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Hume's Objection to the Thomistic Doctrine on Suicide

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I. Introduction

In "Of Suicide," David Hume argues against the dominant Thomistic doctrine on suicide. Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Theologica, I-II, Q64, Art 5*, argues that suicide is morally impermissible because it violates three kinds of duties: one's duty to God, to others, and to oneself. Arguing from within the Thomistic framework, Hume exposes the inconsistencies of Aquinas's theory and refutes Aquinas's arguments against suicide. In this paper I look at only the arguments concerning the ways in which suicide violates a duty to God.

My strategy is as follows. First, I argue that G.R. McLean's interpretation of Hume in his paper "Hume and the Theistic Objection to Suicide" is not only philosophically unsound, but also departs significantly from the text of "Of Suicide." I then offer my own interpretation of Hume's arguments in "Of Suicide," which both avoids the problems that McLean's interpretation faces and is closer to the text. Finally, I raise and respond to one possible objection to my interpretation of Hume's argument. Ultimately, I intend to argue that Hume's attack on the Thomistic doctrine on suicide is actually an attack on the broader Thomistic framework, and that to read "Of Suicide" in isolation from Hume's other works leads to error.

II. The Problem with Hume, According to McLean

What McLean calls the “theistic objection” is essentially this: God created us and only he has the right to dispose of our lives; we do not have this right. McLean takes Hume to be trying “to show that even on theistic grounds” suicide is not actually prohibited.¹ He argues that Hume’s attack, on his reading of Hume’s argument, is unsuccessful. McLean thinks the bulk of Hume’s argument lies in the following passage:

Were the disposal of human life so much reserved as the particular 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 particular province of the Almighty by lengthening out my life beyond the period by which the general laws of matter and motion he had assigned it.²

He says this is Hume's objection "put in a nutshell." I disagree. First, McLean ignores a significant portion of Hume’s argument against the Thomistic doctrine on suicide. Hume offers at least one argument in response to each of the three ways in which Aquinas finds suicide to be impermissible. Secondly, McLean misinterprets the portion of Hume’s argument to which he responds, the portion that takes suicide to be a violation of our duty to God. He thinks Hume offers a *reductio ad absurdum* of the following form:³

¹ McLean, G.R., “Hume and the Theistic Objection to Suicide,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 38, Number 1, January 2001, pp. 99.

² Hume, David, “Of Suicide,” *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene E. Miller, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis: 1985. pp. 583.

³ McLean calls this argument a *reductio*. It actually has the form of *modus tollens*, which is what McLean sometimes maintains. For clarity’s sake, I will consistently refer to his interpretation as a *reductio*. Though McLean is careless in calling the grounds for his inference a *reductio* in some places and a *modus tollens* in others, his carelessness is not problematic. McLean wants to deny the first premise, and he can do this whether he calls the move a *reductio* or a *modus tollens*.

1. If disposing of my life invades the province of God, then preserving my life similarly invades the province of God.
 2. Preserving my life does not invade the province of God.
-
3. Disposing of my life does not invade the province of God.⁴

More basically:

1. $A \rightarrow B$
 2. $\neg B$
-
3. $\neg A$

McLean sees a problem with the argument because most theists would accept the second premise but reject the first premise. To show this, McLean offers his interpretation in its contrapositive form:

1. If preserving my life does not invade the province of God, then disposing of my life does not invade the province of God.
 2. Preserving my life does not invade the province of God.
-
3. Disposing of my life does not invade the province of God

More basically:

1. $\neg A \rightarrow \neg B$
 2. $\neg A$
-
3. $\neg B$

In an effort to refute premise one, McLean draws an analogy between placing money in a bank and God's placing life in our care. You deposit money in a bank trusting that the bank will

preserve it. By preserving your deposit, the bank does not invade your province as the owner of that money. However, if the bank manager decides to take your money, and dispose of it by buying a new car, the bank invades your province as the owner of that money.⁵ Similarly, theists, as McLean describes them, hold that life is a trust placed in our hands for safekeeping, and is therefore not for disposal at our will.

III. The First Problem with McLean

McLean thinks Hume offers a failed *reductio ad absurdum* of Aquinas's argument. I agree that Hume offers a *reductio*, but I argue that it is a different kind of *reductio*, and that Hume's argument is actually successful. Before I offer my own interpretation of Hume's argument, I want to show that McLean's interpretation of Hume's argument is both philosophically unsound and textually inaccurate.

If we accept McLean's interpretation of Hume and his argument against Hume, we have two options both of which are problematic. First, we might accept McLean's interpretation of Hume's argument and reject his bank analogy. The contrapositive form of Hume's argument, as interpreted by McLean, is refuted by the bank analogy only if a contractual agreement holds both for the bank and for our duty to preserve life. In the case of the bank we have certain reasonable expectations. Banks are human institutions, and we are in a good position to know exactly what banks are supposed to do. It is understood, and in fact supported by contract and law, that the money in a bank's possession is to be disposed of by the clients only, except under a few extreme circumstances. However, a theist might reject this analogy on the grounds that there is no such explicit agreement between God and us. Stewards of life have no explicit job

⁴ McLean, G.R., "Hume and the Theistic Objection to Suicide," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 38, Number 1, January 2001, pp. 100.

⁵ Actually, an employee of the bank is invading your province as the owner of that money, so this analogy is a bit shaky.

description, while bankers should have a good understanding of what their job entails. If you take this first option, you may argue for the second premise on different grounds while rejecting the first premise. This position may have some potential for success, but I will not explore it here.

A second option is to accept both the argument and the analogy, which raises two serious problems. The first concerns the notion of stewardship, which is frustratingly vague, since as it is used here, the scope and limits of what constitutes proper stewardship are never specified. In ordinary life, most people act in ways that preserve their lives and they are not called upon to provide philosophical justification for doing so. When a theist claims that there is such a thing as a duty to serve as steward of life, on par with the duty of banks to preserve their clients' money, she must provide determinate criteria for what counts as stewardship. But there are no *philosophical* grounds for believing that God has named humans stewards of life, and even if a theist somehow proved a less extreme claim about a duty to preserve life, she would still have to provide determinate criteria for what counts as fulfilling this duty. From what I can see, McLean has not given us any good idea of what these criteria might be. This is a problem for McLean and other theists because with no determinate criteria in place for what counts as stewardship, they are in danger of sliding down a slippery slope to another serious problem. Namely, the theist will be forced to accept conclusions that her doctrine prohibits. I call this problem "the problem of duties without limits."

IV. The Problem of Duties without Limits

McLean argues on behalf of theists that there is a duty to preserve life and that this duty does not invade the province of God. He does not place limits on the duty to preserve life, and

this is dangerous for the theist. If we are required to preserve life without limits, then any sort of preservation is permissible, and this seems intuitively false.

I think all theists would agree that some life-preserving measures are morally impermissible. If there is some duty to preserve life, certainly it must be limited by such principles as “do not harm one person’s life in an effort to preserve another person’s life.” The type of unacceptable conclusion to which I was referring in the previous paragraph is one in which it becomes acceptable for a person to interfere with the natural death of either herself or another person. A common example is keeping a loved one who has little or no chance for recovery from a serious illness on life support for an exorbitant amount of time. Consider again McLean’s bank analogy. Perhaps in the case of the extremely ill loved one, God is attempting to take his money out of the bank. Our refusal to take this person off life support may be construed as an interference with God’s will, especially since it appears to interfere with the “course of nature.” This case illustrates the need to place parameters on our duties as stewards of our lives. If there are no such parameters, we become like banks that do not allow their clients to withdraw their deposits.

Another more extreme case in which an undesirable conclusion results from accepting an unqualified duty to preserve life might be the development of an immortality elixir. Suppose we could create an elixir that would make us immortal, thus preserving our lives forever. If the bank analogy holds, we might very well be the most excellent bankers the world has seen. Just as we facilitate immortality, the bank would keep our money safe forever. McLean and other theists might make a distinction here between preserving life and prolonging it, but this distinction would be unsuccessful from where they now stand. With no criteria in place for determining what rightly counts as stewardship and preservation, they have no way of

determining what does not count. The subtle distinction between preservation and prolonging of life requires some thoughtful, rigorous philosophical analysis. Simply claiming that God approves of one act and not the other will not do.

V. The Real Problem

McLean's most significant difficulty derives not from the aforementioned concerns, but rather from a misinterpretation of Hume's argument. Hume's argument against Aquinas cannot be contained in McLean's "nutshell" and it does not follow "a straightforward modus tollens form," as McLean thinks it does.⁶ Here is the argument in Hume's own words:

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.⁷

Hume's argument, as I think it should be read, is as follows:

1. One can act to dispose of one's life.
2. One can act to preserve one's life.
3. Both 1 and 2 invade the province of God.
4. Invading the province of God is impermissible.

Therefore, 5. 1 and 2 are impermissible.

This argument is both a consistency argument and a *reductio ad absurdum*. It is a consistency argument because Hume responds to the arbitrary way in which Aquinas's view allows some human actions to fall under the blanket of moral permissibility, while excluding others. Hume is trying to point out that we really have no philosophical reason for believing that some actions

⁶ McLean, G.R., "Hume and the Theistic Objection to Suicide," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 38, Number 1, January 2001, pp. 101.

⁷ Hume, David, "Of Suicide," *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene E. Miller, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis: 1985. pp. 583.

invade God's province, and thus are immoral, while others do not. Basically, Hume is telling Aquinas that he can't have it both ways. If God's immutable laws govern the material world, as Hume understands them to be on his interpretation of Aquinas, then every act that invades God's province is either equally morally impermissible or equally morally permissible. This argument is a *reductio* because if you accept the premises, you are led to what, on Aquinas's view of the universe, is a necessarily false conclusion. It could never be the case, on Aquinas's view, that preserving life is morally impermissible.

Hume assumes, for the sake of argument, Aquinas's conception of the universe. Under this conception, immutable physical laws govern the material world. Within the material world, God endows all living creatures with physical and mental powers. These powers allow these creatures to pursue the sorts of lives for which they are destined. The laws that govern the material world and the powers that govern living creatures constantly encroach upon each other and affect each other's operation. The mental powers of animals, like those of humans, encroach upon the material world in such cases as the use of natural resources like trees to build shelters. Likewise, nature restrains human activity in such cases as when a river blocks human motion across the earth.⁸ This acting upon each other does not result in disorder, but rather in harmony. God governs through these laws. Therefore, in a strong sense, all events are actions of God, as they all proceed from his laws. No action is exempt from these immutable laws.⁹

According to this conception of the universe, it is difficult to see what grounds a theist who wants to defend the whole of Aquinas's system has for her position. Hume contends that it cannot be the case that God has reserved for himself the disposal of human life because human life is subject to the same laws as the lives of all animals, and suicide is not a violation of these

⁸Hume, David, "Of Suicide," *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene E. Miller, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis: 1985. pp. 580.

laws.¹⁰ Suicide cannot be found to be immoral on the grounds that it is wrong to disturb these laws in any case. Hume thinks any assertion to the contrary is absurd. Animals are endowed with their abilities and their prudence and are entrusted to use them to guide their conduct.¹¹ They can alter nature's operation as far as these powers will allow. If this were not the case, living creatures could not survive. They would be killed by predators, natural disasters, or illness.¹² Suicide does not encroach upon the laws of nature, but rather uses them. Hume contends that if suicide were really a violation of God's province, he would have made laws preventing it.

Hume's argument is a consistency argument at its core. If we are allowed to pursue means to prolong our lives, such as dodging a falling boulder or taking medicine, why can we not pursue means to end our lives? Prolonging our lives, Hume thinks, must equally invade God's province. However, neither prolonging nor ending your life to the extent that it is in your power usurps the power of God because both actions follow the general laws God has created. Hume thinks it is absurd to maintain that diverting the flow of a river accords with the laws of nature, but diverting the flow of your own blood does not.¹³ Unless the theist supplies some philosophically satisfying criteria for when interference is morally permissible and when it is not, God's province is compatible with both actions.

VI. The Real *Reductio*

This is where the real *reductio* lies. Hume's final conclusion within the Thomistic framework is the following conditional: *if* suicide were truly an invasion of the province of God, *then* the immutable laws through which God governs the universe would prevent it. This

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 581

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 582.

¹¹ Entrusted in a weaker sense than McLean means to use in his bank analogy; our mere possession of these abilities implies that we are entrusted with them.

conditional decomposes into what is for many people, theists and non-theists, a simpler, but more unacceptable conditional. Aquinas contends that suicide is morally impermissible. Hume thinks God's laws would prevent it if it were truly morally impermissible. His argument generalizes to this form: if *any* action were truly morally impermissible, then God's laws would prevent it. If Hume is correct, it seems as though murder, rape, and pollution are morally permissible. These things happen. No causal law prevents them from occurring. Does this mean that Hume thinks God's laws would prevent *all* wrong actions if they were truly wrong? Either Hume is wrong, Aquinas's God is not one many people would consider worthy of worship, or there is more to Hume's position than initially meets the eye, or at least, McLean's eye.

McLean responds to precisely this difficulty, that the laws of nature permit what intuitively seem to be immoral acts, but he does so too hastily. He thinks Hume is unable to draw the conclusion that every manipulation or disturbance of the laws of nature is either equally impermissible or equally permissible from his premises, but this is because McLean has failed to accurately characterize Hume's argument. McLean repeatedly chastises Hume for failing to make a distinction between murder and suicide. As a result of Hume's failure to make this distinction, McLean thinks Hume has no justification for his conclusion: "And because those premises, so far stated, make no distinction between murder and suicide, we must conclude that they provide no justification for the conclusion that suicide is legitimate."¹⁴ McLean has walked directly into Hume's trap (though I do not mean to imply that Hume is doing something sneaky

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 582.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.583

¹⁴ McLean, G.R., "Hume and the Theistic Objection to Suicide," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 38, Number 1, January 2001, pp. 99.

here). Hume agrees that this conclusion is unacceptable, and that is why he finds Aquinas's argument absurd!

VII. A Possible Objection

I would like to spend what remains of this paper considering a possible objection to my interpretation of Hume's argument against the Thomistic doctrine on suicide. The objection is that Hume's argument seems to completely disregard the concept of free will, which is essential to Aquinas's (or any Christian thinker's) conception of the universe. In order to discuss this objection, and to uncover the depth of Hume's refutation of Aquinas, I must revisit the framework within which both Aquinas and Hume are arguing. Hume takes Aquinas to believe in a Deist conception of the world.¹⁵ This conception maintains that God constructed a system of causal laws to govern the world, and then he figuratively sat back and let the laws do the work. Aquinas believes suicide is an encroachment upon God's province, and therefore a sin. Hume thinks if this were truly the case, the causal laws God created to govern the universe would prevent it. This is the point in Hume's assessment where the problem of free will comes in. It is essential to the Thomistic picture that humans have free will. Most people, not just Christians, think of sin as something a person commits when she knows what the right action is, but *chooses* the wrong action. If causal laws prevent wrong action, humans can never choose the wrong actions *or* the *right* actions. This conflicts with the Christian idea that praise and blame, reward and punishment, heaven and hell depend on our freedom to choose what to do.

I believe that Hume does not explain Aquinas's conception of the world thoroughly enough to make "Of Suicide" an accessible stand-alone essay. To really feel the weight of Hume's objections, we must unpack all of his implicit and unspoken premises. The first that

¹⁵ This may be a misinterpretation on Hume's part. Most philosophers now think Aquinas was a concurrentist. During Hume's time, religious philosophers were either deists or occasionalists. Of the two, Aquinas is a deist.

strikes me is that Aquinas's Deistic picture is *causal*. When Hume explicates Aquinas's position he makes clear that all actions are indirectly God's actions, but he is not as clear as he could be about why that is. Under the Thomistic view, our actions are God's actions because the laws of cause and effect are necessary. For every cause, there is a necessary effect. There is no event that escapes these laws and God, through his omniscience, knows about every event. Aquinas accepts this account generally, but not its application to the human will. The human will, he thinks, is not just another object governed by the causal laws. We make *free choices*.

Though Hume never explicitly says this in "Of Suicide," I think his suggestion that if suicide offended God, his laws would prevent it is not only an indictment of Aquinas's position on suicide but of his entire conception of a world governed by causal laws from which the human will is somehow exempt. The hidden point of Hume's arguments might be that Aquinas's entire system is flawed. Free will does not actually pose a problem for Hume because Hume does not endorse this causal view of the universe. He does not think the creator set in motion a universe in which every event necessarily follows previous events. Therefore, Aquinas must explain how humans have free will in a universe that is otherwise one of necessity.

Hume is, without always explicitly saying so, reducing Aquinas's position to absurdity. Either causal laws govern the world or they do not. I think Hume is implicitly arguing that causal laws, in the Thomistic sense, do not govern the universe and that when we stop thinking about the universe in terms of these laws we do not have the problem of whether acts are freely willed by humans or predestined by God. The free will objection is refuted if we accept Hume's implicit premise. The reason the conditional "if suicide were truly wrong, God's laws would prevent it" is so bothersome is precisely because his laws do not prevent it. Nor do his laws prevent murder, rape, or pollution, but this is perfectly consistent with what Hume is saying

between the lines: moral rights and wrongs are not determined by whether they please or offend God. Not only is Aquinas's position internally flawed, it is also externally flawed. In the midst of this internal critique, we must conclude that Hume is suggesting we reject this Thomistic conception and think about morality from a different perspective. This interpretation derives significant support from Hume's other works, particularly his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Section 8, Of Liberty and Necessity*.¹⁶ "Of Suicide" read in a vacuum leads to the type of unsuccessful arguments made by McLean and others and to an incomplete understanding of what is really a very rewarding piece of philosophy.¹⁷

¹⁶ My personal copy is one edited by Tom L. Beauchamp.

¹⁷ The others to whom I refer include Beauchamp. I find Beauchamp's contribution to *David Hume Critical Assessments*, Volume VI, edited by Stanley Tvein, London and New York: 1995, betrays a very shallow reading and assessment of "Of Suicide." However, this is the subject of another, longer paper, which I am currently writing.