consequently, will and self-knowledge—the two cornerstones of self-determination—are useless. Only divine intervention will help him; he must surrender to a higher power (Wilson, 2002, p. 43).

Summary of Chapter 4 (“We Agnostics”): The alcoholic’s main problem is his powerlessness over his own condition. It simply is not in his power to control his drinking. Nor is there any purely medical solution. The only remaining path is to find a higher power and

surrender to it.<sup>5</sup> Many alcoholics entering the program are agnostics or atheists and therefore have special resistances to believing in a higher power, but such people are as likely to benefit from the program as are those who enter it already believing in a higher power (Wilson, 2002, p. 46).

**Summary of Chapter 5 (“How It Works”):** In addition to surrendering to a higher power, the alcoholic must make amends for the all the wrongs he has done in his life. The entire process of recovering from alcoholism is embodied in the 12 Steps (Wilson, 2002, p. 59). Working the steps involves cleansing his mind of resentments and other petty manifestations of ego (Wilson, 2002, p. 61).<sup>6</sup>

**Summary of Chapter 6 (“Into Action”):** The Steps are operationalized through constant action, as opposed to mere intellectual acceptance (Wilson, 2002, p. 83). Hence the term “working the steps.” A consequence of working the steps is that the alcoholic becomes more action-oriented and less focused on his emotions and less egocentric generally.

**Summary of Chapter 7 (“Working with Others”):** To avoid relapsing, the alcoholic must help others with their alcoholism.<sup>7</sup> If he is to do this effectively, he must make it clear that there is no way to recover from alcohol without surrendering to a higher power; that each person has his own higher power; and that, although AA is effective, what matters is not following AA *per se* but is rather spiritually developing in such a way as to eliminate the shortcomings of character that led the prospect down the path of alcoholism (Wilson, 2002, p. 95).

### Key Points

The alcoholic’s will has been completely shattered. He is internally divided: one part of him wants to drink; the other wants to live. The part of him that wants to drink is winning. It continues to win until the choice for him is quit or die. At that point, he must acknowledge that

his will is defunct and surrender to a higher power. A leap of faith is involved in surrendering to this higher power, but this leap of faith is justified by the consequences. His higher power is specific to him. The alcoholic's ability to find his power does not in any way correlate with his pre-existing religious beliefs. This higher power directs him not to drink and, more generally, to live righteously. In order to keep his relationship with his higher power alive, the alcoholic atone for his sins and live righteously. He must also become action-oriented since wallowing will cause him to relapse. Finally, he must help other alcoholics recover.

### Analysis: Higher Power as Superego

It is suggestive that each person has *his own* personal higher power. What it suggests is that this higher power is a part of that person's mind: in surrendering to a higher power, the alcoholic is really surrendering to some part of himself. But what exactly is surrendering what to what? In other words, which part of the alcoholic is doing the surrendering, which part is being surrendered to, and what exactly is the former surrendering to the latter?

First of all, the alcoholic's recovery seems to center on his becoming less egocentric. Acknowledging his own powerlessness is itself a way of making him less narcissistic and, therefore, less egocentric. Surrendering to a higher power obviously furthers the process of becoming less egocentric: the ego, after all, is about control, and surrendering is forfeiture of ego. Making amends for past wrongdoing furthers the process of becoming less egocentric, since admitting wrongdoing deflates ego.

The recovering alcoholic's shift from a passive to an active relationship to the world also serves to keep his ego in check. Action involves confronting the world and therefore confronting one's own limitations, and for this reason a certain humility is embodied in action. To be sure, action involves *self-confidence*. But this self-confidence is internal to an acknowledgement that

one must play by the world's rules, not the other way around, and it therefore presupposes a certain humility. Inaction involves no such humility, since it involves not confronting the world and therefore not having one's ego kept in check by it, with the result that the inactive person's fantasies are as grandiose as his accomplishments are miniscule.

This gives us a partial answer to the question *what is surrendering what to what?* It is the ego that is doing the surrendering, and what it is surrendering is the childish egocentrism that is inherent in a life that is inaction-base and fantasy-centered life—and therefore fundamentally not sane. The alcoholic is surrendering indolent, childish ego in exchange for action-positive, adult non-ego.

The question remains: What is being surrendered *to*? The obvious answer is: 'The unconscious.' But *which* unconscious? The *id* of Freud and Nietzsche? A mass of primal desires, unregulated by logic or conscience?<sup>8</sup> This would seem to be the opposite of the unconscious to which the alcoholic is surrendering. The force to which he is surrendering is supremely moral; it guides him down the path of self-restraint and righteousness. This higher power has him behave in the ways in which he would *ideally* behave. I therefore hypothesize that *the higher power to which the alcoholic is surrendering is his idealized self---his ego-ideal*, as we might put it.<sup>9</sup>

This hypothesis is consistent with the fact non-believers (atheists and agnostics) are able to find a higher power as believers, given that believers and non-believers alike have ego-ideals. It is also consistent with the fact that making amends for past wrongdoing is necessary to sustain the relationship with this higher power, given that being on the right side of one's idealized self involves acting in accordance with one's ethical standards. This hypothesis is also consistent with the fact that the recovering alcoholic must become more action-oriented, given that an

action-oriented, reality-embracing life is less egocentric than an inaction-driven, reality-avoidant life.

### Will vs. Desire

This hypothesis also explains why surrendering to a higher power restores the alcoholic's will, specifically his will to stop drinking. First of all, will must be distinguished from mere desire. A smoker *desires* a cigarette, but he does not *will* himself to have one. If he has a cigarette, it is precisely because of a *lack* of will (Frankfurt, 1984). Will represents values, whereas mere desire represents urges. The alcoholic drinks because he desires to do so, not because he values doing so and, therefore, not because he *wills* to do so (Davidson 1969). In drinking, he is violating his values and therefore weakening his will, since one's will represents the dominion of one's values over one's behavior (Frankfurt, 1984). When the alcoholic speaks of "turning his will over to a higher power", he is *reactivating* his will, not *deactivating* it. His words suggest otherwise until we recognize that his "higher power" is his own ego-ideal and is therefore effectively *identical* with his will.

### The Role of Projection

Why does this process have to be carried out projectively? The alcoholic has constructed an elaborate system of rationalizations by which to justify his degenerate behavior to himself.<sup>10</sup> Whenever he has the urge to drink, he can rationalize doing so, since the necessary rationalizations are on stand-by. If he looks inward for a reason not to stop drink, those rationalizations will immediately kick in. Indeed, those rationalizations have undermined his ability to introspect, since he has turned his faculty of introspection into a means by which to rationalize his degenerate behavior. Therefore, he can no longer be aware of his values as

internal entities and must consequently experience them as external entities in order to be aware of them: he must project them, in other words.<sup>11</sup>

### Internal Unity as Superego-compliance

In BB, Wilson describes the alcoholic as being internally divided---“a real Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”, (Wilson, 2002, p.21)---and he says that recovering from alcoholism involves becoming internally unified. Our hypothesis explains what this means and why it is true. The alcoholic’s urge to drink is at odds with his values. The alcoholic has given himself over to this urge, and he has thereby weakened their ability direct his conduct. Nonetheless, he still has his values: he has not removed them, only rendered them impotent. Consequently, his values are out of alignment with his conduct and, therefore, with the part of him that guides conduct. In surrendering to his higher power and letting it guide his conduct, the alcoholic is realigning his conduct with his values, thereby mending the internal divisions that his alcoholism created.

### Sanity as Superego-compliance

Many recovering alcoholics describe their alcoholism as a form of “insanity” (Wilson, 2002, p. 30).<sup>12</sup> The very alcoholics who say this typically appear completely sane.<sup>13</sup> So, how are such statements to be interpreted? Our theory can help us answer this question.

Insanity is about replacing reality with fantasy (Kernberg, 1995). The insane person wants reality to play by his rules, not the other way around, and since reality won’t oblige him, he withdraws into a fantasy-world that does. Drinking is a way of turning away from reality. The homeless person feels like a big shot when he drinks: with the help of alcohol, his fantasies feel real. The use of alcohol therefore mediates a temporary psychotic flight from reality, and a compulsion to use of alcohol is a compulsion to engage in such a flight. Alcoholism is therefore a compulsion to be insane. When recovering alcoholics say that they are insane, they are

speaking elliptically: what they really mean is that they have a standing compulsion to be insane that will lead to insanity if acted on. The reason the people who say this seem sane is that they are sane since they are not at that time succumbing to that compulsion.

### The Alcoholic's Leap of Faith

Let us now discuss the 'leap of faith' that the alcoholic makes in surrendering to his higher power. In making this supposed leap of faith, he is really just surrendering to a part of himself; and at some level he knows this and he is therefore *not* really making a leap of faith. The alcoholic must nonetheless *represent* what he is doing to himself as a leap of faith, since, for the reasons discussed earlier, he must conceive of the part of himself to which he is surrendering as an external entity.

### God as Externalized Superego

Let us end this section by discussing belief in God in general. This belief has two foundations. On the one hand, it is an explanatory hypothesis: the world is the way it is because a superior being made it that way. On the other hand, it embodies wishful thinking: we are not alone in this world; there is a supreme being who is looking after us. Our analysis suggests that there may be a third basis for this belief. The alcoholic's acceptance of God, we have argued, is projective acceptance of his own ego-ideal, that being why surrendering to it gives him strength. It is deeply implausible to suppose that God is externalized conscience in the alcoholic's case but not in anyone else's, and the appropriate inference to draw is therefore that *in general* God is externalized conscience. We will find this inference to be consistent with James' discussion of religious sentiment, to which we now turn.

### Section III: The Varieties of Religious Experience

VRE consists of twenty lectures. The first seven are the most relevant to this paper, and we will therefore begin by summarizing them.

**Summary of Lecture I (“Religion and Neurology”):** A belief is rational if it benefits the person who has it; and by this criterion, religious sentiment is sometimes rational since it may improve the lives of those who have it.<sup>14</sup> The rationality of religious belief is justified only by its consequences, and religious belief therefore involves a leap of faith, this being why many are quick to regard it as irrational. But this is irrelevant since that leap of faith often proves worth making.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, *all* hypotheses, including those that we would regard as quintessentially scientific, involve an initial leap of faith, their legitimacy being established by their consequences, and religious conviction is therefore not unique in this respect.<sup>16</sup>

**Summary of Lecture II (“Circumscription of the Topic”):** Authentic religious sentiment does not necessarily involve membership in an organized religion.<sup>17</sup> Religious sentiment necessarily involves awareness both of some higher consciousness of a benevolent nature.<sup>18</sup> Religious conversions are involuntary, and religious sentiment in general involves a forfeiture of ego. Religious sentiment tends to involve intense emotion.<sup>19</sup> Religious sentiment often enables those who have it to do what they could not otherwise do and sometimes even what is seemingly beyond anybody’s ability to do. Religious people also believe life to be meaningful and for this reason also are relatively adversity-tolerant.<sup>20</sup>

**Summary of Lecture III (“The Reality of the Unseen”):** Those who are religious believe that the world is governed by an unseen presence.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes this presence directs their actions. This is what happens, for example, with cases of ‘automatic writing’, this being when someone ‘lets’ his hand write ‘all by itself.’<sup>22</sup> Hallucinations, such as are brought about by

religious ecstasies, make this unseen presence quite literally visible.<sup>23</sup> The mental states that mediate awareness of this unseen presence are similar to those that occur when the boundary between the conscious and unconscious minds is relaxed, as is the case during hypnosis or drug-use. Awareness of this unseen presence often involves an ‘effacement’ of self: one’s ego disappears, as it were, being replaced by pure awareness of divinity.<sup>24</sup>

Summary of Lectures IV—V (“The Religion of Healthy Mindedness”), Lectures V-VI (“The Sick Soul”), and Lecture VII (“The Divided Self and the Process of Unification): Some people are more aware than others and are therefore more aware of evil than others. Such people tend to become internally divided and neurotic. Religion alleviates these internal divisions by giving them a way of processing their awareness of evil.<sup>25</sup> To those who are religious, the world is a fundamentally just place, and religious sentiment therefore dials down this paralyzing fear.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, religious sentiment tends to induce self-fulfilling optimism, and its absence tends to induce self-fulfilling pessimism. “Mind-cure” (a hypnosis-based precursor of psychoanalysis) is effective because it relaxes the boundary between the conscious and unconscious minds, in much the same way as religious sentiment, and for that reason mends the internal divisions responsible for mental illness.<sup>27</sup> Religious conversion involves a process of “letting go”, i.e., of deactivating one’s ego and all of its defenses.

### Key Points

Religious sentiment does not depend on membership in an organized religion. Such sentiment strengthens those who have it, and those who have it tend to have a sense of inner peace that those who lack it tend not to have. In those who are religious, the unconscious and the conscious minds communicate relatively freely. Relatedly, those who are religious tend to be internally united, whereas those who are not religious tend to be internally divided. To those with

a religious mindset, the world is governed by a just and sapient presence, and such people are therefore more resilient and less fearful than those who are not religious. Religious conversion involves a process of letting go of ego-based defenses. Religious conversions involve intense emotions. Mind-cure has effects similar to those of religious conversion. Though involving a leap of faith, religious conversions, and religious sentiment generally, are justified by their consequences are to be presumed true so long as they are so justified.

### *Analysis: God as Superego*

It is suggestive that religious membership is independent of membership in an organized religion. What it suggests is that having authentic religious sentiment involves having a *personal* relationship with the divine, and this in its turn suggests that it involves finding one's very own divinity to have a relationship with. All Catholics have to worship the same God. If a given Catholic wants to worship some other God, he is barred from doing so, and he is therefore barred from finding his own higher power to worship. This obviously holds not just of Catholicism but of many other religions, if not of organized religion categorically.

It is suggestive that religious sentiment involves relaxed communication between the conscious and unconscious minds. Given that religious sentiment presumably involves awareness of a divinity, it suggests that religious sentiment is highly dependent on unconscious ideation and, consequently, on the associated psychological mechanisms, such as displacement and projection.

It is suggestive that mind-cure has effects similar to religious conversion. What it suggests is that religious conversion involves surrendering not to an external but to an internal power. Mind-cure works by relaxing the barrier between the unconscious and unconscious minds.<sup>28</sup> When this barrier is too rigid, it prevents the conscious mind from drawing on the

power in the unconscious mind, and the conscious mind *can* draw on it when that barrier is relaxed. The similarities in effects between mind-cure and religious therefore suggest that conversion is about disinhibiting some part of one's mind that has been kept in abeyance.

It is suggestive that, for the religious person, world is a just and loving place. The data available to the religious person no more warrants such an outlook than does the data available to a non-religious person. Indeed, it is when people are at rock bottom that they are most likely to find God, this being why "there are no atheists in the trenches."<sup>29</sup> During times of hardship, people tend to be religious and, consequently, they tend to be believable in an objective, God-based moral order; and during times of ease, people tend to become atheists and moral relativists. This suggests that a great deal of wishful thinking is embodied in religious sentiment: the religious person believes what he believes not because the data warrants it but because he wants to believe it. This means that the religious person hasn't discovered God so much as he has projected him, which is consistent with the fact, noted by James, that religious sentiment is possible only when the barrier between consciousness and unconsciousness is relaxed.

This sheds light on the fact, also noted by James, that religious conversion is such an intensely emotional experience. Derepressing emotion inevitably releases emotion into consciousness (Kernberg, 1985). Religious conversions usually happen suddenly, indicating that the accompanying lowering of the consciousness-unconsciousness barrier happens correspondingly quickly (Clarkin et al. 1999). This in turn suggests that the intensity of the emotions involved in the conversion process is a consequence of the fact that the emotions being released from the unconscious are being released all at once. This hypothesis is consistent with the fact that, when the consciousness-unconsciousness barrier is lowered gradually, as it is in

psychoanalysis and in some religious conversions, the resulting emotional changes happen correspondingly slowly.

### Faith vs. Psychosis

Let us grant, if only for argument's sake, that there is indeed an element of wishful thinking in religious sentiment. Let us also grant, what may follow, that religious sentiment involves projection and possibly other regressive modes of thought. Do these suppositions explain all of the facts that James cites? Do they fully explain why the religious person tends to be so resilient or has such peace of mind? Do they explain why religious sentiment does so much in the way of making and keeping people *sane*?

No, they do not. The benefits of religious sentiment tend to be enduring and deep. The benefits of unalloyed delusion tend to be neither. People who are incontrovertibly psychotic are extremely fragile (Kernberg, 1985; Lieberman, 2018). Their delusions clearly do them more harm than good. But this is not the case with religious sentiment, at least not categorically. To be sure, there are religious people who are simply psychotic; and in such people, religious sentiment is just another manifestation of psychosis. But there are also people for whom religious sentiment is a source of strength and, indeed, of sanity; and in such people, religious sentiment cannot be sheer delusion. There must be non-delusions, for lack of a better word, underlying the delusions; indeed, the delusions must be operating as foils for the non-delusions.

Consider the case of the proverbial atheist who finds God “in the trenches” and thereupon metamorphoses from a cowering wretch into a valiant super-soldier. This person hasn't *actually* found God. So, what is really going on with him? Let us answer this question by asking him a different one: What would this person's *idealized* self do in this situation? Would his idealized self be paralyzed with fear while his comrades needed his help? Of course not. His idealized self

would do the right thing, not the easy thing. The right thing is to unfreeze himself and do his soldierly duty. The easy thing is to do nothing and retreat into catatonia. What he has found, we may conclude, was not God but his own conscience, his delusive pseudo-discovery of God being a mere cover for his non-delusive actual discovery (or *rediscovery*, rather) of his own conscience.

It is therefore misconceived to suppose that the trench-atheist is making a ‘leap of faith.’ If the atheist were in fact surrendering to a genuinely external deity, then he would indeed be making a leap of faith. But he is surrendering to a part of himself, not to an external deity. This is borne out by the fact that the trench-atheist’s so-called leap of faith involves acceptance of a deity that just *happens* to be moral and indeed just *happens* have the very moral code that is embodied in his conscience. He never discovers a God whose morality belongs to an alien culture, let alone an alien species. This means that he is surrendering to *his own* morality, which means that he is *not* really making a leap of faith. To be sure, he is not *consciously* surrendering to his own superego, but that is in fact what he is doing and at some level he knows as much. Given that he is only making a ‘leap of faith’ relative to what his *conscious* mind knows, as opposed to what his mind as a whole knows, he isn’t really making a leap of faith at all.

#### Internal Unity as Superego-compliance (Revisited)

Someone who is at odds with his own conscience is internally divided. Someone who is internally divided is not at peace with himself. The person who aligns himself with his conscience *is* at peace with himself. In some cases, aligning oneself with one’s conscience involves ‘finding God’, and in such cases, religious sentiment is a source of strength and sanity. Yes, an element of delusion is involved in such cases. But the delusion lies not in the substance of the psychological changes taking place but rather in the way that the person in question is

representing those changes to himself. The trench-atheist is rightsizing himself with respect to his own values: that is the substance of what is taking place. He conceives of what is happening as ‘finding God’: that is how he *represents* what is taking place to himself. So, the element of delusion is not part of the foundation of the changes taking place, and that is why those changes tend to be both positive and enduring. The psychotic’s delusions are in very different category: they are not mere secondary phenomena; they are not mere foils for sane awarenesses. That is why any benefits they confer tend to be superficial and fleeting.

### Self-fulfilling Belief: A Critique

James frequently asserts that religion-based optimism is ‘self-fulfilling.’<sup>30</sup> Religious people believe that the universe is on their side, which makes them less fearful and more proactive, with the result that, thanks to the successes that result from these changes, the universe really *is* on their side.

There is obviously a certain truth in the idea that optimism, including religion-based optimism, is self-fulfilling. But care must be taken to delineate exactly how it is true. The optimist who does great things really has it in him to do those things, and someone who doesn’t have it in him to do those things can’t, no matter how optimistic he is. If I believe that I have it in me to be a great composer, that belief won’t result in my being a great composer unless it is true. If I become a great composer on the basis of that belief, it is not because that belief *actually* made itself true. It is because it was already true and, because I had it, I took the steps needed to actualize my musical potential. In general, when optimism is ‘self-fulfilling’, it is because it disposes people actualize potential that they in fact have.

More generally, ‘leaps of faith’ tend to lead to nothing—except when they *aren’t* really leaps of faith. In positing evolutionary theory, Darwin wasn’t making a ‘leap of faith’; he was

modeling existing data. In general, an empirical belief is justified when the believer knows it to model existing data and when he therefore knows that belief *not* to be a leap of faith. The idea, advocated by James in WTB, that empirical hypotheses represent ‘leaps of faith’ embodies a failure to distinguish between simply guessing, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, making a data-consistent—and therefore *not* faith-based—but potentially wrong judgment. Religious beliefs, by contrast, *do* involve *bona fide* leaps of faith: if I believe that Christ walked on water, it is not because I judged that belief to be a reasonable way of modelling the data. Indeed, if that *were* my reason for having that belief, it would just be another garden-variety belief and would therefore fail to be a *religious* belief. Consequently, when a religious belief is consistent with the data, it is only accidentally so since that is not the reason it is held.

As for James’ contention that empirical beliefs are justified by their consequences, this is misconceived. For an empirical belief to be justified is for it to be consistent with existing data. Beliefs that are consistent with past data are likely to be true and therefore consistent with future data. The justification for a belief necessarily grows stronger with the arrival of new confirmatory data, but at any given juncture a belief is justified only by its consistency with existing data. This destroys the parallelism between religious beliefs and garden variety empirical beliefs, given that religious beliefs are either inconsistent or only accidentally consistent with existing data. When religious beliefs are ‘justified’, it is in the sense that they benefit those who have them (e.g., they make them happier or healthier). It is not in the sense they are data-consistent and it is therefore not in the same sense as garden-variety empirical beliefs.

## Section IV: Conclusion

AA involves surrendering to a higher power, and AA works. But why does surrendering to a higher power work? To answer this, let's start with what we know. We know that:

- That higher power is experienced as an external entity.
- Its morality is that of the person who is surrendering to it, i.e., it is the moral code that he believes he *should* follow, even though he is currently violating it.
- Prior to surrendering to it, this person was ashamed of his drinking and drinking-related conduct and was therefore on the wrong side of his own conscience
- After he surrenders to it, he becomes less internally conflicted and his will is strengthened.

These facts are readily modeled. The alcoholic's higher power is a projection of his superego. By surrendering to it, he realigns himself with his superego, and the resulting internal unity gives him peace of mind and strength of will. The alcoholic must project his superego in order to surrender to it owing to the fact that he has spent years justifying his degenerate conduct to himself, making it impossible for him to find anything other than rationalizations when he looks inwards for moral guidance.

Though incomplete and possibly inaccurate, the model put forth in the present paper represents a sincere attempt to provide a secular justification of the effectiveness of the AA program, and it is sufficiently *prima facie* reasonable as to warrant further consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, alcoholics who have quit with AA's help must *continue* to believe in their higher power, as those who cease to do so are overwhelmingly likely to relapse (Tonigan et al., 2017).

<sup>2</sup> James, W. (2009). *William James: Varieties of religious experience: A Study in Human Nature*. eBooks@Adelaide.

<sup>3</sup> "We are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition" (Wilson, 2002, p. 85). See also *Understanding The 12 Steps - STEP ONE* (0:58).

<sup>4</sup> "One feels", writes Dr. Silkworth, that something than human power is needed to produce the essential psychic change" (Wilson, xxvii). Elsewhere Dr. Silkworth writes that, if there is a path to recovery for alcoholics, "it lies in a power greater than themselves" (Wilson, 2002, p. xxvii).

<sup>5</sup> "Lack of power, that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be A Power Greater Than Ourselves. Obviously. But where and how were we to find this Power?" (Wilson, 2002, p. 45).

<sup>6</sup> "Resentment was the number one offender" (Wilson, 2002, p. 61).

<sup>7</sup> "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics" (Wilson, 2002, p. 89).

<sup>8</sup> See Freud (1989).

<sup>9</sup> Freud (1989) uses the terms "ego-ideal" and "superego" interchangeably, and we ourselves will sometimes do so.

<sup>10</sup> See Kernberg (1967).

<sup>11</sup> See Kernberg (1967).

<sup>12</sup> See *Understanding the 12 Steps - STEP TWO* (0:16).

<sup>13</sup> See *Understanding the 12 Steps - STEP TWO*.

<sup>14</sup> "In other words, not its origin, but THE WAY IN WHICH IT WORKS ON THE WHOLE, is Dr. Maudsley's final test of a belief. This is our own empiricist criterion; and this criterion the stoutest insisters on supernatural origin have also been forced to use in the end" (James, 2009, p. 13).

<sup>15</sup> "Saint Teresa might have had the nervous system of the placidest cow, and it would not now save her theology, if the trial of the theology by these other tests should show it to be contemptible. And conversely if her theology can stand these other tests, it will make no difference how hysterical or nervously off her balance Saint Teresa may have been when she was with us here below" (James, 2009, p. 18).

<sup>16</sup> James, 2009, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> "Now in these lectures I propose to ignore the institutional branch entirely, to say nothing of the ecclesiastical organization, to consider as little as possible the systematic theology and the ideas about the gods themselves, and to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple" (James, 2009, p. 26).

<sup>18</sup> "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us 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. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow" (James, 2009, p. 27).

<sup>19</sup> "There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream or curse. It is precisely as being SOLEMN experiences that I wish to interest you in religious experiences" (James, 2009, p. 26).

"Religion, whatever it is, is a man's total reaction upon life, so why not say that any total reaction upon life is a religion? Total reactions are different from casual reactions, and total attitudes are different from usual or professional attitudes. To get at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree everyone possesses. This sense of the world's presence, appealing as it does to our peculiar individual temperament, makes us either strenuous or careless, devout or blasphemous, gloomy or exultant, about life at large; and our reaction, involuntary and inarticulate and often half unconscious as it is, is the completest of all our answers to the question, "What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?" It expresses our individual sense of it in the most definite way. Why then not call these reactions our religion, no matter what specific character they may have? Non-religious as some of these reactions may be, in one sense of the word "religious," they yet belong to THE GENERAL SPHERE OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE, and so should generically be classed as religious reactions" (James, 2009, p. 30).

"This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion. It is parted off from all mere animal happiness, all mere enjoyment of the present, by that element of solemnity of which I have already made so much account" (James, 2009, p. 30).

<sup>20</sup> "Now 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" (James, 2009, p. 41).

<sup>21</sup> "Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, 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. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul" (James, 2009, p. 43).

<sup>22</sup> "Professor Flournoy of Geneva gives me the following testimony of a friend of his, a lady, who has the gift of automatic or involuntary writing:—'Whenever I practice automatic writing, what makes me feel that it is not due to a subconscious self is the feeling I always have of a foreign presence, external to my body. It is sometimes so definitely characterized that I could point to its exact position. This impression of presence is impossible to describe. It varies in intensity and clearness according to the personality from whom the writing professes to come. If it is some one whom I love, I feel it immediately, before any writing has come. My heart seems to recognize it'" (James, 2009, pp. 49-50).

<sup>23</sup> “In an earlier book of mine I have cited at full length a curious case of presence felt by a blind man. The presence was that of the figure of a gray-bearded man dressed in a pepper and salt suit, squeezing himself under the crack of the door and moving across the floor of the room towards a sofa. The blind subject of this quasi-hallucination is an exceptionally intelligent reporter. He is entirely without internal visual imagery and cannot represent light or colors to himself, and is positive that his other senses, hearing, etc., were not involved in this false perception. It seems to have been an abstract conception rather, with the feelings of reality and spatial outwardness directly attached to it—in other words, a fully objectified and exteriorized IDEA” (James, 2009, p. 50).” Plato 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. Abstract Beauty, for example, is for Plato a perfectly definite individual being, of which the intellect is aware as of something additional to all the perishing beauties of the earth...the whole array of our instances leads to a conclusion something like this: It is as if there were in the human 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” (James 2009, pp. 45-46).

<sup>24</sup> “Here is still another case, the writer being a man aged twenty-seven, in which the experience, probably almost as characteristic, is less vividly described:—“I have on a number of occasions felt that I had enjoyed a period of intimate communion with the divine. These meetings came unasked and unexpected, and seemed to consist merely in the temporary obliteration of the conventionalities which usually surround and cover my life.... What I felt on these occasions was a temporary loss of my own identity, accompanied by an illumination which revealed to me a deeper significance than I had been wont to attach to life. It is in this that I find my justification for saying that I have enjoyed communication with God.”” (James 2009, p. 55).

<sup>25</sup> Referring to those who experience religious conversions as “twice-born”, James (2009, p. 129) writes: “The psychological basis of the twice-born character seems to be a certain discordancy or heterogeneity in the native temperament of the subject, an incompletely unified moral and intellectual constitution.” A few pages later, James (2009, p. 133) writes that, because of religious conversion, many an inwardly divided soul has “emerged into the smooth waters of inner unity and peace.”

<sup>26</sup> “At our last meeting, we considered the healthy-minded temperament, the temperament which has a constitutional incapacity for prolonged suffering, and in which the tendency to see things optimistically is like a water of crystallization in which the individual’s character is set. 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. This religion directs him to settle his scores with the more evil aspects of the universe by systematically declining to lay them to heart or make much of them, by ignoring them in his reflective calculations, or even, on occasion, by denying outright that they exist. Evil is a disease; and worry over disease is itself an additional form of disease, which only adds to the original complaint” (James 2009, 99).

<sup>27</sup> “The mind-curers have given the widest scope to this sort of experience. They have demonstrated that a form of regeneration by relaxing, by letting go, psychologically indistinguishable from the Lutheran justification by faith and the Wesleyan acceptance of free grace, is within the reach of persons who have no conviction of sin and care nothing for the Lutheran theology. It is but giving your little private convulsive self a rest, and finding that a greater Self is there. The results, slow or sudden, or great or small, of the combined optimism and expectancy, the regenerative phenomena which ensue on the abandonment of effort, remain firm facts of human nature, no matter whether we adopt a theistic, a pantheistic-idealistic, or a medical-materialistic view of their ultimate causal explanation” (James, 2009, p. 87).

<sup>28</sup> See Kernberg (1967) and Freud (1989).

<sup>29</sup> James (2009, p. 38) makes a similar point: “To suggest personal will and effort to one all sicklied o’er with the sense of irremediable impotence is to suggest the most impossible of things. What he craves is to be consoled in his very powerlessness, to feel that the spirit of the universe {47} recognizes and secures him, all decaying and failing as he is. Well, we are all such helpless failures in the last resort. The sanest and best of us are of one clay with lunatics and prison inmates, and death finally runs the robustest of us down. And whenever we feel this, such a sense of the vanity and provisionality of our voluntary career comes over us that all our morality appears but as a plaster hiding a sore it can never cure, and all our well-doing as the hollowest substitute for that well-BEING that our lives ought to be grounded in, but, alas! are not. And here religion comes to our rescue and takes our fate into her hands. 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. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday. The time for tension in our soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived. Fear is not held in abeyance as it is by mere morality, it is positively expunged and washed away.”

<sup>30</sup> “*In concreto*,” write James, “the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider. When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and wait-acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were not true. Since belief is measured by action, he who forbids us to believe religion to be true, necessarily also forbids us to act as we should if we did believe it to be true. The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action. If the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away, and controversy about its legitimacy is a piece of idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds. I myself believe, of course, that the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief.] till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and senses working together may have raked in evidence enough, --this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave” (James, 1896, pp. 16-17).