Abstract: Hume and The Enthusiasm Puzzle

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This paper presents a discussion of what Hume regards as the moral implications of his concept of religious enthusiasm. This concept is central not only to Hume's view of religion, but also his list of the vices that his moral theory classifies sardonically as the "monkish virtues," as well as his discussion of the historical development of English society in his History of England. Although Hume regarded religious enthusiasm as a vice, he also claimed that, unlike its twin, superstition, it has positive effects on society. There is a puzzle with Hume's account of these effects: although enthusiasm belongs among the vices, Hume regards it as having beneficial effects on society. This, however, is part of what makes something a virtue according to Hume's ethical theory. But virtue and vice are contrary properties. How can Hume consistently maintain that enthusiasm is both a vice and not a vice? The paper refers to this as "the enthusiasm puzzle." This paper explores the puzzle, and considers different interpretations of what Hume means by enthusiasm.

The paper explores two possible solutions to the enthusiasm puzzle: either there is no puzzle, and so there no inconsistency about enthusiasm in Hume's moral theory, or there is a puzzle, and one can either reconcile with Hume's theory or one cannot. If there is no puzzle, then enthusiasm either is a virtue, a vice, or neither. If there is a puzzle, it either must be possible to explain how this could make sense according to Hume's moral theory, or what the inconsistency implies about that theory. The paper refers to some of Hume's examples of enthusiasts from his History of England, drawing out implications of his discussions on the enthusiasm puzzle. The paper assesses the alternative solutions to the puzzle, and argues that the puzzle is real, and that it poses an important problem for Hume's moral theory.