

PHIL 1313: INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

MODERN PHILOSOPHY:

Hume's *Enquiry*, §§10-11



David Hume (1711-1776)

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§10. *Of Miracles*

Part I

(pp.72-77)

Hume's Definition and Repudiation of Miracles

“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.” (p.76)

And Furthermore...

“Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happened in the course of nature....nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, *but by an opposite proof, which is superior.*” (p.76)

Begging the Question

Read straightforwardly, Hume's argument seems to beg the very question at issue:

1. A miracle is a violation of a presumptive law of nature.
 2. Experience confers probability 1 on a presumptive law.
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Therefore, the probability of a miracle is 0.

Of course, if a miracle has genuinely occurred as reported, *then experience does not confer probability 1 on a presumptive law, so premise 2 begs the question of whether any miracles have actually occurred.*

And Furthermore...

- Given that constant conjunction in experience (Hume's view of our perception of causality in nature) is a necessary condition but not a sufficient condition for a *physical law*, Hume is not entitled—especially in view of his metaphysical skepticism—to conclude that *necessity (law) exists in nature*.
- And furthermore, we note again that the condition of uniform and repeated experience conferring certainty (probability 1) on presumptive laws is *contradicted by the report of a miracle*, opening the possibility that the experience leading to affirming that natural regularity is *not unalterable*.

Back to the Drawing Board

Recognizing this circularity, some Hume scholars have argued that what Hume must actually have been contending is that, regardless of whether a miracle occurred, knowledge that it occurred is excluded, since it is never reasonable to suppose that a miracle occurred.

The Argument Reformulated

1. Miracles are *highly improbable occurrences*, since they are violations of well-established natural regularities
 2. Natural regularities are *extraordinarily probable occurrences*.
 3. The *evidence* for what is extraordinarily probable *always exceeds* that for what is highly improbable.
 4. A wise person *always proportions his belief to the evidence*.
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Therefore, a wise person should *never believe that a miracle has occurred*.

Part II

(pp.78-90)

Bolstering Part I

- The second part of §10 is designed to *bolster the argument of the first part* by providing reasons that the testimony of a miracle should never be believed.
- Hume offers *four arguments* to this effect, each of which are supplemented by a series of illustrations intended to strengthen his claims in accordance with the maxim he advocates at the end of Part I (p.77):

“[N]o 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.”

Hume's First Argument (p.78)

- In order to have their testimony accepted, the witnesses must be educated, truthful, reputable, and have something to lose if found to be lying.
- Furthermore, there must be a sufficient number of such witnesses, and the miracle in question must have taken place in public in a reputable part of the world.
- If these conditions are not met, the testimony should not be accepted.

Hume's Second Argument (pp.78-79)

- *The emotion (passion, sentiment) of surprise and wonder is agreeable to human beings and makes the human mind susceptible to the miraculous and inclined to be credulous when miracles are reported.*
- *For this reason, wise people base their acceptance of testimony on their own past experiences, and past experience always renders testimony of a miracle suspect.*

Hume's Third Argument (p.79)

- Miracles and supernatural manifestations almost always originate “*among ignorant and barbarous nations*” or long ago.
- The modern enlightened world has been freed of the very kind of ignorance about nature that allows childish beliefs about the supernatural to persist.

Hume's Fourth Argument (pp.81ff)

- Hume's fourth and final argument concerns the *multiplicity of miraculous testimonies*.
- He argues that *incompatible religions* seek to establish their own particular credentials with various miracle stories, with the ultimate effect that *the stories cancel out each other's significance*.
- Each miracle report, intended to establish its own religious system, *destroys the credibility of every other*.
- The upshot is that, even if various miracles could be proven to have taken place, *nothing conclusive could be proved from them*, so the wise person would know that he *was not justified in attributing to them any meaning or significance*.

Response to the First Argument (1)

- The criteria for the reliability of testimony that Hume proposes would have the following effects:
 - (1) They would exclude anyone who has not been educated at a Western/European institution of learning;
 - (2) They would exclude anyone living outside a major cultural center in Europe; and
 - (3) They would exclude anything that didn't happen in public, even if it were subject to corroboration by other means.
- If historical reports were all held to this standard, we would have good reason to reject most of what historians tell us is true.

Response to the First Argument (2)

If we respond to Hume's argument on behalf of the historical evidence for Christ's resurrection, we may observe the following:

- Christ's resurrection was a very public event and it was observed by many people who staked their lives on something they were in a position to know was false if it was, in fact, false. In giving their lives for what they proclaimed, they demonstrated the genuineness of their testimony that what they were *in a position to know* was, in fact, *true*.
- Jerusalem was a major center of world history and close to other such centers—it was not a cultural backwater.
- The Apostle Paul—who testifies to the truth of Christ's resurrection, was in a position to know, and gave his life for what he believed—*more than meets Hume's educational criteria for his time*.

Arguably, then, the evidence for Christ's resurrection actually meets the essential criteria of Hume's first argument.

Response to the First Argument (3)

We can expand on the evidence for Christ's resurrection as a response to Hume's first argument. In particular, the following facts are agreed upon by the *majority* of reputable New Testament scholars and historians, whether Christian or not:

- Jesus died by crucifixion
- Jesus' early followers had experiences a short time after the crucifixion that they thought were resurrection appearances of Jesus
- As a result of these experiences, Jesus' early followers were transformed to the point of being willing to die for the message of Jesus' resurrection and victory over death
- Two key figures in the early church were converted from unbelief by experiences of the risen Jesus: (a) James, the brother of Jesus; and (b) Saul of Tarsus (later the Apostle Paul)
- The gospel message of the death and resurrection of Jesus and its significance began to be taught very soon after these events

Response to the First Argument (4)

This scholarly consensus arises from recognition of the following facts:

- The New Testament contains dozens of short reports of the earliest church teaching, dating from the twenty years before the first canonical books of the New Testament were written. This means that some of these confessional statements of the early church date from no later than the mid-30s AD. These creedal texts or traditions, which predate by many years the works in which they appear, include:
 - I Corinthians 15:3-7
 - I Corinthians 8:6 and 11:23-25
 - Romans 1:3-4 and 10:9
 - Philippians 2:6-11
 - Luke 24:34
- Various criteria used by historians for judging historical accuracy apply to the events surrounding Jesus death and resurrection:
 - The accounts are based on reliable testimonies from people who were close to the events or participated in them
 - Those testifying to these events did so very soon after the events occurred
 - The events are attested by two or more independent sources
 - Those who opposed the early Christians and wished that certain events had not happened sometimes nonetheless agree that they did
 - The accounts are sometimes told in a way that does portrays those reporting them in an embarrassing light, showing them more likely to be truthful than invented
 - Different accounts of the same event dovetail in a way that creates a coherent picture

Response to the First Argument (5)

- Christianity is the *only* major world religion whose early disciples were willing to die for their belief that their religion's founder had been *resurrected*. Furthermore, this resurrection and the hope they took it to represent were at the *center* of their message.
- While none of this proves with mathematical certainty that the resurrection happened, it does prove that Jesus' earliest disciples *thought* that it occurred and that they were *in a position to know* whether it in fact occurred. That they were willing to die for their testimony shows they were utterly convinced of something they were in a position to know—and the *best explanation* for this fact, and for the explosive growth of the early church itself, is that the event of Christ's resurrection, on which the Christian church is founded, *actually happened*.
- In short, if a *presumptive naturalism* is discounted, historical evidence and scholarly judgment **strongly** support the historicity of the miracle of *Christ's resurrection*.

Response to the Second Argument

- Hume's general point about human psychology—that we love a sense of wonder and mystery and awe, and thus are predisposed to believe in the miraculous—is true to some extent.
- It does not follow, however, that such claims do not also provoke a natural response that is skeptical: consider the fact that Christ's disciples themselves—and Thomas in particular—*didn't* initially believe the reports of Christ's resurrection.
- Furthermore, to suggest that we might be inclined to believe something because it appeals to our sense of wonder *does not* demonstrate that a belief accepted on this basis is false—to maintain that it does is to commit the genetic fallacy, that is, it is to reject the truth of a statement because of its source rather than examining it on its own merits.

Response to the Third Argument

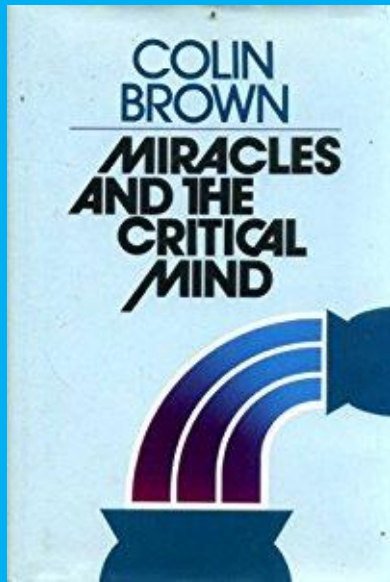
- Hume's point here again reflects a *Western bias* and a *modern bias* that suggests that people from other parts of the world, or people who lived in ancient times, were benighted.
- Aside from the *genetic fallacy* raising its head again, it is absurd to suppose that people from non-Western cultures or historical times were unacquainted with the fact that dead people generally stay that way and that paralytics don't generally ever walk again, and so on.
- From the standpoint of general knowledge, therefore, it is highly unreasonable to require of a witness that he or she share the same worldview, the same experiences, the same education, and the same culture as oneself.

Response to the Fourth Argument

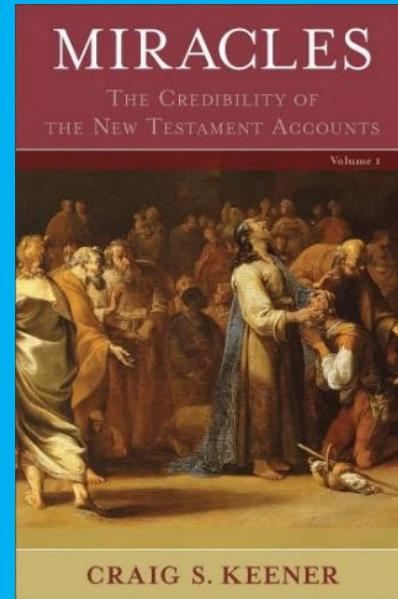
In regard to the allegedly conflicting nature of miraculous testimony from different religions, a number of observations may be made:

- It does not follow from this that every miracle report must substantiate one religion to the exclusion of others. Its proper explanation requires its interpretation in the context of its occurrence.
- Whatever the context of a miracle report, if it genuinely is of a miracle, then at a minimum it testifies to the existence of a supernatural realm that transcends nature.
- Finally, just because one miracle is accepted as having happened doesn't mean that all miracle claims must be regarded as true. Some have good evidence for them and some do not. Believing that miracles can and sometimes do occur is not an invitation to credulity.

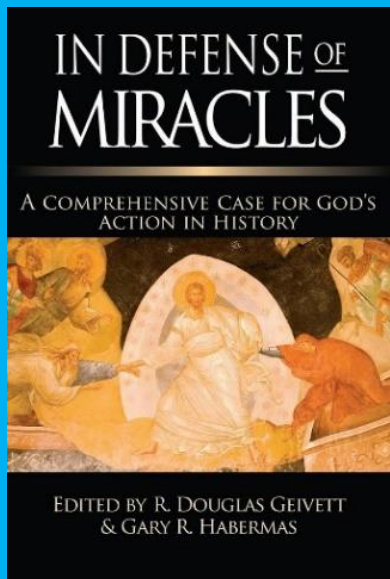
Additional Resources (1)



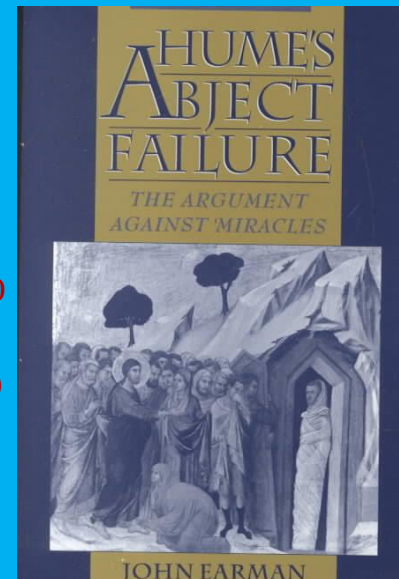
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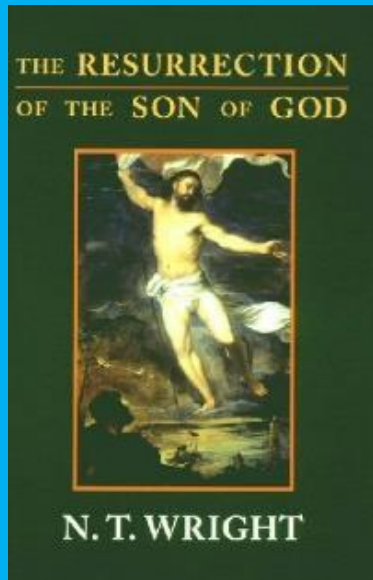


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(Downers Grove: IVP, 1997)
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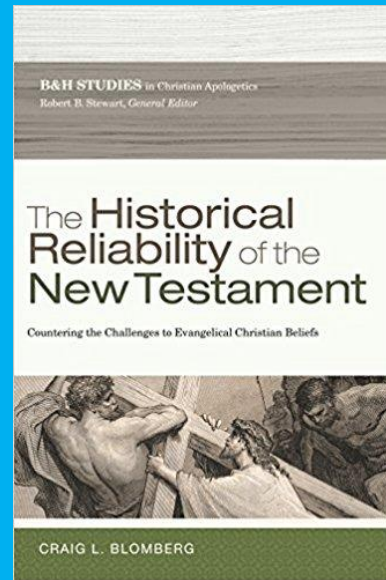


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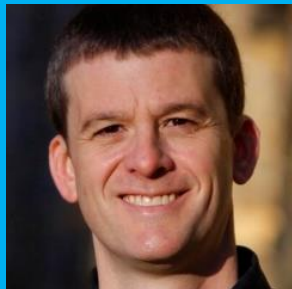
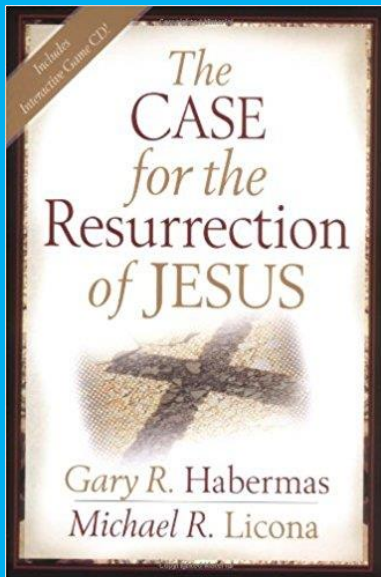
Additional Resources (2)



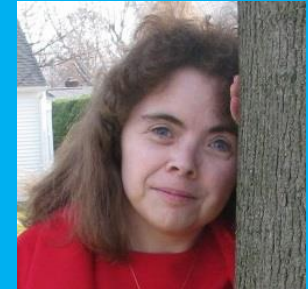
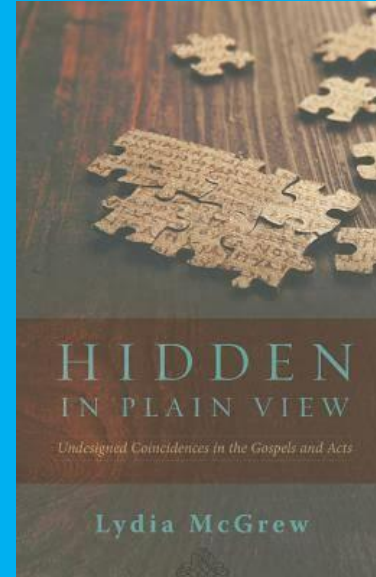
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Craig L. Blomberg (1955 -)



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Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts
(Chillicothe: DeWard, 2017)
Lydia McGrew (1965 -)

**§11. *Of a Particular
Providence and of a
Future State***

Epicurean Dialogue

- Hume structures this section of the *Enquiry* as an interaction between himself and the ancient philosopher *Epicurus* (341-270 BC).
- *Epicurus was known for his atheism and belief there was no afterlife*, and the dialogue, in part, explores whether these Epicurean beliefs, which entail the denial of providence and any future state, *pose a threat to morality and civilization*.
- While Hume tries to create the *illusion of a rhetorical distance* between himself and Epicurus on these matters, acting as if he does not openly embrace the Epicurean view, it is nonetheless clear that this is where his sympathies lie.

Hume's Critique of Design

- Hume's dialogical exploration leads him into *a critique of the design argument* for the existence of God.
- He claims, first of all, that the argument from design is an over-reach (p.93):

“When we infer any particular cause from an effect, we must proportion the one to the other, and can never be allowed to ascribe to the cause any qualities, but what are exactly sufficient to produce the effect... (p.94) ... The same rule holds, whether the cause assigned be brute unconscious matter, or rational intelligent being. If the cause be known only by the effect, we ought never to ascribe to it any qualities beyond what are precisely requisite to produce the effect.... Allowing, therefore, the gods to be the authors of the existence or order of the universe; it follows, that they possess that precise degree of power, intelligence, and benevolence, which appears in their workmanship; but nothing farther can ever be proved.... etc.

- So Hume concludes that *we cannot infer divine perfection from this imperfect world on the basis of a design argument.*

Context and Qualification

- In offering such a critique, Hume was responding to theologians of his time who had indulged in philosophical over-reach.
- It seems clear that we must grant that, on the basis of mere design, there is no valid inferential chain leading from design in nature to full-blown Judeo-Christian theism, or even to a stripped-down deism.
- Of course, this realization was not unique to Hume. Thomas Aquinas recognized that this was the case in regard to his fifth way. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* he remarks:

“By his natural reason man is able to arrive at some knowledge of God. For seeing that natural things run their course according to a fixed order, and since there cannot be order without a cause of order, men, for the most part, perceive that there is one who orders the things that we see. But who or what kind this cause of order may be, or whether there be but one, cannot be gathered from this general consideration.”
- So even Aquinas recognized that the character and number of designers could not be settled simply by studying nature.

Hume Against the Modest Design Argument

- Even though the design argument in natural theology was recognized as more modest in its implications, *Hume goes on to attack even this more modest inference to an unspecified designer or designers—especially in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, but also, more obliquely, in the way he deals with objections to his critique in section 11 of the *Enquiry*.
- In this regard, Hume insists that all our knowledge arises from induction on the basis of experience (by which, in accordance with what he has earlier argued, he can only mean that this “knowledge” derives from instinctual belief), and *the design argument, proceeding as it does on the basis of analogy, cannot get us from the human to the divine.*

Analogies and Examples

- As an example, Hume offers that, on the human level, we might infer from a *half-finished building* that it was the work of design, and that it will receive further improvements until it is finished (p.98).
- But Hume denies that we can infer any intentions regarding the completion of our imperfect universe since the intentions of the creator or creators of the universe cannot be inferred from what we see, since we only have one example of a universe and “there is an infinite difference of the subjects” between humanity and the creator(s) of the universe, if there be such.
- Aside from the *disanalogy* between humans and universe-creators that Hume sees as undermining the design argument, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* he also points out that there are *disanalogies* between human artifacts and natural organisms. Human artifacts are inorganic, whereas biological organisms are organic and capable of healing and repairing themselves. As an argument from *analogy*, he contends, *the design argument fails*.

Responding to Hume

- With all due respect to Hume, it would seem that there is a way of dealing with the problems he raises while preserving an analogical argument. Consider, for example, the following:
 1. Man-made machines are designed.
 2. Man-made machines and biological organisms *both* exhibit functional interdependence of parts, adaptation of means to ends, etc.
 3. There is no known instance where a complex entity exhibiting functional interdependence of parts, adaptation of means to ends, etc., has existed without being designed.

Therefore, biological organisms are also designed.
- But Hume has a rejoinder to this move. He insists that experience is our guide, and while we have the experience of man-made machines being designed, we have no experience of biological organisms or the universe being designed. On this ground, therefore, Hume claims we cannot legitimately infer design without experiential knowledge of the designer.

Reid's Rejoinder

- But *Hume* is just wrong that we need experiential knowledge of the designer if a design inference is to be proper.
- As **Thomas Reid** (1710-1796) pointed out in response to Hume, “from marks of wisdom and intelligence in effects, a wise and intelligent cause may be inferred” (Reid, *Lectures on Natural Theology*).
- In other words, we don't need to get into the mind of the designer to attribute design; rather, we examine the effects in an object itself to determine whether those *effects display signs of intelligence*.
- In doing so, we are *not arguing inductively* from our experience, but rather *abductively*, that is, we are making *an inference to the best explanation* for an observed effect: we see in the object a pattern that is *best explained* as the mark of a designing intelligence.

The Modern Design Inference

- In a way, contemporary intelligent design (ID) theorists build on this insight of Thomas Reid's by analyzing and quantifying the hallmarks of design and then asking whether these hallmarks are present in certain features of nature.
- In fact, modern ID theory may be defined as the hypothesis that certain features of the universe and of biological systems are best explained as the result of an intelligent cause (of some sort) rather than the result of undirected natural processes.
- What sorts of features? Those that exhibit *specified functional information*. Let's consider an example.

An Example: Protein Folding (1)

- Let's consider the origin of *protein folds*.
- The *protein-coding segments of DNA* must produce amino acid sequences (proteins) that fold into biologically functional structures in three dimensions.
- In tying physical possibilities to physical evidence, we note that *the sequence of triplet-codons along the sugar-phosphate backbone of DNA is not determined* by any biochemical laws or self-organizational properties in physical chemistry any more than the chemistry of ink bonding to paper explains the particular configuration of ink in a book.
- This biochemical *independence* is, in fact, *essential* to the vast information-carrying capacity of DNA, since biochemical determination would constrain the permissible sequences of nucleotides and severely limit the number of possible sequences.
- Realizing this, the relevant empirical study becomes evaluating how frequently *functional* protein folds occur in amino acid sequence space, for *this functionally-specified information* is precisely what is contained in the relevant *physically undetermined* sequences of triplet-codons in the DNA molecule.

An Example: Protein Folding (2)

- Careful laboratory experimentation and analysis performed by Douglas Axe¹ has shown that, on average, a *single* protein folding domain (i.e., *one* stand-alone functional protein fold) has a probability in amino acid sequence space of about 1 in 10^{74} .
- Life on earth as we know it requires around *a thousand different protein folding domains*, so these bare protein constituents, quite apart from their functional assemblage into actual organisms, *have a probability of 1 in $10^{74,000}$ of existing at all*.
- As calculated by Seth Lloyd,² a quantum computational theorist at MIT, the computational capacity of the observable universe allows, *at best*, for the undirected generation of 10^{120} bits of functionally-specified information, so *functionally-specified structures* having *probability less than 1 in 10^{120}* are *best explained* by an intelligent cause, *not* a blind natural process.
- This means that *in the entire history of the universe we should expect to see the undirected production of no more than two protein folds (which have a joint probability of 1 in 10^{148})*, yet we have—on one planet, no less—around a thousand of them.

¹ Douglas D. Axe, "Extreme functional sensitivity to conservative amino acid changes on enzyme exteriors," *Journal of Molecular Biology* 301 (2000): 585-596; Douglas D. Axe, "Estimating the prevalence of protein sequences adopting functional enzyme folds," *Journal of Molecular Biology* 341 (2004): 1295-1315; Douglas D. Axe, "The Case Against a Darwinian Origin of Protein Folds," *BIO-Complexity* 1 (2010): 1-12 (<http://bio-complexity.org/ojs/index.php/main/article/view/BIO-C.2010.1/BIO-C.2010.1>).

² Seth Lloyd, "Computational Capacity of the Universe," *Physical Review Letters* 88(23) (2002): 237901 (<https://arxiv.org/pdf/quant-ph/0110141.pdf>).

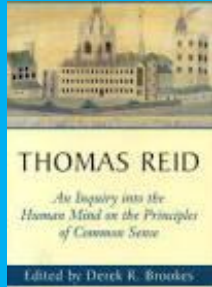
Hume on Morality and Civilization

- It would seem that *Hume's argument against design arguments is, much like his argument against miracles, grossly deficient.*
- There are *other issues that Hume raises that are worth discussing, however.*
- For instance, Hume raises the question whether denying the existence of God and an afterlife undermines both morality and civilization (civilized behavior).
- Hume argues that neither God nor immortality are necessary to morality because experience itself teaches us (p.96) that “to a well-disposed mind” it is evident that “between the virtuous and the vicious course of life... every advantage is on the side of the former.”
- So, while we cannot infer from experience that there is a future state (afterlife) that rewards good and punishes evil, he contends, we may nevertheless infer from experience that virtue contributes to human happiness and vice does not.

Some Final Questions for Hume

- If there is no God or afterlife, *is it true* that virtuous behavior contributes more to human happiness than vice?
- Even *if we grant* Hume's contention with regard to general human happiness, *would this suffice* to ground individual moral behavior?
- If God does not exist and immortality is a chimera, *why should we think that general human happiness is a supreme good*, especially if individual human happiness might better be served at times by vice?
- Does Hume *have an answer* to the person who suggests that evil acts have furthered his personal well-being?
- All of these questions are going to become quite pressing as we turn to an examination of the implications of atheism as articulated and defended by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)....

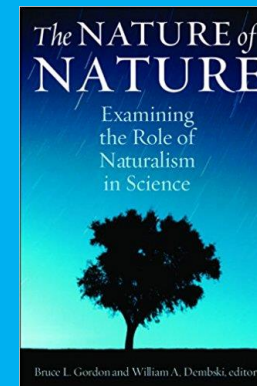
Additional Resources



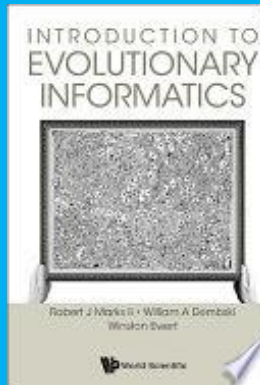
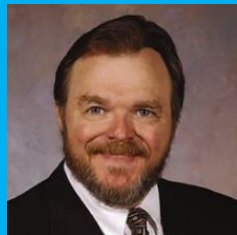
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Thomas Reid



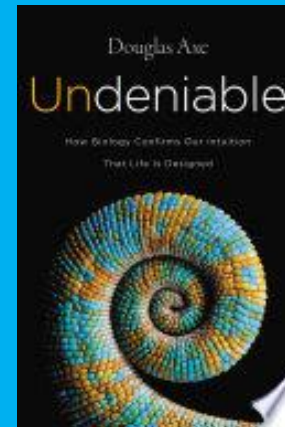
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William A. Dembski



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Douglas Axe

End of Presentation