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The UW Undergraduate Philosophy Review is a monthly journal by and for University of Washington undergraduates. All content is the work of the authors alone, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the editors or of the UW department of philosophy.
One fine afternoon, a bright young Cretin decided that he had known quite enough of his little island, where the women and men devoted their lives to idleness, amusement, and the propagation of their species. He kissed his mother goodbye, and set off north in search of the foundations of morality. As he traveled, he inquired of each passerby as to where he might learn about such matters. Each passerby responded in the same way: “I can’t tell you the answer.” Then, they would point to the north.

Finally, after many long days of travel, the young Cretin arrived at the cold Northern Seas, outside a quaint little Prussian town by the water. As he entered the city, he was surprised to find all of the townspeople standing outside their doors, their pendulum clocks in their hands. Their eyes were all fixed upon the slow, metrical march of a solitary old gentleman, out for his noon-time walk. The moment the gentleman rounded the block, they all set their clocks at once. *Exactly eleven-o-five.* The Cretin was mystified, and asked of an approaching Whig:

“Can you tell me the name of that man, whose pace is so certain that one can set a clock to it?”

“I can’t,” replied the Whig.

“For heaven’s sake, why not?” exclaimed the Cretin.

“Good sir, I am telling you—his name is *I. Kant,*” said the Whig, as he trotted away.

The Cretin suddenly realized that he had found what he was looking for. *Of course!* he thought. *I. Kant tell you the answer!* He hurried up to the old gentleman and fell into step beside him.
MORALITY AS SUBJECTIVELY PERSPECTIVIST

conjecture, refutation, and revision is ongoing; it revivifies our moral consciousness and keeps our values alive and not dead dogmas (as John Stuart Mill might say of a social process of belief stimulation).

Each scheme of morals that one adopts is a purely heuristic procedural device that gives one a tool that is in reliable alignment with one’s moral intuitions; the indicators of one’s own values. The idea here is not to live by any determinately fixed normative principles, but rather to engage in a process of reflection that places the individual in a self-actualized mode that clarifies which values are one’s own. This is the process that allows for moral action and intentional living.

B.W. ROBERTS

“Mr. Kant,” said the Cretin, “I was wondering if you could teach me something about the foundations of morality.” Kant regarded the Cretin thoughtfully, his cane ticking rhythmically on the sidewalk as he walked. He replied with firm conviction:

“There is but one categorical imperative, namely this: Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

Finally, an answer to the puzzle! Yet Kant’s response was startling to the Cretin, whose island was known for its lawlessness as much as for its lazy lack of action. “I don’t understand. Can you give me an example?” he asked.

Kant thought for a moment, then responded: “Thou shalt not promise deceitfully.”

This startled the Cretin even more, with regard to a long-practiced tradition on his far-away island. He decided to explain.

“Well, you see Mr. Kant, we have a tradition in my far-away home, which is to take the following oath: I promise to break all of my promises…”

Kant shrieked. “Be careful! Foolish South Sea islander, you may have already doomed yourself! Think about what you’ve said.”

In his surprise, the Cretin tripped and fell out of step for a moment, then jogged to catch back up with the old gentleman. He thought hard about Kant’s words, and about his oath. Kant says it is imperative that I not break my promises, he thought. But if I am to keep my oath, then I must break all of my promises. And my oath is itself a promise—so it may be kept if and only if it is broken! The poor Cretin, what could he do? It seemed inevitable that he would soon violate Kant’s Categorical Imperative: whether he kept his oath or broke it, he would still be breaking promises.

Suddenly, the Cretin had a dangerous idea. He could simply resolve to make no promises at all; then his oath would remain indeterminate, and his conscience would remain clear in Kant’s eyes. He decided to give it a try.

“I’ve got it,” said the Cretin after a long pause. “I promise not to make promises.”

“No!” cried Kant. “Don’t, you fool!”

But it was too late. In speaking these words, the poor young Cretin had double-violated the Categorical Imperative. His promise
not to make promises was broken as soon as he made it. And his oath was now inevitably broken in one sense or the other, for the oath was kept if and only if it was broken. Kant shook his head and marched on, leaving the poor young Cretin gaping behind him.

The young Cretin left the cold Northern Seas and returned to his little island, where the women and men devoted their lives to idleness, amusement, and the propagation of their species. He kissed his mother upon his return.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” she asked.

“What I found was beyond our world,” the Cretin replied, “as much as it was beyond sensible language. As for what I was looking for, I do not believe it exists.” He looked to the north and smiled. “But if it does, then we are all in a lot of trouble.”

Aim of Reflective Process

Here I will explain how the methodology I propose connects one’s motivation to live intentionally with a motivation to be moral. The foundation of one’s scheme of morals is always (and is meant to be) shaky, as the point of the exercise is to consider one’s values; that is, to consider that which one values, and to see whether one’s values have their source in oneself. By engaging in the reflective process of conjecture, refutation, and revision of the principles that one lives by (in making practical moral decision-making), so that they are in maximal alignment with one’s moral intuitions, the values that one has a result of this process have their source in oneself. Thus, they satisfy one’s desire to have authorship over one’s own life, since one is thereby ordering his or her life themes by authenticated principles.

This exercise is not to produce a competitive account of the good, nor something to convince someone else of agreeing to. The idea here is that one is able to apprehend oneself by facing one’s values. This is not effectively accomplished by overcoming others’ values, so that these values will have been implanted by an external source, but rather through reflection upon one’s self. The process of reflection that I propose (conjecture, refutation, and revision) is meant as a tool for one to re-evaluate one’s values and to live by.

Let me repeat: I’m not trying to come up with a list of universal moral truths to live by. I don’t think this sort of parochial approach has much to do with us; at its best, it seems more like a cry for uniformity of thought, in the likeness of the so-called “apostles’” point of view.

As for how one goes about living by main axiomatic principles as I suggest: if these principles are to be of any instrumental use at all, they must not be determinately (but rather heuristically) fixed. When one is engaged in the project of reflection on one’s own values this process of

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6 The foundation of one’s scheme of morals, if one uses the methodology I propose, consists of the main axiomatic principles resulting from one’s reflective process.

7 One is living authenticated principles when and only when the principles that one lives by express those and only those values that have their source in oneself.
MORALITY AS SUBJECTIVELY PERSPECTIVIST

The point of this exercise is to get you to examine some of the kinds of normative principles that you may live by and to attempt to tally them in some sort of list of independent primitives, which you can use as a guide in the formulation of your ends and goals. If they lead you to ends that you are intuitively uneasy with, then this reflective formulation should better help you identify the values that have their source other than in yourself, and to formulate revised principles that express values that have their source in yourself.

Authority and Motivation

As in the example given at the beginning of the last section, neither the slavish, dogmatic follower nor the unreflective, ignorant intuitionist is truly motivated in living intentionally, but is rather being deceived (by others or himself) as to the intentionality of his own existence. The dogmatic follower is convinced that by engaging in life activities as others value them, he is thereby fulfilling his engagement with his own life (although what is really going on is that he is being cut off from authorship of his life). One example of this is in Christian theology. Jesus claims to be the gateway to eternal life; in reality, this is used as an institutional mechanism of control and authorship over other people’s lives in the name of God’s Will.

I think that as a fundamental fact of our phenomenal existence, we want to live intentionally and to be the author of our own lives. This desire is the motivational basis by which one lives, and without it there would be no reason to continue living; one’s life would no longer be one’s own.

However, though this is a motivational basis for living, it is broader than a purely moral motivational basis. People are not motivated to do what they think is right in and of itself. However, the motivation to live intentionally subsumes the process of reflection on one’s own values as expressed in the principles that one is to live by. Thus, one is motivated to live morally, but this motivation is indirect; it is the result of one’s desire to live intentionally. In order to live intentionally, one need not live by determinant principles, but one does need to decide on a methodology of moral decision-making. I consider an axiomatic methodology to be the most effective, accurate, and fruitful for this end.
THE MIRACLES DEBATE

assignment of miracles in his famous essay “Of Miracles”. The argument is against miracles, and purports the irrationality of believing in miracles. The argument Hume deploys has been under debate since its publication and still remains a contemporary focus. Under the interpretations of many religious and philosophical scholars, the argument is partitioned in two ways. First, the argument can be separated into two arguments by the distinction: a priori or a posteriori, both of which provide arguments that must be acknowledged by the opposing side. Second, the argument can be separated into two arguments by the two parts in the essay, Part I and Part II. It is not as difficult to determine exactly what Hume was trying to accomplish in his essay, but rather how and by what method he reaches his conclusion. I will set forth in this essay to show that Hume’s conclusion does not rely solely on either the a priori or the a posteriori argument, but rather uses them both together. Furthermore, there is an alternative argument revealed in a footnote to the passage that is of greater importance to his overall argument against miracles, and it is this argument which drives Hume’s final claim that religious belief is irrational.

First, let us establish what a miracle is for Hume. Generally, a miracle is something that defies the natural course of events that are governed by “laws of nature.” Hume states:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. … Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature. … There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation.

For Hume, the driving force in the first of the two definitions he proposes is the concept of “laws of nature.” It is this definition that is mainly employed in the argument in Part I of the essay, and many recommend an end or goal that I feel intuitively uneasy about to the extent of nonacceptance, then this is the refutation of those principles that lead intractably to this uneasy consequence. In cases of refutation, the construction of my independent axiomatic principles makes it clear which principles are refuted, so that either the refuted principles or their priority must change to be coherent. My scheme of morals itself is to be changed when any refutation of a principle occurs. When this occurs, I must examine what values the refuted principle expresses, and revise my scheme of morals to exclude or replace those principles that could not help but express those values that lead to the intuitively uneasy result. This is because these values do not or no longer have their source in myself.

When I say that these principles are to be “main” principles, this means that they are to capture one’s own values that are to be worthy as a theme of life (that is, the principles are to express values that not only have their source in oneself, but bring about a state of affairs which is to have the same worth as a theme of one's life). When I say that these principles are to be “axiomatic,” this means that within our daily life, thought, and action they are to be taken as primitives, that is, they are not proved or argued for within our scheme of morals. This is not to say that they are entirely unanalyzable; it simply says that once we have adopted a scheme of morals, then these main principles are used to derive further ones for their consequences and applications, and are not to be argued for within this scheme.

Some examples of such a scheme of morals are John Stuart Mill’s Rule Utilitarianism or Kantian Morality. In the former, the main axiomatic principle is the Greatest Happiness Principle from which we derive the rules (such as rights) that are to be used in applications. In the latter, one main axiomatic principle might be that moral laws are a priori, or perhaps the Formula for Universal Law from which we derive the Formula of Humanity as an End in Itself.

In interpreting one’s life as an unfolding narrative from an internal point of view, a life theme (or theme of life) is part of that fabric; it is, as one perceives it, one’s way of locating divergent fixed points in the variations of our self-actualized activities and conformist tendencies. The patterns that we consciously or unconsciously design from these activities and tendencies that mold and compose one’s phenomenal life are thus interpreted as themes (life themes).

2From section X, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.
3Hume, 111.
second objection, I regard each of these terms (good, right, dutiful, responsible, and obligatory) as first-order moral terms whose definitions and relationships with respect to each other may be elaborated within one’s scheme of morals.

**Mode of Reasoning**

While most people either take their personal code of conduct from some external authority or, in particular circumstances, simply “go with their gut feelings” in deciding what to do or how to live, these are not the only ways to go about deciding how to live. In these two cases (which I regard as the predominant basis for which most people probably go about deciding how to live a moral life), there is close to no decision being made at all. In the first case, that of the external authority, someone else is deciding how you should live for you, and in the second, I consider our “gut feelings” to be a highly rough (yet unreflective) approximation of our moral intuitions.

For those who do reflect on how to live, what is moral, and what one should do, I take this reflection to be a cognitive process of discovering what is right for one’s subjective existence. This is a process of self-discovery that involves reasoning for the purpose of living by principles that are in maximal alignment with one’s moral intuitions. While there may be many means to achieve this, I will suggest a method (as a mode of reasoning) that I consider to be the most effective, accurate, and fruitful. I hope that a consequence of this method is to produce what I call “main axiomatic principles” that are prioritized and independent of one another in such a way that practical standards of moral decision-making may be derived and applied from them.

Think of the reflection upon what main and axiomatic principles for one to adopt as a way of foundationalizing our moral intuitions by a process of conjecture, refutation, and revision. I conjecture some main axiomatic principles that I am to live by. Presumably, if I am rational, the principles that I do hypothesize express what I value and disvalue. I then apply these to the formulation of my ends and goals. If I find that they

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4 Main Proponents of the *a priori* argument include David Johnson in *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* (1999) and C.S. Lewis in *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (1996).

5 Hume, 112.

6 For Mill, *enumerative induction* is the concept of simple generalization from experience that provides us real knowledge of the world (see *Examination* IX 482).
simplest known formula is compatible with observations, we regard it—provisional[ly]—as a law of nature.\footnote{Swinburne, 25.} In making this claim, Swinburne is assuming that the laws of nature may be easily ascertained from a simple formula. I agree that, in some cases, a law of nature derived in this fashion can be as simple as the conclusion that heavy objects fall toward the earth, based on our experiences with heavy objects falling down. What about cases in which objects do not abide by gravitational laws, for example in outer space? Where is the simple formula to account for this? One might respond by simply asserting that it is a part of the same law of gravity, based on our experience of floating objects in space and heavy objects falling to the ground on earth. Can one really say that gravitational laws come from simple formulas based on our experience, and that they are not more complex? Surely, a modern physicist would not agree with such a claim. The laws of nature derived in a Humean fashion cannot be as arbitrary as Swinburne proposes.

We can now enter Hume’s first argument in Part I, granting my explanation of Hume’s laws of nature and not that which Swinburne holds. A fair interpretation of this argument that I will use throughout from William Rowe’s introductory text on religion, Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction, is as follows:

1. The evidence from experience in support of laws of nature is extremely strong.
2. A miracle is a violation of a law of nature.
3. Therefore, the evidence from experience against the occurrence of a miracle is extremely strong.\footnote{Rowe, 127.}

According to Swinburne, the evidence from experience against a miracle is extremely strong because “there cannot be repeatable counter-instances to genuine laws of nature, that is, counter-instances which would be repeated in similar circumstances.”\footnote{Swinburne, 26-27.} If there are repeatable counter-instances, then our laws of nature are not in fact laws of nature. Thus, laws of nature are self-contained. I agree with redundant and referential, since if some proposition that normatively asserts how I am to live my life is in alignment with my moral intuitions, then I am to live my life in accordance with that normative proposition (and visa versa). The referent of propositions that are normatively assertive on how to live one’s life is simply the subject of the proposition: oneself.

Claims that ethical propositions have their truth-values by some objective or intersubjective standard I take to be simply meaningless, for by what framework will they claim this kind of universality?\footnote{Both objective and intersubjective standards for the truth of moral claims take true moral claims as universal. Objectivist Theories of Moral Truth tend to associate themselves with strong universality (in that true moral claims are metaphysically necessary) and Intersubjectivist Theories of Moral Truth tend to associate themselves with weak universality (in that true moral claims are metaphysically contingent, but just so happen to be true for all moral agents due to an overlapping consensus or some other intersubjectivist standard).} We can’t step outside of ourselves to attain some kind of “perspectiveless perspective”; to attempt to do so is not only to attempt the impossible, but also to misunderstand the nature of the ethical enterprise.

This is why I am skeptical of views of morality as somehow something that only exists between people, just as I am skeptical of similar claims which suggest that moral propositions would not have a referent or would not be meaningful in cases where individuals are isolated. For example, if some man is caught alone on a desert island, I still think it makes sense to say that this desert island man can live a moral life, even if he has no contact with any other life forms and was the last of his own species.

I am taking a rather broad notion of morality in that it’s about how to live one’s life. One may object that this conception is too broad (in that it may contain acts we regard as purely prudential, such as brushing one’s teeth) or that it doesn’t capture some concepts we regard as purely moral (such as that which is good or right, dutiful, responsible or even obligatory). As to the first objection: it’s not the case that any proposition one formulates that normatively asserts how to live life is a moral one, but rather that the line between moral and non-moral propositions will completely depend on the scope of one’s framework; that is, the scope of one’s moral intuitions, determined subjectively by each case. As to the...
but I do think that the source of one’s moral motivation lies in one’s desire to be a “radically free agent”; one wants to be the author of one’s own life: “a wheel rolling out of its own center.”

However, if we have no motivations to do what is moral in and of itself, then the biggest challenge this account of motivation must face is how to connect moral motivations with one’s desire to be a “radically free agent.” In order to correctly satisfy this motivation one must go through a reflective process of re-evaluating the values one has in order to distill the values that have their source not in oneself from those that do.

Subject Matter

If a notion of moral truth is to make sense at all, I think that it has to be subjective. We could very well deny that moral claims have truth-values: that to say they do is to be mistaken on the character of moral claims or that the assignment of truth-values to moral claims is purely nonsensical or unverifiable.

However, I do think that there is a sense of moral truth that is tenable, but the character of this kind of truth is neither objective nor intersubjective. I take “truth,” semantically, to simply be an assignment (true or false) of well-formed propositions within some linguistic framework that is redundant (‘x’ is true iff x) and referential. The meaning of any proposition is and only is determined by the linguistic framework that proposition is formulated within; propositions that are either not well-formed or are formulated outside a specific linguistic framework are essentially meaningless.

In morality, the aim of a proposition is normative on how to live life (for example, the statement “I think that killing is wrong” simply means that “the life of a killer is not the one for me to have”). For a moral proposition to be true, the framework that one is operating within is one’s perspective in life, in that well-formed propositions (those propositions that are normatively assertive on how to live life) are true if and only if they are in alignment with one’s moral intuitions. This is both

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2For the purposes of this paper, I take the follow terms to be sufficiently similar so as to be equivalent: “radically free agency,” “authorship over one’s own life,” and “living intentionally.”

Swinburne on this view, and it is one of my concerns especially if we are to live in a world of scientific progress where repeatable counter-instances readily do occur. Thus, we have a refutation of nomic laws that makes them self-defeating. This view leads to an a priori account of Hume’s first argument in Part I, a view championed by David Johnson in his book: Hume, Holism, and Miracles. He declares,

Hume might, and in at least some moods certainly would, protest that he is not just assuming that we have a proof, and hence “uniform experience,” against a given miracle, but that this follows from the very fact that the alleged event is a miracle. … But if this is the claim, then, first, Hume is saying that it is a necessary truth that every miracle is opposed by a uniform experience.10

If this is the case, then no argument in favor of a miracle can ever be endorsed. Referring back to Swinburne’s claim of counter-instances, Jenkins furthers this argument in his book Understanding Hume. Here he claims that we would never be justified in recording the first counter-instance of a law of nature—it will always be dismissed. It may be attributed to scientist error, instrumental error, or to any other excuse for the refusal of the law in question. Therefore, a process of garnering counter-instances will never get started, and so the repeated occurrence of counter-instances will never serve as proof of a miracle.

Now, it is critical in our discussion of miracles thus far to acknowledge Hume’s take on evidence. He makes it quite clear how to evaluate the evidentiary proof for a miracle:

The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention) ‘[t]hat no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact, which it endeavors to establish. … I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.’11

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10Johnson, 19.
11Hume, 112.
For Hume, the evidence in favor of a miracle has been historically less than (or at least equal to) that of our evidence for the laws of nature, where miracles are a violation of the laws of nature, which are established by our experience. The opposite experiment most likely will never be greater than the original experiment, so the superior evidence will always be in favor of the original. Thus, no laws of nature will ever be violated, which makes believing in miracles irrational as a direct consequence of no repeatable counter-instances. As an a priori argument, this is clearly very problematic, and runs contradictory to the spirit of inquiry that Hume dogmatically supports throughout the Enquiry. Is this the argument Hume is trying to convey in Part I?

The problem with the prima facie claim is its strict interpretation of Hume in his belief that the laws of nature will never be malleable. By adhering to my interpretation of “laws of nature” that was stated earlier, I maintain that the argument is not entirely a priori and thus does not fail on that account, but rather for other inconsistencies. The claim put forth by Jenkins (that the scientist can never get the method of gathering counter-instances off the ground, due to the credit of the commonly agreed upon law) is an absurd claim. Hume never claimed that the laws are incorrigible. In fact, he acknowledged that they could be altered: “any phenomenon, which violates a law of nature, comes within the reach of human testimony, that testimony be very extensive and uniform.” The example he uses to illustrate this point is the possible unanimous agreement of scholars on the eight days of total darkness beginning on the first of January 1600. This is justification enough that Hume’s argument does not rest solely on an a priori argument.

Furthermore, there are many contemporary instances of progress in science and thus there are many apparent instances of violations of laws of nature. Our law of nature proof is capable of being threatened by a contrary proof. An example exists in the discovery of hydrochloric acid (HCl) to show that a law of nature has been altered. The older definition for acids was that “all acids contain oxygen.” It

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12 Jenkins, 187.
13 Hume, 123.

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Morality as Subjectively Perspectivist
Matthew Jernberg

T.M. Scanlon raises several questions concerning the subject matter, mode of reasoning, authority, and motivation of moral claims that should be answered by any adequate philosophical theory of morality. These questions are, “What is morality fundamentally about?”, “What is the ground of truth for moral claims?”, “How do we reason about this subject matter?”, and “Why do/should we care about this subject matter?” In this paper, I hope to sketch a comprehensive philosophical account of morality that sufficiently addresses these questions, but which can be taken as an alternative to objectivist or intersubjectivist theories.

Program

Morality is fundamentally about how one is to live his or her life. Moral claims are grounded subjectively: what’s morally true for one is and only is that which aligns with one’s moral intuitions. This is because from the moral framework of one’s own perspective, one’s moral intuitions indicate one’s own values (those values that have their source in oneself, as opposed to those values that have their source other than in oneself).

To think of morality as what we owe to others (or one another) is to misunderstand one’s ethical responsibilities; it’s not what one owes to others, but what one owes to oneself. Keep in mind that my account of morality is not just about action, since this is too narrow. It is about how to live.

I endorse the methodology of axiomatic principles for pragmatic reasons. Furthermore, I endorse this because this process of reflection puts one into a mode that is the object of one’s motivation. I don’t think that people are motivated to do what they think is right in and of itself,

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natural order are legitimate. Thus, for instance, we may eat apples and oysters, but not our aunts and uncles."

The Achilles’ heel of Hume’s essay is, therefore, not bad Humean philosophy, but rather Hume’s horrible failure at assuming the guise of a theist. In “Of Suicide”, Hume’s position waffles not because Hume himself is indecisive, but because Hume cannot shed Hume for the sake of an argument. Simply put, if Hume showed up to a costume party disguised as a theist and toting “Of Suicide”, he would quickly and easily be identified, for Hume does a poor impression of a theist. Nevertheless, his inability to mount a theistic attack on a theistic objection does not omit his essay from the realm of respectable and notable philosophical writing. Hume’s essay “fits nicely into the assault by the 18th century British deists upon Christianity, at a time when, during the Age of Reason, the general assault upon mystery and superstition in human thought came full flower”. So despite its obvious failures, Hume’s “Of Suicide” successfully provides a rational structure for thinking about the moral issues of suicide free from the rubric of religion.

References


was required of acids to combine with alkalis to form salts to contain oxygen, but upon the discovery of HCl the definition of acids, and thus the law, had to be modified. To take the point even further, in the strict sense, a law of nature that was previously held was violated. But in response, one could just say that the former law for acids was not a genuine law of nature and that this new law is the real law. James Kellenberger, in an essay entitled “Miracles”, rejects Hume’s characterization of laws of nature, but agrees that Hume would say, “our previous conception of the natural law involved was deficient” in this situation, and that the violation is not really a violation of the law but rather an unusual circumstance. The result is that a law of nature is not violated. The consequence of this reformulation of the law keeps the a priori argument intact, and unambiguously eliminates the dilemma of a violation of a natural law.

Moreover, if we did violate a law of nature for acids, does the discovery of hydrochloric acid constitute a miracle? Let us examine this in more detail. Suppose we say that the original definition of acid is in fact a law of nature supported by a preponderance of evidence. Despite the discovery of HCl, we can still agree that the acids that contain oxygen are still acids—that cannot be refuted. The difference now is the addition of HCl, we are faced with amending the law or making a new law. For our purposes, we want to avoid falling into an a priori argument so that we will not be modifying the law to recognize it as the real law of nature. Instead, we will keep with the traditionalist definition and law. Again, the existence of HCl proves a violation of a law of nature, given that the direct experience of HCl passes all Humean checks of being a contrary proof to the proof that originally established the law.

For Hume it seems that the contrary proof is always more difficult to prove. The burden is on us to provide positive evidence for the violation. What we do not have is the ability to provide equally positive evidence for laws of nature. Yes, our conception of the laws of nature is grounded in our constant and uniform experience, but it appears as though the positive evidence for laws of nature is always

\[\text{References}\]


\[\text{Mclean, G. R. 2001. “Hume and the Theistic Objection to Suicide.” \textit{American Philosophy Quarterly} 38:100.}\]

less and much less difficult to produce than the evidence for a miracle. Why is it that one must be of greater value? Why is the burden of proof not on the other side of the fence? My response to this is, simply, that there have to be higher standards in assessing violation of laws of nature, because laws of nature have already proven themselves as laws of nature. If the requirements were lax, then there would be a continuous changing of the laws of nature, which opposes Hume’s conception of uniform experience. Thus, this opposes the very principle that grounds the laws of nature. In his book, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles*, David Fogelin agrees with this challenge for the disprover, who has “the formidable task of showing that the argument drawn from the internal quality of the testimony fully dominates the counterargument based on the empirically grounded improbability of the event’s occurring.”

As I claimed earlier, it is a difficult task, but I do not believe Hume thinks it an impossible task.

A way to escape the worry about the laws of nature is to assign supernatural events, which is a view that is posited by Michael Levine. Levine recognized that Hume was not arguing the impossibility of miracles, but rather that justified belief in a miracle on the basis of testimony is impossible. What Levine fails to do is reconcile the incompatibility of the laws of nature with miracles. He asserts that one way to overcome the problem with the laws of nature is to regard them as non-universal or incomplete. Levine claims that if we restrict the laws of nature to things that are inside the natural realm, to make room for the supernatural, we will not run into a conflict of violating the laws of nature if we experience a miracle. There would be no contradiction in supposing that a physically impossible event could occur because it is not within the scope of the laws of nature. This is a rather interesting idea that is somewhat naïve in assuming that the laws of nature have these special supernatural loopholes, and in fact this becomes problematic if we are to label events as supernatural. In Hume’s defense, we have no

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16Fogelin, 16.

17Levine, “Miracles”.

18The reference to a “loophole” in this situation is with respect to a more relaxed notion of normal conditions. Rather than (a) under normal condition

Remember, though, that it is the theistic objection to suicide that Hume aims to refute in his essay. Hume’s arguments against the theistic theory of natural laws are, therefore, misguided because he fails to recognize the distinction between laws of nature and natural laws and grounds his attack in the former.

Admittedly, Hume’s essay “Of Suicide” is susceptible to additional avenues of attack. But what makes Hume’s essay the most troubling is not that it commits the occasional argumentative error, but that the holes and shortcomings of his arguments are so blatantly obvious. One would think that an exemplary philosopher such as Hume would not only have caught these errors, but refrained from committing them altogether. I argue, therefore, that Hume “writes from the assumed standpoint of a philosophical theist.” Hume’s adoption of this very un-Humean position helps to elucidate much.

For starters, it explains why he allows transgression of a duty to God as a possible reason for prohibiting suicide. Merrill, who suggests that Hume is a practical atheist, offers what he considers to be a true Humean response to this objection: “Hume’s own actual position can be stated in plain language: God does not give a fig whether we kill ourselves or not; it is a matter of absolute indifference to him.” On his own terms, Hume simply has no problems of a theological sort with suicide.

That Hume has assumed a theistic position also lends itself to the faulty laws of nature/natural laws construal noted above. In this case, Hume is certainly not conceding to the theists their beliefs for the sake of an argument, for Hume holds fast to his scientifically grounded notion of laws of nature rather than lodging an attack on Thomistic natural laws. Again, in his man/oyster discussion, Humean philosophy trumps his assumed theism: “The theist believes that different kinds of creature do have different kinds of status within God’s order of things, and that certain kinds of inference in the

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46Merrill, 402.

47According to Merrill, a practical atheist believes that God has no relation to the practical/moral life of human beings.

48Merrill, 402.
HUME’S HORRIBLE COSTUME

How many people, especially in Hume’s day when therapy was limited, were not as lucky as this hypothetical man? How many of Hume’s candidates for suicide were merely the victim of a bad day?

Even more disturbing is that in his refutation of the social arguments against suicide, Hume simply ignores some obvious counterexamples. For starters, Hume concentrates exclusively on situations in which responsibilities are non-existent or extremely weak. Let us say that a woman, crippled by a drunk driver, commits suicide. Despite her handicap, the woman ran the local food bank which fed an average of one hundred families per week. After her death, the food bank, now understaffed, closed. The deceased woman also left behind a now devastated husband and five year old son. In “Of Suicide”, Hume sidesteps cases such as this and wholly disregards the plain fact that “under the criterion of social utility, some suicides appear justifiable and others do not”.

Additionally, Hume conflates the theistic notion of natural law and scientific concept of laws of nature. Aquinas and natural law philosophers have always drawn a distinction between laws of nature and natural laws. Presumably the former are descriptive statements derived from scientific knowledge of universal regularities in nature, while the latter are prescriptive statements derived from philosophical knowledge of the essential properties of human nature. According to the theistic or Thomistic theory, natural laws do not empirically describe behavior but rather delineate the behavior which is morally appropriate for a human being:

What is proper to a human differs from what is expected from other creatures insofar as their ‘natures’ differ; and their natures differ because they possess different essences with different potentialities. Natural laws are the orderings of potentialities to their actualizations, and human goods are determined by reference to these orderings. Suicide is wrong precisely because it violates a natural inclination to live…This theory also permits the Thomist to admit that it is an empirical psychological fact that powerful inclinations to suicide occur, while denouncing them as unnatural deprivations.

knowledge of the supernatural, because we never experience anything outside the scope of the laws of nature. Therefore, we can confidently determine what counts as supernatural: it cannot merely rest upon the definition that the supernatural is something that is not within the laws of nature. As argued, the laws of nature are already ambiguous. One worry is that it will become a common occurrence to consider unusual events as supernatural. Another worry is in distinguishing between the supernatural and that which resides within the laws of nature. We cannot remedy the problems of the laws of nature by offering, as a solution, the addition of such stipulations to them as Levine and many other scholars do.

Given these considerations, let’s assume that a contrary proof to the original proof for the law of nature is strong enough to constitute a “violation.” If Hume wants to remain consistent with his argument thus far, he has to admit here that the violation is a miracle, because a law of nature was sufficiently proven to be broken. But this cannot be correct. Surely we cannot justly maintain that all scientific discoveries are miracles. This is an instance where falsification is not miraculous. Jenkins was correct in the strict sense that laws of nature will never be violated on one of Hume’s accounts, but he fails to acknowledge the other Humean view of a non-argument which, as I have shown, fails as well. Understanding the argument a priori (prior to) or a posteriori (after) with respect to Hume’s laws of nature poses serious difficulties in solving the philosophical worry. Therefore, one also needs Hume’s footnote definition of miracle to complete the entire argument.

Recall once again the definition Hume states in a footnote: “[a] miracle may be accurately defined, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.”

Because the argument against miracles from laws of nature fails on two possible accounts of Hume’s argument (a priori and falsification), we are left to reconcile his argument with his

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44Merrill, 408.
45Beauchamp, 80.
footnote. However, this is not to say that Hume’s characterization of the laws of nature in Part I is not a necessary condition of his argument. It lays down the groundwork of probabilistic reasoning needed to confirm or validate testimony on behalf of miracles. In Part II, Hume shifts the focus of his essay to properly address the issue of rational belief in religious miracles. Instead of basing the argument against miracles entirely on just violations of laws of nature, we can now attribute those violations to a divine being. Thus, Hume centers his argument on the rejection of religious miracles, which is the stronger and more complete argument of the two. So where Part I ends, Part II begins to complete the story.

From the onset of Part II, Hume presents four main claims against historically reported miracles and uses them as proof for the unreliability of human testimony concerning religious miracles. First, Hume claims that never in history has there been a miracle attested to by enough educated men that their testimony could serve as reliable testimony that does not entertain the skeptic. Second, humans give preference to events that arise out of our “passions” of surprise and wonder (with which he is referring to religious miracles). These religious miracles overpower our common sense-experience and the laws of nature due to the sheer exhilaration of the professed miracle. Thirdly, Hume questions the integrity and intelligence of those who attest to religious miracles: “they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations,” and even those that are intelligent descended from ignorant and barbarous ancestors. Finally, Hume claims that there is no miraculous event “that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses; so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of the testimony, but the testimony destroys itself.”

Thus, we have witnessed each of the four “checks” on miracles set out to prove that human testimony is tenuous on the matter of religious miracles. We will often refer back to these four claims.

It is fairly difficult to read Hume’s four claims and not have any objections to his determination of what is or is not “good human testimony.” The first claim is nearly infallible; it leaves a miniscule chance that any human testimony can ever achieve a true and entire consensus on a miracle. It directly counters his claim of a true and

nature”.

If, as Hume argues here, all animals have full authority to bring about that particular alteration of the operations of nature, then a human being certainly has full authority to bring about that particular alteration of the operation of nature in which his killing of himself consists. Here, again, in licensing suicide, Hume’s argument licenses much else besides. “Too much else”, argues McLean: “Murder, for instance. One’s use of an axe can in various ways ‘alter the operations of nature,’ in cutting firewood or in severing another’s head from his body. But no sane person, and certainly no theist, believes that all such uses are authorized”.

Hume also argues that all human actions, faculties, and capabilities proceed from those powers which the Almighty has endowed His creatures. “We may for that very reason conclude that [all human actions, faculties, and capabilities are]... favored by him”. “So whatever actually happens in the world God most approves of!” Well, despite what some Neo-Nazis might argue, the Holocaust happened. Hence, the worry is again that by this principle the most horrific murders turn out to be legitimate.

Another worry is what to make out of Hume’s statement that “no man ever threw his life away, while it was worth keeping”. Indeed a doubtful empirical claim at the very least, Hume’s assertion is also rather ignorant and inherently pessimistic. It seems odd that Hume, Mr. Experience, Mr. Empirical, would posit such an absurd notion. Let us say that a man is down and out. He recently broke up with his wife of 12 years and was diagnosed with a temperamental case of diabetes. One night, drunk with depression, the man slits his wrists. Two days later, he wakes up in the hospital. After recovering, he returns, melancholy, to life. Gradually, however, he regains his emotional and physical strength. He finds company with a new kitten and learns to manage his diabetes; he is ecstatic to be alive. The man’s suicide attempt was brought on by situational depression; his desire to end his life was an emotional reaction or outburst, of sorts.

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39Ibid, 100.
40McLean, 104.
41Hume, 102.
42McLean, 106.
43Hume, 102.
Hume's Horrible Costume

Heinous crime takes his own life before the State does. In response, Merrill contends that:

The reasoning here is wrong...Punishment involves more than the inflicting of suffering, deprivation, or hardship; it involves an official denunciation of the criminal act and the inflicting of the penalty by someone who is legally (or morally) entitled to do so. Otherwise, it is not punishment. Self-inflicted punishment would lose its character as punishment.\(^{37}\)

It seems as though Merrill is working with an a priori notion of punishment. Has Merrill solved the age old question of what constitutes punishment? Maybe, but I find his response troubling. While Merrill’s view may sufficiently capture the essence of punishment in the contemporary Western world, it drastically dilutes the practice of punishment elsewhere – for example, in Islamic nations. As such, Merrill’s attack not only falls short of defusing Hume’s argument, but it propounds a notion of punishment that is sure to raise a skeptical eyebrow or two.

Hume’s “Of Suicide”, therefore, is not as “seriously flawed” as Merrill contends. Nevertheless, Hume’s essay is not a philosophical masterpiece. First, I argue that “Of Suicide” tries to prove too much. For example, take one of Hume’s conclusions: man “may lawfully employ the power with which nature has endowed him”\(^{38}\). Naturally, then, man is authorized to commit suicide. But man is also naturally endowed with the capacity to commit murder or rape. Does it not also follow, then, that man is authorized to thrust a hunting knife into his neighbor’s heart simply because he is physically able to carry out the motions? Although it is absurd to suggest that Hume would agree with the latter, murder offers itself as a conveniently vivid counterexample to Hume’s claim.

Further, Hume writes, “all animals are entrusted in their own prudence and skill for their conduct in the world, and have full authority, as far as their power extends, to alter all operations of

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\(^{37}\)Merrill, 408.  
\(^{38}\)Hume, 100.
between religion and miracles as the foundation of religions. He does not present a convincing argument for the relation, though it can be inferred. It appears that Hume again is employing an a priori argument to show that the testimony for miracles is self-defeating, but that is not the case. The countering claim brings back the example of the eight days of darkness contained in Part II, it serves as a defense of this critique for the reasons stated previously. Hume posits these four arguments against the reported testimony of his day, but let us pay particular attention to an argument on the verification of evidence that takes into account the character of a witness.

Elliot Sober proposes an elaboration and unique view on what constitutes an evidentiary proof for a constant experience, which founds laws of nature, in response to John Earman’s book, Hume’s Abject Failure. Hume puts emphasis on the quantity of evidence that must be provided to validate the laws. Sober interprets this in terms of probabilities. Though this type of proof is not explicitly discussed in either part of the essay, it is worth noting now because it plays a fundamental role in confirming a violation of a law of nature. Sober affirms that the reliability or proof of a law of nature can be understood using a Bayesian representation, though it is not a method Hume actually employs. The argument differentiates between “likelihoods” in the proposition versus “posterior possibilities” for miracles (M) and not M. Sober’s proposition is stated:

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\text{Pr}(M | t(M)) \times \text{Pr}(M) = \frac{\text{Pr}[t(M) | M]}{\text{Pr}[t(M) | notM]} \times \text{Pr}(M)
\]

In effect, Sober contends from the proposition that the testimony from one witness must be very reliable if it is to be more probable than “not a proposition that has a very low posterior probability.”

Merrill charges Hume with having made the “unsupported and dubious assumption” that “if our life is vulnerable to forces beyond our control—a falling stone, a rabid dog, a virus—we should certainly have a right to end it when we choose.” Does Hume make this assumption? The passage in Hume that Merrill refers to is the following:

Were the disposal of human life so much reserved as the peculiar province of the almighty that it were an encroachment on his right for men to dispose of their own lives; it would be equally criminal to act for the preservation of life as for its destruction. If I turn aside a stone which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature, and I invade the peculiar province of the almighty by lengthening out my life beyond the period which by general laws of matter and motion he had assigned to it.

Merrill wants to nestle his claim into the above statement, but precisely where, I am not sure. For, I do not understand Hume’s argument to have anything to do with human vulnerability. On the contrary, the argument Hume posits here is simply that:

Premise 1: An encroachment on divine province is criminal.
Premise 2: To act for the preservation of life or to bring about death is to encroach on divine province.
Premise 3: Both acts are criminal.
Premise 4: But to act for the preservation of life is not criminal.
Conclusion 1: Thus, it is not criminal to encroach on divine province.
Conclusion 2: Therefore, suicide should not be considered criminal.

While Hume’s argument is not pretty, it surely does not require Merrill’s claim, nor does it hint at human vulnerability as a means of justifying suicide.

Finally, I find Merrill’s objection to Hume’s refutation of the social argument against suicide question begging. Specifically, Hume argues that we ought not object if a man condemned to death for a
as presumptuous as attributing the conclusion “miracles will never happen” to Hume’s essay “Of Miracles”.31

Further, Merrill argues that Hume’s man/oyster statement is simply a momentary indulgence if “his true feelings”.32 If my above interpretation of Hume’s statement is correct, then it actually serves a much greater purpose than a mere outlet for Hume’s emotional outburst. Merrill has limited the relevance of the man/oyster statement to his discussion entitled “The Range of Allowable Prudential Acts”. I argue, however, that Merrill’s subsequent section, “The Sacredness of Human Life”, better captures Hume’s intentions. Take, for instance, the text that follows:

And were it of ever so great importance, the order of nature has actually submitted it to human prudence, and reduced us to a necessity in every incident of determining concerning it...A hair, a fly, an insect is able to destroy this mighty being whose life is of such great importance. Is it an absurdity to suppose that human prudence may lawfully dispose of what depends on such significant causes?33

I think the point Hume is trying to make here is a continuation of the man/oyster analogy. Man, Hume is arguing, does not make the world go round. If one man, or the entire human race for that matter, up and quit his or her station, the universe and its natural laws would not cease to function. Moreover, “if God had made human beings the crown of creation, he would have not made them so fragile.”34 For even a tiny mosquito carrying a nasty strain of West Nile Virus can put a man in the morgue, Hume would argue. Why, then, on the grand universal stage, should human beings be given the spotlight? Would it drastically alter the universe to give oysters the lead role? It seems that Merrill has failed to make a fairly obvious connection. Either that, or he has missed Hume’s punch-line.

However, the proposition also maintains that the larger the set of witnesses, the less stringent the standards of reliability must be. For Sober, the proposition (*) is a representation of Hume’s stance on testimony and evidence: “[the] basic idea is that the testimony that M is true must somehow be combined with the background evidence that M is false if we are to form an overall assessment of whether M is correct, and that the stronger the background evidence is against M, the more difficult it will be for testimony to reverse our prior judgment.”25

It is typical to employ Bayesian probability laws to philosophical arguments like the one presented above. However, the problem with this type of argument is the subjectivity of the probabilities used in the equation for evaluating the evidence, and what results is something very similar to a probability for the proposed event. We can never formulate probabilities that are entirely objective; they are always influenced by the past experiences or background knowledge we have acquired throughout our lives. The result is a non-uniform account, which Hume’s epistemology directly opposes. For this reason, arguments of this nature are non-conclusive and fail to prove anything.

Another implication of the four arguments presented is to question why Hume does not raise positive arguments against the testimony, and subsequently why he does not raise positive arguments for reasoning the event as a miracle from God’s hands. Why should positive evidence count, and not negative evidence? How could God show his omnipotence by intervening in our lives, and how can we empirically distinguish the event? These questions merit our attention in order to point out the shortcomings in Hume’s argument against religious miracles. So let us turn to another critique of the argument regarding the second definition, based on the following argument presented by Rowe. The second definition only allows miracles for those who are followers of theistic faith. If followers already believe in a God that watches over his children, then it simply follows that the same God has the power to yield miracles through his volitions. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe in the occurrence of miracles in cases where faith and religion are present.

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31According to popular scholarly opinion, in “Of Miracles”, Hume does not argue that the occurrence of miracles is impossible but, rather, that none have occurred yet.
32Merrill, 404.
33Hume, 101-102.
34Merrill, 406.
25Ibid, 492.
THE MIRACLES DEBATE

Although this argument seems plausible, there is a serious problem with respect to the “grounds.” The argument presupposes the belief in a god in order to justify a miracle, and leaves us with an even more urgent problem for the non-believer. Rowe advances this view, that we “have to have reasons for thinking that the violation is itself evidence for the existence of God. And if it is the theistic God that concerns us, it hardly seems possible that this should be so,” if one does not believe in God. 26 The argument for miracles and the evidence thus falls upon another separate contemporary debate on the existence of God, and furthermore his power to intervene through miracles.

Given these concerns, what are the ramifications of Hume’s argument in Part II? Toward the conclusion of the essay, he confirms our suspicions by making his position unmistakably clear:

Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted a probability, much less a proof: and that even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact, which it would endeavor to establish. It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience which assures of the laws of nature. 27

Hume used Part II to ground the argument he posed in Part I, in order to fully derive an argument against the rational belief in religious miracles. It is the rejection of miracles that allows Hume to make his final blow: “we may establish it as a general maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.” 28 Therefore, a system of religion is not warranted and it is irrational to believe in religion. The argument against miracles is a smoke screen for Hume’s real objection to religion. Despite the difficulties the argument faces, it still establishes a procedure for assessing miraculous claims. Though there are inconsistencies in some of his formulations, Hume’s superstitious fear of offending God. But while I would readily agree with Merrill on this point, to say that Hume thinks the latter two objections are grounded solely in superstition is to miss the point. For example, “duty to society” is an objection to suicide recognized by Hume. This objection is not grounded in superstition, but rather, in an obligation to do good to society that seems to “imply something reciprocal.” 27 Therefore, it is not the case that Hume considers all objections to suicide as the product of superstitious reasoning.

Then Merrill asks the reader to consider Hume’s death: “Hume was not afraid of dying,…nor was he superstitious; but he did not kill himself…even in the face of what he knew to be a mortal illness that would leave him increasingly debilitated. At least one person rejected suicide for reasons other than fear of death or superstitious beliefs”. 28 The problem with Merrill’s reasoning is, again, that Hume never made the claim that fear of death is a necessary and sufficient condition for rejecting suicide. Hume, for any number of reasons – commitment to a publisher, for starters – could have rejected suicide had he considered it. But given the circumstances, Hume would argue, had he taken his own life, his actions would have been justified.

But does Hume argue that suicide is, in every circumstance, always permissible? While Merrill responds in the affirmative, Hume’s view is ambiguous. 29 Surely, Hume thinks that suicide is permissible under certain conditions – for example, prolonged intractable pain, with no prospect of recovery. Furthermore, Hume does conclude that “no man ever threw a life away that was worth keeping”. 30 From this, it can be inferred that Hume thinks that all suicides so far are justified and, therefore, morally permissible. But can it be further inferred that Hume thinks suicide is always and will always be permissible? To attribute this latter view to Hume would be

26 Rowe, 132.
27 Hume, 122.
28 Ibid,122.
29 Mclean argues that Hume “is not seeking to show that suicide is always legitimate, but only that it is legitimate under certain conditions–conditions which our natural judgment can discern” (Mclean 104).
30 Hume, 104.
seems odd to me that Merrill did not make the obvious connection between the first three paragraphs and the second to last paragraph:

Premise 1: Apprehensive attitudes towards suicide are grounded in superstitions.
Premise 2: Fear of death is one such superstition.
Premise 3: “So great is our horror of death, that when it presents itself...it acquires new terrors and overcomes his feeble courage.”
Premise 4: Small motives will never be able to reconcile this horrific fear of death.
Premise 5: A person who commits suicide, then, is driven by mighty motives or an “incurable depravity or gloominess of temper as must poison all enjoyment, and render him equally miserable as if he had loaded with the most grievous of misfortunes” and such a life is not worth keeping.
Conclusion: “no man ever threw away his life while it was worth keeping”.

There is clearly an explicit logical connection here. Furthermore, Hume uses his discussion from the first three paragraphs as premises for the conclusion drawn in the second to last paragraph of his essay.

Merrill claims that in the first three paragraphs, “Hume effectively dismisses the possibility that we might have non-superstitious reasons for rejecting suicide, even if we do not fear death”. But Merrill’s criticism does not seem to make much sense considering that Hume spends the remainder of his essay refuting objections to suicide that are not necessarily grounded in superstitions. Moreover, Hume is not saying that superstitions are the cause of all objections waged against suicide. On the contrary, a fear of offending God and a fear of death are merely two reasons why an individual might have qualms about taking their own life; for Hume, fear does not equal rejection. Merrill could object here by stating that Hume most certainly thinks that the theistic objection is driven by a general ideology is coherent to the world as we know it, therefore the maxim in general is upheld. The best we can do is have confidence in our experiences that determine laws of nature. The failure in Hume’s argument is not that the maxims do not work, but that Hume’s argument rests more on the unfalsifiable claims. His argument is not entirely a priori, but there are times when a priori reasoning is the only choice.

The improvement of the definition of a miracle made by adding God makes Hume’s argument much stronger on the basis of insufficient and unqualified testimony and evidence, despite the difficulties with the four methods of detection. The outcome and achievement of the argument is that one acknowledges the questions Hume raises. For this, Hume’s argument is most effective. Rather than analyze the argument in detail, the argument makes us question the rationality of our own religious beliefs on these grounds—an age old question that still resonates today. He concludes on the matter:

Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

What are the implications of this statement? Without faith there will inevitably be despair—miracles and religion cure the human spirit. Are miracles necessary for life? Hume seems to ignore the psychological necessity associated with miracles. His stone cold conclusion diverts our attention to the question of rationale versus emotion in religion. There are further questions that must be answered if he is to provide a more complete argument against religion. Hume is only successful in arguing for the improbability of miracles, not the impossibility of miracles. Impossibility is the absolute strike against rational religious belief; thus, the irrationality of religious belief is not readily supported. The maxims lead us to the improbability of

23Hume, 98.
24Ibid, 104.
25Ibid, 104.
26Merrill, 397.

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30Hume, 125.
miracles. So now, let us finally return to the miraculous talking carp, and apply the Humean checklist; does the religious miracle hold? The short answer: Reason and Hume tell us no.

References


By the conclusion of his essay, has Hume saved suicide from “every imputation of guilt or blame” and restored men “to their native liberty”? In his article “Hume on Suicide”, Merrill contends that Hume’s arguments are unclear and logically defective. While Merrill touches on some of the obvious negative implications of Hume’s arguments, his critiques regarding Hume’s attack on the theistic objection are often off base. Let us now examine these objections. I think that there are alternatives to Merrill’s reading that clear up the logical mess Merrill charges Hume with having created in “Of Suicide”.

Merrill argues that “the first three paragraphs of Hume’s essay – the introductory lauding of philosophy – bear no obvious organic or logical relation to the arguments that follow”. While Merrill is not claiming that these paragraphs are “incidental”, he is agreeing with Beauchamp’s statement that they are “purely introductory”. If the introductory paragraphs have no logical connection to the rest of the essay, then it should be impossible to derive a logically coherent argument using the discussion in the first three paragraphs for either premises or a conclusion. I contend that there is an argument that can be drawn out of Hume’s essay, and, furthermore I do not think I am putting words into Hume’s mouth by extracting the argument. It

Before I move beyond the summary of Hume’s arguments in “Of Suicide”, it is worth mentioning his brief and concise proof that suicide is lawful under the Christian scripture, namely the Old Testament of the Holy Bible. Hume’s argument is contained in a footnote at the end of his essay. While it is a persuasive and factual account, it is beyond the scope of my paper and does not detrimentally impact my thesis. In fact, Hume’s final footnote strengthens my conclusion, a point on which I will expound on in the latter portion of my paper.

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20 Hume, 98.

21 Merrill, 396.

22 Beauchamp, 74.
for the local army reserve, but assisted in matters that dealt with top secret homeland security information. If this information were to leak, the results would be devastating to the nation. If this man were to be captured and were he to commit suicide, his act, Hume would claim, would surely be accepted and praised as heroic. Finally and again for the sake of the argument, because now this man’s life story is beginning to sound like the main character of a Quentin Tarantino film, let us say that the man gunned down the president of the senior citizen center after his embezzlement scheme was uncovered. He was subsequently sentenced to death and, after two miserable weeks on death row, hung himself in his prison cell. His suicide, Hume would argue, merely expedited the inevitable and desired execution. He rid society of himself, and again, in this instance, his act would be viewed, according to Hume, as a justified favor to society.

Thirdly, Hume attempts to refute the claim that suicide is a transgression of one’s duty to oneself, writing: “That suicide may often be consistent with interest and with our duty to ourselves, no one can question, who allows that age, sickness, or misfortune may render life a burthen, and make it worse even than annihilation”.\(^{17}\) In short, what Hume is saying is that the act of suicide is often in one’s best interest, and given that one is suffering immensely, no outsider would argue against or question the individual’s decision to extinguish his or her life. Take, for example, the retired CPA. Let us say that his Alzheimer’s has progressed to the point where he recognizes no one and is regressing into a child-like state. The doctors predict that his condition will only worsen. This man, Hume would argue, would be justified in taking his own life.

Whether or not the act of suicide is truly limited to men like the one described above is a question I will answer later. It is certain, however, that Hume most certainly thinks that there has never been a case in which a “man threw away a life, while it was worth keeping”.\(^{18}\) Why Hume holds this view ties into his introductory discussion of superstition in the preliminary three paragraphs. Man’s fear of death, Hume argues, is so strong that it would take quite a bit to push him towards suicide. Even if on the surface, a man’s motives

\(^{17}\)Ibid, 104.

\(^{18}\)Ibid, 104.
Hume’s Horrible Costume

Julia Parker

Hume’s “Of Suicide” has received an amazing variety of mixed reviews. Many agree that Hume’s refutation of several classic objections to suicide is incomplete, insufficient, or even “un-Humean.” Through a comparison of Hume’s argument to the criticism of Kenneth Merrill, it is argued here that these objections are not fatal, and that those which are legitimate are in fact the result of a futile attempt by Hume at assuming the guise of a theist.

Hume’s posthumously published essay, “Of Suicide”, has earned the 18th century philosopher both praise and criticism alike. Hume’s essay, argues Frey, “provide[s] a ground for morality free from Christian—or, indeed religious—underpinnings”.1 In contrast, Merrill writes, “Of Suicide’ does not represent Hume at his philosophical best...The essay is, in fact, pretty slipshod”.2 In agreement with the latter, Beauchamp finds many of Hume’s arguments “less satisfactory than do those writers...who have been heavily influenced by them”.3 Specifically, Hume’s refutation of the Theistic objection to suicide has received harsh reviews. McLean contends that, “what is particularly interesting about the objection is that there is widespread view among philosophers that Hume’s attack upon it succeeds, when in fact,...this attack does not succeed at all”.4

Whether or not the above author’s opinions hold merit is, in part, the focus of this paper. After restating Hume’s central arguments in

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individual ceases to benefit from society and stops promoting the society’s interests? Furthermore, what if doing good to society will bring greater harm to the individual? Why should this person not be allowed to withdraw himself from society altogether? Would his decision not be justified?

Hume’s response parallels the reasoning of a seventy-year-old man on the verge of retirement. Consider a prospective retiree is no longer physically capable of performing the duties required of, say, a certified public accountant. He suffers from the early signs of Alzheimer’s, mild arthritis, and the recent death of his wife of fifty years to brain cancer. He has made a few minor mistakes on this past year’s returns for two of his esteemed clients, costing both his firm and the client an additional sum of money. Basically, the man is worn thin from forty-seven years as a diligent CPA and the approaching struggles associated with old age; he fears that he will collapse if he does not retreat into retirement. The man has reached the age where, according to Hume, he “may lawfully resign from any office, and employ [his] time alleviating as much as possible the miseries of [his] future life”.15 “Cut short these miseries at once”, Hume would suggest to the suffering retiree, “by an action which is no more prejudicial to society” than, say, your retirement.16 While Hume is not necessarily promoting suicide in cases like these, he is making the claim that, if a man in this position were to take his own life, his action would be justified and cause no undue harm to society.

Then, Hume pushes his argument further. Again, using my example of the retired CPA, let us assign the characteristics Hume assigns to possible candidates for suicide. In addition to the qualities and events described above, the retired CPA soon loses his capacity to use the restroom on his own. He suffers from chronic diarrhea and requires constant and vigilant assistance. To make matters worse, he has been embezzling money from the other senior citizen center in his neighborhood. The man has become a burden to society and a hindrance to the lives of others. A person of this sort, Hume would argue, would be doing society a favor by killing himself. For the sake of the argument, let us say that this same man not only did the taxes

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15 Ibid, 103.
16 Ibid, 103.
actually attempting to wage two distinct criticisms. Hume’s second attack is as follows:

Premise 1: All human actions, faculties, and capabilities proceed from those powers which the Almighty has endowed His creatures.

Premise 2: When someone is successful in taking her own life, “it is only the consequence of those powers and principles, which He has implanted in His creatures.”

Premise 3: Since the ability to commit suicide, therefore, is a work of God, it follows that it is favored by Him.

Premise 4: Suicide is not a transgression of our duty to God.

Conclusion: Suicide is not criminal; suicide is morally permissible.

So, if suicide does not violate the laws of nature and, as it now seems, is not an act frowned upon by God, what other objection could the theist make? According to Hume, the theist would argue that human life is of such great importance, that it would be presumptuous for human prudence to dispose of it. Hume responds: “But the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster”. What I interpret Hume’s infamous statement to mean is that in the grand scheme of the universe, man is no more necessary to its existence than, say, an oyster. If an oyster can perish without disrupting the natural order, can man not vacate his station in life with similar ramifications? Furthermore, if suicide be the means, then this act is justifiable for the reasons previously stated. This response put forward by Hume will be the topic of later discussion, for it raises a number of legitimate worries.

Secondly, Hume attempts to refute the claim that suicide is criminal because it is a transgression to our neighbor or society. Hume pays considerably less attention to this objection, and his argument rests on the notion that “all of our obligations to do good in society seem to imply something reciprocal”. If an individual benefits from society, then the individual ought to promote the society’s interests. So, Hume asks, what happens when this same

12Ibid, 102.
13Ibid, 100.
14Ibid, 103.
HUME’S HORRIBLE COSTUME

miserable man can seek permanent solace in suicide, for “only death alone can put a full period to his misery”. Hume’s first three paragraphs attempt to explicate the foundation of the fear that accompanies suicide as well as offer a means of reconciling this fear: philosophical thought and discourse. It is only after this preliminary stage-setting that Hume embarks on the central argument propounded in “On Suicide”. Viewed as a whole and stated in general terms, Hume’s argument may be understood as follows:

Premise 1: If suicide is criminal (that is, morally impermissible), then it must be a transgression of our duty to God, or to our neighbor (society), or to ourselves.
Premise 2: Suicide does not violate any of these duties mentioned in Premise 1.
Conclusion: Suicide is not criminal (that is, morally impermissible).

In order for his conclusion to hold, Hume must show that Premise 2 is true. If Hume’s endeavor prevails, men, he claims, will be restored “to their native liberty” and the action of suicide, rescued from “every imputation of guilt or blame”. Thus, it is this task that he undertakes in the remainder of his essay.

First, Hume attempts to refute the theistic objection to suicide. As Frey writes, “Hume interprets the theological prohibition of suicide in terms of a violation of the laws of nature [the general laws of matter and motion], which are decreed by God and govern all his creatures.” Whether or not Hume’s interpretation is correct is a matter for later discussion. Moving forward toward Hume’s understanding of the theistic objection, it follows that by taking our lives, we encroach upon the province of God, who alone rightly disposes of our lives. To deflect this argument, Hume simply observes that, if suicide disturbs the general laws of matter and motion, then anything which similarly interrupts this natural order must be objectionable: “If I turn aside a stone which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature, and I invade the peculiar province of the almighty by lengthening out my life beyond the period which by general laws of matter and motion he had assigned to it.” Hence, to say that suicide is not morally permissible because it violates the laws of nature is the same as saying that preventing death and lengthening one’s life is also criminal because it too violates the laws of nature, which is an absurdity. Thus, Hume’s conclusion can be partly inferred from this reductio ad absurdum: suicide does not violate the laws of nature and, therefore, is not criminal. This argument, as it is explicitly stated in the seventh paragraph of his essay, is as follows:

Premise 1: “Every animal is entrusted with their own prudence and skill for their own conduct in the world, and have full authority, as far as their power extends, to alter all operations of nature.”
Premise 2: Every action of both animal and man alters the ordinary course of the natural laws of matter and motion.
Premise 3: Human life, like animal life, depends on these laws.
Premise 4: It is of no offense to God to disturb these general laws (shown in part by the above reductio ad absurdum).
Conclusion: “everyone has free disposal of his own life…and…he [may] lawfully employ that naturally endowed power” to commit suicide.

In addition to the reductio ad absurdum and the extended version posited in paragraph seven of his essay, Hume pursues an additional avenue of attack against the theistic objection. Here, Hume is attacking what Beauchamp calls the “Divine Appointment Interpretation” which rests on the theological view that nothing in the universe happens without providential “consent and co-operation”. Consequently, Hume’s refutation of the theistic objection might mistakenly be taken as one single argument, when in fact he is

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6Ibid, 98.
7Frey, 344.

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8Hume, 100-101.
9Ibid, 100.
10Ibid, 100.
11Ibid, 102.