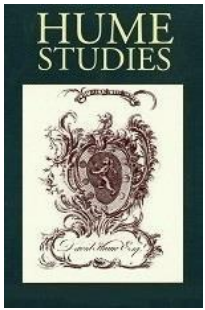


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# Hume and the Laws of Nature

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*Abstract:* The common view that Hume is a regularity theorist about laws of nature isn't textually well grounded. The texts show that he thinks of them as objective governing principles that could conceivably be violated while still counting as a law of nature. This is a standard view at the time, and Hume borrows it from others. He implies that the best evidence for rational religion is the exceptionless workings of the laws of nature, he argues that suicide isn't incompatible with the will of God by identifying his will with the laws of nature, and he has Philo argue for the existence of God from the simplicity of the laws governing the world. He sheds some of the theological baggage that laws of nature carry at the time, but not all of it.

What does Hume think the laws of nature are?[1] I will show that he does not think of them as regularities, but rather as objective governing principles, principles that conceivably could be violated by a miraculous exception. He borrows his concept of a law of nature from his predecessors, who think of them as general volitions of God. Hume expresses affinity for this position in his sympathetic description of rational religion, in his argument that suicide is not against the will of God, and in one of the arguments for the existence of God in part 12 of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. He modifies this theological conception with skepticism and irreligion, but he does not fully abandon it.

## 1. Some Humean Laws

Let us begin by considering and classifying some examples. In the *Treatise,* most of the references to 'laws of nature' are in Cicero's sense of the discoverable principles of morality

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(DL 1.18–23). Hume uses the expression to refer to the foundations of moral phenomena, for example, property (T 3.2.4.1, 3.2.5.8; SBN 514, 520), promises (T 3.2.8.5; SBN 543), and governmental authority (T 3.2.12.9; SBN 573). He does refer to the laws governing the motion of animal spirits (T 1.4.1.10; SBN 185) and claims that saplings sometimes kill their parent trees by "the laws of matter and motion" (T 3.1.1.24; SBN 467). Even so, his systematic discussion of 'laws of nature' in the *Treatise* is about "the rules of justice" (T 3.2.1.19; SBN 484). In this context, the "three fundamental laws of nature" are "*that of the stability of possession, of its transference by consent,* and *of the performance of promises*" (T 3.2.6.1; SBN 526).

In the first *Enquiry,* the expression 'law of nature' is front and center, in something like the modern sense. In section 1, Newton's determination of "laws and forces" governing the planets is a model for philosophy of mind (EHU 1.15; SBN 14–15, see de Pierris, *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*, 148–49n213). In section 4, Hume argues that the laws of nature are only discoverable through experience (EHU 4.9, 4.13; SBN 29, 31). In section 8, Hume argues that irregular biological events should not make us doubt that laws of nature apply exceptionlessly to living things (EHU 8.14; SBN 87); he also considers the implications of his belief that voluntary motions are "subjected to the same laws of necessity with the operations of matter" (EHU 8.32; SBN 99). In section 10, he argues that our confidence in the laws of nature should be so high that we should never trust religiously motivated testimony that they have been broken.

Hume's references to particular laws of nature can be divided into three groups. First, he offers psychological laws as analogous to the laws of physics. For example, he proposes that vivacity is transferred across associated perceptions and says that, if generally confirmed, this hypothesis "may be established as a general law, which takes place in all the operations of the mind" (EHU 5.14; SBN 51). If this were a general psychological law, it would justify his attempt to carry out "enquiries concerning the mental powers and œconomy" similar to what Newton succeeded with in astronomy (EHU 1.15; SBN 14). In the *Treatise,* he calls his principles of association "a kind of attraction, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to show itself in as many and as various forms" (T 1.1.4.6; SBN 12–13, see Kemp Smith, *Philosophy of David Hume*, 71–72), which suggests that he thinks that his laws of association have similar nomic status as Newton's law of gravitational attraction.

The second sort comprise biological and chemical generalities that underlie an argumentative question in Hume's essay on miracles. "Why," he asks

> is it more than probable, that all men must die; that lead cannot, of itself, remain suspended in the air; that fire consumes wood, and is extinguished by water; unless it be, that these events are found agreeable to the laws of nature, and there is required a violation of these laws, or in other words, a miracle to prevent them? (EHU 10.12; SBN 114–15)

Notice that the generalities that all men die and that water quenches fire are not said to be laws, but rather to be agreeable with laws while their negations are not. The laws must be

wider generalities that contain these narrower generalities, and these laws must be well enough known to us for Hume's argument to make sense. All living things die permanently may be the generality that includes all men die and which would be violated by Queen Elizabeth's resurrection (EHU 10.37; SBN 128).

The third group comprise the laws of mechanics, at least as Hume understands them. When he says that a philosopher "determined the laws and forces, by which the revolutions of the planets are governed and directed" (EHU 1.15; SBN 14), he has in mind Newton's three laws and the law of universal gravitation. In section 8 he tells us, "The degree and direction of every motion is, by the laws of nature, prescribed with such exactness, that a living creature may as soon arise from the shock of two bodies, as motion, in any other degree or direction than what is actually produced by it" (EHU 8.4; SBN 82). Hume takes this to be an implication of Newton's second law. The motion of a body is determined by its mass, motion, and the forces impressed upon it. We should also read Hume's footnote on imperceptible miracles in section 10 in this light. There he writes, "The raising of a house or ship into the air is a visible miracle. The raising of a feather, when the wind wants ever so little of a force requisite for that purpose, is as real a miracle, though not so sensible with regard to us" (EHU 10.12n23; SBN 115n1). Take the sum of forces over time on a feather in light of Newton's second law and the parallelogram rule for adding forces and then calculate where the feather should be. If the feather goes higher, then the laws of nature have been broken. God's intervention does not count as an additional force in this case.

## 2. Laws as Objective and Capable of Exceptions

I want to attribute three thoughts to Hume on the laws of nature. First, he thinks that they govern—that is to say, they exercise a controlling influence over—the things that fall under them. Second, he believes that they can be violated—not just that they are matters of fact and not relations of ideas, but rather that they could conceivably be violated and continue to be laws of nature. Third, he thinks that they are objective matters of fact; whether they are violated does not depend on whether we realize it.

The standard reading of Hume on the laws of nature among philosophers of science and what gets called the 'Humean theory of laws' in the general community of philosophers is that they are mere regularities. There is not any textual evidence for this interpretation beyond what can be drawn out by analogy and extrapolation from his account of causation, but commentators have been willing to make the leap. Walter Ott and Lydia Patton ("Debate over Laws of Nature," 6–7), for example, quote Hume's first definition of causation from the *Treatise*: "An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac'd in like relations of precedency and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter" (T 1.3.14.31; SBN 172). They then add, "This suggests that a law of nature will simply be a statement of a regularity" (Ott and Patton, "Debate over Laws of Nature," 7).

A little reflection shows that we should be wary of assimilating the concept of cause to the concept of law. A cause, considered as a particular finite object or event that produces

another, is not a law, considered as a general principle that fits or governs some fundamental features of the world. Bertrand Russell argues, "there is nothing that can be called a cause, and nothing that can be called an effect" in the laws of an advanced science ("On the Notion of Cause," 153). Whether Russell is right or wrong, his position is intelligible and possible, so *law* and *cause* are different concepts. Distinguishing between laws and causes is at least as important for interpreters of Hume as it is for philosophers of science. What he says about causes does not always carry over to what he thinks about laws.

One way of filling out Ott and Paton's inference is as follows. Regularities of the form "objects similar to one thing will be followed by objects similar to another" play a central role in Hume's first definition of causation. Thus, Hume assumes the importance of regularities in the philosophy of science. Regularities are general and laws are general, so, as a conjectural interpretation, we might suppose that these regularities are what Hume means by the laws of nature.[2]

If we are going to be careful, we should check this interpretive hypothesis against passages where Hume explicitly discusses laws of nature under that name, to find out whether this hypothesis is borne out. As it turns out, it is not.

One problem for the regularity interpretation is that Hume often writes about laws as if they govern nature. So, for example, he tells us that the motions of the planets are "governed and directed" by Newtonian laws and forces (EHU 1.15; SBN 14), which is not what we would expect if he were a regularity theorist. Hume repeatedly expresses the thought that laws govern the world. "Every thing is surely governed by steady, inviolable laws," Philo tells us (DNR 6.12; 72). The most refined theists say "general laws" are that "by which nature is governed" (NHR 6.2). In his own voice, Hume writes, "There is no one event, however important to us, which he (*scil.* God) has exempted from the general laws that govern the universe, or which he has peculiarly reserved for his own immediate action and operation" ("Suicide," 581), and "the winds, rain, clouds, and other variations of the weather are supposed to be governed by steady principles; though not easily discoverable by human sagacity and enquiry" (EHU 8.15; SBN 88, see also T 1.4.1.10; SBN 185, EPM 6.5; SBN 236).

In addition, Hume distinguishes between the marvelous, which are unusual events (EHU 10.8; SBN 113) and the miraculous, which are violations of the laws of nature (EHU 10.12; SBN 114). According to Hume, we ought to diminish our confidence in the marvelous "in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual" (EHU 10.8; SBN 113) but we have a kind of "proof" against what "is really miraculous" (EHU 10.11; SBN 114). So, for example, in telling the history of Joan of Arc, Hume writes,

> It is the business of history to distinguish between the *miraculous* and the *marvellous;* to reject the first in all narrations merely profane and human; to doubt the second; and when obliged by unquestionable testimony, as in the present case, to admit of something extraordinary, to receive as little of it as is consistent with the known facts and circumstances. (H 2.398)

That a young, low-born woman would appear at the head of a French army and turn the tide of a war is unprecedented, but not miraculous. If, however, Hume thinks of laws of nature as mere regularities, then, as Antony Flew argues, it would be "impossible for Hume himself to justify a distinction between the marvelous or the unusual and the truly miraculous" (*Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 204).

Another difficulty with attributing a regularity theory to Hume is that it does not seem to fit with his argument in the section on miracles. The tension is well known and much discussed. Hume defines a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature" (EHU 10.12; SBN 114), and then says it "may be accurately defined" as "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent" (EHU 10.12n23; SBN 115n1). Many commentators on Hume assume with John Earman that "whatever else a law of nature is, it is an exceptionless regularity" (*Hume's Abject Failure*, 8). If they are exceptionless regularities, then there are not exceptions to them, and Hume did not need "a complicated essay on the credibility of miracle stories" to show that (ibid.).[3]

There are two issues here, one philosophical and one interpretive. The philosophical puzzle is making clear to ourselves what we might mean by a violation of the laws of nature. Alastair McKinnon argues that miracles are incompatible with "the current scientific use of *natural law*" ("'Miracle' and 'Paradox,'" 309) as entirely accurate descriptions of what happens in the world. If laws of nature describe "the actual course of events," then "someone who insisted upon describing an event as a miracle would be in the rather odd position of claiming that its occurrence was contrary to the actual course of events" (ibid.).[4]

The interpretive puzzle is how to make Hume's argumentative practice compatible with his definition of miracles. Norman Swartz accuses him of contradicting himself:

> *If* physical laws are 'constant conjunctions' (Hume's own words in "On Miracles"), then it is *logically* impossible that a physical law should be 'violated.' Nothing can be both 'constant' and 'violated,' that is, without exception and with exception. If Hume is going to allow that it is possible that a physical law should be violated, then he cannot, with consistency, define physical laws to be constant conjunctions. (*Concept of Physical Law*, 108)

Swartz has found a hypothetical contradiction here, and it is true that Hume defines causes as constant conjunctions, but it is not true that he defines laws in that way. Hume does not offer an explicit definition of laws of nature in the *Enquiry* (Millican, "Twenty Questions," 169).

The standard solution to this puzzle among Hume scholars is to say that he has a subjective account of laws of nature, at least in this context. Thus, Don Garrett argues that by a "law of nature," Hume means something relative to "*an individual's cognitive organization* . . . for which the individual has, within his or her experience, *a proof*" (*Cognition and Commitment*, 153).[5] As Garrett concedes (*Cognition and Commitment*, 252–53n7), however, such an account is in tension with Hume's discussion of the miraculously raised feather. If a feather moves in a way inconsistently with Newton's Second Law, then it violates a law of nature, whether or not

anyone notices it.[6] The raising of a feather with insufficient force is a miracle, even "though not so sensible with regard to us" (EHU 10.12n23; SBN 115n1). The example of the excessively lifted feather rising suggests that Hume has an objective account of laws of nature in mind, that is, an account of the laws of nature that makes their violation independent of what any human being thinks, perceives, feels, or knows.

One could say, as Garrett does (*Cognition and Commitment*, 252–53n7), that Hume adopts a subjective definition in the body of the text and an objective one in the footnote with the feather, or come up with another way to make the letter of the subjective account of laws compatible with the footnote. Such maneuvers ignore the spirit of the text. Hume would not go out of his way to emphasize the objectivity and possible imperceptibility of miracles if he had a subjective definition of laws of nature in mind.[7] In the footnote, Hume warns us off a certain misunderstanding, and Garrett chooses not to heed that warning. Subjective account of Hume on laws of nature are, moreover, incompatible with all the passages where he describes them as governing the things that fall under them. As Robert Larmer writes, "for Hume the question of whether an event is in fact a miracle is determined by whether it is actually a transgression of a law of nature by a supernatural agent not . . . by the epistemic state of observers" ("Philosophical Fiasco," 100).

This picture of Humean laws of nature as objective, governing, and conceivably violated is confirmed by Hume's discussion of the laws of nature as a source of suffering. In presenting the evidential problem of evil in part 11 of the *Dialogues,* Philo lists four features of the actual universe that a perfectly benevolent God would probably not have added. The second circumstance is "the conducting of the world by general laws; and this seems nowise necessary to a very perfect being" (DNR 11.7; 108). In describing the contingency of this fact, Philo gives a hypothetically morally perfect God two alternatives to the present situation, a heavy intervention where God acts entirely through particular volitions rather than through general laws, and a light intervention in which God applies general laws to the world and occasionally uses particular volitions to change the imperceptible states that the laws act upon.

In the heavy intervention, God does nothing through laws and instead acts on a case-by-case basis. Philo concedes that undoing the general laws of nature would upend the regularities that they entail: "if every thing were conducted by particular volitions, the course of nature would be perpetually broken, and no man could employ his reason in the conduct of life" (ibid.). The concession is that a world governed by particular volitions instead of laws would not have enough salient regularities to underwrite causal inferences. After raising this objection, Philo asks, "But might not other particular volitions remedy this inconvenience? In short, might not the Deity exterminate all ill, wherever it were to be found; and produce all good, without any preparation or long progress of causes and effects?" (ibid.). That is, God could immediately tell us what we would have only inferred under a system of laws and, more generally, immediately give us every other benefit that we might derive from the laws (Ryan, "Philo's Second Circumstance," 8–9).

In the light intervention God usually governs the world through laws, but also occasionally throws in some particular volitions that lead to happy consequences. Hume supposes that God

could imperceptibly break the laws of nature by fiddling with hidden causes, in something like the way that he could raise a feather higher than the forces upon it would entail. Accordingly, he has Philo argue, "a Being, therefore, who knows the secret springs of the universe, might easily, by particular volitions, turn all these accidents to the good of mankind, and render the whole world happy, without discovering himself in any operation" (DNR 11.7; 108). For example, "some small touches, given to Caligula's brain in his infancy, might have converted him into a Trajan" (DNR 11.7; 109). Philo tells us, "a few such events as these, regularly and wisely conducted, would change the face of the world; and yet would no more seem to disturb the course of nature or confound human conduct, than the present œconomy of things, where the causes are secret, and variable, and compounded" (DNR 11.7; 108–109). After God changes a secret spring, nature runs in its usual course, and the new accident is followed by its lawful consequences. These well-chosen miracles break the general laws by modifying some state of the world in an inconspicuous way that does not interfere with our reasoning. No one would be able to tell that a miracle had occurred, and we would confidently continue to rely on the uniformity of nature in our inferences (Ryan, "Philo's Second Circumstance," 9–11). Once a new state is in place, the general laws apply to it and carry on with the course of nature, but with more pleasant results than we would have had otherwise.

Philo's description of a light intervention in the course of nature is useful for us because it shows us how Hume thinks things ordinarily run. (In this context, we have no reason to doubt that Philo speaks for Hume.) Hume assumes that microphysical states of the world do not deductively entail later states of the world without supplementation from the laws of nature. If there were a demonstrative connection between one state and the next, then the relation between one state and the next would be "eternal and inflexible, even by the will of the Supreme Being" (EPM Ap. 1.21; SBN 294). Only if one of these states does not entail the next can God intervene in the chain without changing a chain of preceding states.

According to Hume, the world is governed by laws of nature that apply to microphysical states in a way that generates a regular course of nature and allows us to make causal inferences. His treatment of the exceptionless workings of laws as a source of misery is incompatible with treating him as a subjectivist about laws, because the laws are supposed to apply to imperceptibly small states and because he explicitly allows for the possibility that they might be violated without anyone knowing that they had been violated. It is incompatible with treating him as a regularity theorist because he allows for the conceptual possibility of violations of the laws of nature.

It is a standard trope among philosophers of science that on a Humean picture of the laws of nature, God creates a mosaic of states of affairs and does not, in addition, will the laws of nature into being. According to Matthias Frisch ("Laws in Physics," 36), for example, "the Humean God is not a law-giver but rather a pointillist painter, who set himself the . . . task of sprinkling the universe's four-dimensional space-time canvas with particular matters of fact.[8] In light of this standard way of explaining 'Humeanism,' it is noteworthy that Hume is not Humean. For him, the laws of nature are something distinct from the states that fall under them. Their being imposed on those states is one of the four main causes of misery.

They must be something more than phenomenal patterns as observed by us, since God could break them while keeping up appearances.

Fair readers will grant that Hume talks as if laws govern the world and that he seems to allow for the conceptual possibility of violations of the laws of nature. Nor will they deny that the footnote in the essay on miracles and his discussion of the misery caused by the application of laws of nature to secret springs suggest that he thinks of the laws of nature as objective matters of fact. I doubt that they will claim that they have good texts that show the opposite. They may point to Hume's definition of causes as elements of regularities and interpret by analogy, but there is nothing more direct to point to. Still, I suspect, these points might not be enough to persuade. Part of the problem is that the force of custom favors customary interpretations. Beyond that, however, people might wonder how Hume might have ever come to the thought that the laws of nature go beyond codifying regularities and our reactions to them.

So, I owe the reader an account of how Hume came to think of laws of nature in this way. I will argue that he took the standard, contemporary, theologically rooted picture of laws of nature and modified it with skepticism and impiety. I will try to give a close and responsible reading of enough texts to make my interpretation seem plausible, interesting, and important.

## 3. Laws as General Volitions of God

Let us return to the problem of finding the conception of laws that allows Hume to define miracles as violations of them. McKinnon emphasizes that his argument against miracles rests on a "modern" conception of laws of nature ("'Miracle' and 'Paradox'," 309). Our interpretive puzzle will be more tractable if we start looking at conceptions of laws that were more common in early modern Europe.

Normally, philosophers adopt their concepts and presuppositions from the surrounding culture, modify them, and fit them into their picture of the world. Of course, sometimes they argue for wholly new conceptions, but Hume's conception of laws, unlike his analyses of causation, is not a conclusion that he argues for in a stretch of text. Instead, he appeals to the concept of law in discussing other things: whether we have good reasons to believe in miracles, the problem of evil, whether suicide is against our duty to God, and so on. Hume writes about the laws of nature in these contexts and assumes that his readers will know what he is talking about. As a starting point at least, we ought to look at how laws of nature are usually conceived of in the early modern period.

One important root of the concept of a law of nature lies in the Greek axiomatic ideal, which extends into the medieval period. Jane Ruby ("Origins of Scientific 'Law'") has shown that the modern use of law emerges as an expression for fundamental principles in the mixed sciences of optics and astronomy and the pure science of logic by the time of the sixteenth century. Out of the materials that she gives us, we can reconstruct a definition of laws as the actual or potential axioms of a science. Isaac Newton's *Principia* is written in a Euclidean axiomatic form, and he introduces his laws of motion with the expression "Axiomata sive Leges Motus," Axioms, that is to say, Laws of Motion (*Principia* 13=*CW* 416).[9]

Recent philosophers of science often distinguish between law statements from the laws of nature that make these statements true. The axiomatic conception of laws of nature is an account of law statements and is compatible with many different accounts of the worldly facts that make them true. Descartes is the foundational figure for the standard early modern account of the laws of nature in the worldly sense. On this account, laws of nature are general commands of God.[10] Francis Oakley speaks for the majority of historians of ideas:

> When Descartes spoke of God's having imposed laws upon all he really had to do, therefore, was to transfer from order into the realm of natural philosophy the well-established logical doctrine of an omnipotent Legislator-God, whose will lies at the very heart, not only of the divine laws revealed Scriptures, but also of that natural law to which right reason unswerving. ("Christian Theology and the Newtonian Science," 441)

Descartes's view that laws of nature are expressions of God's will is common in the British Isles in the era between Newton's *Principia* and Hume's *Treatise*. So, for example, Richard Bentley argues in the inaugural Boyle lectures,

> That this Gravity, the great Basis of all Mechanism, is not it self Mechanical; but the immediate Fiat and Finger of God, and the Execution of the Divine Law; and that Bodies have not the power of tending towards a Centre, either from other Bodies or from themselves: which at once; if it be proved, will undermine and ruine all the Towers and Batteries that the Atheists have raised against Heaven. (*A Confutation of Atheism*, 6)

Bentley goes on to argue that since universal gravitation cannot be explained mechanically, it must therefore proceed "from a higher principle, a Divine energy and impression (*7th Sermon*, 32).[11] Samuel Clarke defines "the course of nature" as "the will of God producing certain effects in a continued, regular, constant, and uniform manner," and then, similarly to Hume, defines miracle as "an effect produced contrary to the usual course or order of nature by the unusual interposition of some intelligent being superior to men" (EV 149–50).[12] Berkeley fits into this tradition as well. For him, "the set rules or established methods, wherein the mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense, are called the *Laws of Nature*: and these we learn by experience" (*Principles*, Part I §30).[13] The doctrine that the laws of nature are the free volitions of God and the doctrine that they are discovered by experience are the background against which Hume's arguments are set.

Hume borrows some conceptual terminology from one particular figure in this tradition of thinking of laws theologically. Hume's more precise definition of a miracle is "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity" (EHU 10.12n23; SBN 115n1). The formula, "a particular volition of the Deity," is a piece of jargon that alludes to Malebranche's theory of God's agency.[14] For Malebranche, general volitions are laws of nature, while particular

volitions are miracles and other unlawlike events. In speaking of God's activity, Malebranche tells Arnauld that "acting by general *volitions* and acting according to general *laws*" amount to "the same thing" (OC 8.651).[15] In contrast, "God acts by particular volitions when the efficacy of his will is not at all determined by some general law to produce some effect" (TNG 1st Clarification §2=*OC* 5.147–48).[16] For Malebranche, after the first days of creation, particular volitions would be miracles (OC 8.696).[17]

Malebranche's account makes miracles intelligible in a tidy way. Laws of nature are general volitions of God, and, if he pleases, he can supplement these with particular volitions that violate these general volitions, in something like the way I can form a general volition to exercise in the morning and I can also skip exercising on some particular morning if I choose. To the extent that Hume borrows Malebranche's conceptual apparatus, he can intelligibly define miracles as violations of the laws of nature. He could likewise distinguish between miraculous events that run contrary to the general volitions of God and merely marvelous, unprecedented events.

Hume refers to particular volitions six times in his corpus, always in connection with God's acting outside the laws of nature. As we have seen, in part 11 of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,* Hume discusses particular volitions both in considering the hypothesis that, instead of acting through laws, God might do everything through particular volitions, and also in considering the hypothesis that God might lightly intervene with particular volitions where "causes are unknown and variable" from our point of view (DNR 11.7–8; 108–109). In the *Natural History of Religion*, Hume sympathetically describes the religion of zealous and refined theists according to whom God fixes general laws and does not disturb those laws through particular volitions (NHR 6.2). In "Of Suicide," Hume depreciates particular volitions of God. He identifies them with miracles, contrasts them with the laws of nature, and doubts that they ever occur: "Nature still continues her progress and operation; and if general laws be ever broke by particular volitions of the deity, 'tis after a manner which entirely escapes human observation" ("Suicide," 581).

In the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,* Hume considers regimes that follow the principle that virtue should be proportionately rewarded with possessions. Such a principle would be disastrous if carried out by humans, but "in a perfect theocracy, where a being, infinitely intelligent, governs by particular volitions, this rule would certainly have place, and might serve to the wisest purposes" (EPM 3.23; SBN 193). Hume is imagining a God who does not work through amoral general laws but instead distributes property in proportion to virtue with each individual evaluated and rewarded separately.

In the first *Enquiry*, Hume takes the jargon of particular volitions, makes it his own, and turns it unfairly against its inventor. The point of Malebranche's distinction between general volitions and particular volitions is to contrast God's ordinary activity through laws and his extraordinary activity in cases such as miracles. For Hume, a particular volition of God is any deviation from the ordinary order of laws, and Hume thinks it would be extraordinary if God's activity deprived ordinary objects of causal power. Because occasionalists deny that

ordinary objects have causal powers, Hume concludes that their God only acts through particular volitions:

> They pretend, that those objects, which are commonly denominated *causes*, are in reality nothing but *occasions*; and that the true and direct principle of every effect is not any power or force in nature, but a volition of the Supreme Being, who wills, that such particular objects should, for ever, be conjoined with each other. Instead of saying, that one billiard-ball moves another, by a force, which it has derived from the author of nature; it is the Deity himself, they say, who, by a particular volition, moves the second ball, being determined to this operation by the impulse of the first ball; in consequence of those general laws, which he has laid down to himself in the government of the universe. (EHU 7.21; SBN 70)

For Malebranche, the divine volitions that constitute the laws of nature are not particular volitions. Hume seems to be thinking that if events in Malebranche's system are not caused by ordinary events, then they must be caused by divine interventions through particular volitions. Hume thus tacitly accepts an inference that Leibniz drew: if we treat God as the only cause, "without there being any other explanation that can be drawn from the order of secondary causes, this is literally resorting to a miracle" (L 457=G 4.483; see Ott, *Causation and Laws of Nature*, 102n2).

Nothing in section 10 of the first *Enquiry* commits Hume to the existence of God. He's arguing against theists who believe the miracle stories of the Bible. In that context, it makes perfect sense to assume for the sake of argument that laws are general volitions of God, even if Hume does not believe it himself. Similarly, though Hume is committed to saying that a feather that moves incompatibly with Newton's second law violates a law of nature, whether anyone notices it or not, that does not commit him to the further claim that laws are general volitions of God. Laws of nature could be objective and conceivably violated without being derived from God.

Even so, there are passages in the *Natural History of Religion,* the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,* and "Of Suicide" that make it worthwhile to ask, to what extent, if at all, does Hume endorse Malebranche's picture of laws as general volitions of God?

On the one hand, Hume thinks that insofar as there is such a thing as rational religion, one of its main justifications is the exceptionless operation of the laws of nature. He also thinks that insofar as there is such a thing as the providential will of God, it is expressed by these laws. On the other hand, although Hume thinks that there is an objective order in the world and it is reasonable to infer that this order has a source, he also thinks that the source of this order will be significantly unlike a human mind, and so it will be reasonable not to call this source 'God.' This answer is a little complicated, but once we work through the details, we will know how Hume came to think of laws as objective governing principles that could be conceivably violated by miracles.

## 4. Rational Religion in The Natural History

In *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume argues that religion as we find it in human societies does not arise from rational inference. In the course of offering this argument, he describes what a rational religion would look like and the place of laws of nature in justifying such a religion. The *Natural History* begins with his distinction between religion's "foundation in reason" and "its origin in human nature"—in effect, between the rational grounds for theism and the anthropological causes of religion as it is actually practiced and believed (NHR Intro). The book is about the second, anthropological question,[18] and on the way to addressing it, Hume says that the question of the rational grounds of religion allows for "the clearest solution," namely, "the whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion" (ibid.).[19]

Hume's quick solution to the problem of rational religion serves two rhetorical purposes. First, it allows him to clarify the historical and sociological project of his book by way of contrast with the problem that he has just set aside (Falkenstein, "Hume's Project," 15–16). Second, by declaring that the argument from design is obviously persuasive and justifies the first principles of theism, Hume can dodge some accusations of impiety that would inevitably accompany his non-rational account of the origins of actual religion. If all that Hume had to say on the subject of religion were that it originates out of superstition and error, he would have been wise to sugarcoat that message with praise for the argument from design.

It is worth noting, however, that the attractiveness of the design argument is a load-bearing element of Hume's larger argument in the *Natural History.* He wants to show that monotheism arises out of polytheism by a slow progression. As a rival hypothesis, he considers the possibility that early people discovered design in the world as a whole, then inferred a creator god, and that this belief was later corrupted into the polytheism that we find in early recorded history. Against this, Hume argues as follows:

> If men were at first led into the belief of one Supreme Being, by reasoning from the frame of nature, they could never possibly leave that belief, in order to embrace polytheism; but the same principles of reason, which at first produced and diffused over mankind, so magnificent an opinion, must be able, with greater facility, to preserve it. (NHR 1.7)

Set aside for the moment whether Hume genuinely believes that monotheism is a magnificent opinion. The anthropological point of the argument is that discovering and accepting the argument from design in the universe as a whole is more difficult than retaining that argument once it has been discovered, so monotheism probably was not discovered through a rational argument and then corrupted. That would be a deeply misleading argument, if he thought that the argument from the frame of nature for monotheism were a mere fallacy (Yoder, *Hume on God*, 85).

Hume argues that religion originally arises from our tendency to anthropomorphism, and monotheism arises out of an inclination to flatter a particularly important local god (NHR 3.2–5, 6.5–6).[20] He defends his account against the rival story that most people are monotheists for rational reasons.

As part of this defense, Hume gives further details about the kind of theism that would be justified by the argument from design. On this account, God fixes the laws of nature and does not intervene with miracles:

> Many theists, even the most zealous and refined, have denied a *particular* providence, and have asserted, that the Sovereign mind or first principle of all things, having fixed general laws, by which nature is governed, gives free and uninterrupted course to these laws, and disturbs not, at every turn, the settled order of events by particular volitions. From the beautiful connexion, say they, and rigid observance of established rules, we draw the chief argument for theism; and from the same principles are enabled to answer the principal objections against it. (NHR 6.2)

According to these zealous and refined theists, God chooses general laws and does not rely on particular volitions, and the exceptionless operation of these laws is the best evidence for theism (Marušić, "Hume's Attack on Popular Religion," 730–33).

Hume associates this philosophical religion with Bacon's dictum, "a little philosophy makes men atheists: A great deal reconciles them to religion" (NHR 6.2).[21] Hume explains,

> For men, being taught, by superstitious prejudices, to lay the stress on a wrong place; when that fails them, and they discover, by a little reflection, that the course of nature is regular and uniform, their whole faith totters, and falls to ruin. But being taught, by more reflection that this very regularity and uniformity is the strongest proof of design and of a supreme intelligence, they return to that belief, which they had deserted; and they are now able to establish it on a firmer and more durable basis. (Ibid.)

It is worth noting that this was Bacon's original point. The implausibility of miracle stories leads us away from religion, and the uniformity of nature leads us back to it. According to Bacon,

> I had rather believe all the fables in the Legend, and the Talmud, and the Alcoran, than that this universal frame is without a mind. And therefore God never wrought miracle to convince atheism, because his ordinary works convince it. It is true, that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion. For while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no further; but when it beholdeth the chain of them, confederate and linked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity. ("Atheism," 371)

"The Legend" is a medieval collection of miracle stories. "Convince" here has its original sense of *overcome*. For Bacon, a little philosophy teaches us not to believe in miracles. More philosophy teaches us that the exceptionless order of the world is a good argument for theism.

The new science and its laws could be a poisoned pawn for those seeking to shore up faith in Christianity. If you believe in God only because of grand regularities that you find in nature, you will be less inclined to think that those laws have exceptions (Marušić, "Hume's Attack on Popular Religion," 733). Someone who denies that the laws of nature are ever violated rejects miracles, and someone who rejects miracles rejects the reliability of the Bible and the occurrence of the Resurrection. British natural philosophers who defended the existence of God on the basis of the order revealed in nature and mocked Catholics for their superstition were pushed to what Eamon Duffy calls "a sort of religious schizophrenia" ("Miracle, Science, and Orthodoxy," 252) by their view that Jesus' nature was revealed and his doctrines were justified by the miracles that he carried out.

The absence of miracles in this zealous and refined religion has an argumentative role. If religion based on reason does not have miracles in it, then religion as it stands in eighteenth-century Europe is not rational, since it gives a central place to miracles in the Old and New Testaments. According to Hume, ordinary people do not see the merits of philosophical religion and accuse its followers "of the grossest infidelity" (NHR 6.2). Instead of appealing to the design argument, they point to human suffering as an explanation of why they believe in God (NHR 6.1). For good reasoners, these are the "chief difficulties" against believing in a supreme intelligence (ibid.).

This does not work as a merely hypothetical concession to a theistic reader. The point of the argument is that contemporary theism is not derived from rational argument, since, if it were, it would not have miracles or particular providence[22] in it. That's a rickety argument to offer, if you do not think that any form of theism can be justified by rational argument.

Hume is returning to the rational religion that he endorses (or apparently endorses) in the opening paragraph of the *Natural History,* and he is filling in details. The explicit absence of miracles in the view undermines the hypothesis that he only endorses it as a smokescreen to avoid persecution. In Note G of the *Natural History,* Hume advances the principle that "no political devotee" is ever a heretic for their times. He justifies this principle by arguing that there is no profit in being insincere for a heresy. On the basis of this premise, he argues that Xenophon believed in pagan superstition and Locke, Newton and Clarke were Arians and not atheists (NHR 12.23n78). If we apply the principle to Hume himself, it suggests that he is a sincere advocate of the philosophical religion that he sympathetically describes. He tells us that rational religion is obviously true and that rejecting miracles is an essential part of rational religion. To reject miracles is to heretically reject the resurrection, and, according to Hume, no one lies for a heresy.

## 5. God's Will in "Of Suicide"

In the first and longest part of "Of Suicide," Hume argues that if suicide is contrary to a duty towards God, then it is contrary to God's will as expressed in Providence. But nothing that happens is contrary to Providence, since God carries out his plan through exceptionless laws. On this view of God's will, everything that happens accords with it: "Providence guided all these causes, and nothing happens in the universe without its consent and co-operation. If so, then neither does my death, however voluntary, happen without its consent" ("Suicide," 585).[23] Hume argues that suicide is not contrary to God's will, since it is not contrary to the laws of nature. The argument only makes sense if he is aligning the laws of nature with God's will.

Indeed, according to Hume, we can think of everything that happens as something that God does. God "governs every thing by those general and immutable laws" and therefore "all events, in one sense, may be pronounced the action of the almighty" ("Suicide," 581).[24] Since everything is the action of God in this sense, "When I fall upon my own sword, therefore, I receive my death equally from the hands of the deity, as if it had proceeded from a lion, a precipice, or a fever" ("Suicide," 584). Since nothing God does is contrary to our duty to him, no actual suicide can be contrary to our duty to God.

At one point in the essay, Hume's argument seems to go off the rails. He argues, "It would be no crime in me to divert the *Nile* or *Danube* from its course, were I able to effect such purposes. Where then is the crime of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channels!" ("Suicide," 583). Of course, most stabbings are crimes, and if Hume's premises imply that there's nothing wrong with stabbing another person then at least one of the premises is false. In context, Hume's point is that diversions of blood are not crimes against God (Holden, "Religion and Moral Prohibition," 200–202). If they were, they would be contrary to Providence, which is enacted by the laws of nature and which no human action can violate, not even large public works that alter the face of nature.[25]

That clarification notwithstanding, it may seem that Hume is still confused. When most people say that something is contrary to God's will, they do not mean that it violates the laws of nature. They suppose that God has certain preferences about how we should act, and the prohibited act is contrary to those preferences. If Hume were merely trying to show that suicide is not contrary to the will of God as contemporary theists understand that will, then the argument does not work.

But Hume is speaking in his own voice and not for the sake of common religion. On his view, something is contrary to our duty to God if it is contrary to the will of God, and the will of God (if there is a God) is expressed by the laws of nature. For Hume, "it is a kind of blasphemy to imagine, that any created being can disturb the order of the world, or invade the business of providence" ("Suicide," 586). Hume's God is not interested in your praise, he is not testing you, and he will not exchange rewards for penance, poverty, or pointless suffering. Insofar as he cares about what you do, you'll do what he wants, because your actions have been determined by divine laws of nature.

Of course, Hume is not a divine command theorist about ethics. His ethical view is propounded in Book 3 of the *Treatise* and in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,* and, according to it, our distinctions between right and wrong and our distinctions between virtue and vice rest ultimately on whether actions produce happiness or suffering in ourselves or others. In accordance with that theory, the remainder of Hume's essay on suicide aims at showing that there are circumstances in which suicide does not harm society and circumstances where it is not a misfortune for the one who commits it. Whether an act of suicide violates God's laws does not come into Hume's ultimate evaluation. He does not think that any of our actions do, but even if they did, it would not matter on his ethical theory.

## 6. God and the Success of Simple Methods

Hume most directly tackles the problem of the source of order in the universe in part 12 of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Philo declares his "unfeigned sentiments on this subject" of natural religion (DNR 12.9; 121), namely, that "a purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, stupid thinker" (DNR 12.2; 116). For Philo, the principle that nature works by the simplest methods needs an explanation, as does the complexity of biological organisms. The best explanation of these features of universe is something both like and unlike a mind, a middling resemblance that makes it arbitrary whether we should call this cause God.

At the end of part 10, Philo offers another important exposition of what he really thinks. When it comes to the evidential argument from evil, "Here, Cleanthes, I find myself at ease in my argument. Here I triumph" (DNR 10.36; 104). In contrast,

> when we argued concerning the natural attributes of intelligence and design, I needed all my skeptical and metaphysical subtilty to elude your grasp. In many views of the universe, and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strikes us with such irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms; nor can we then imagine how it was ever possible for us to repose any weight on them. (Ibid.)

Philo's considered evaluation is that he has the better side of the debate when it comes to the problem of evil, and Cleanthes has the better side of the debate when it comes to the argument from design (Yoder, *Hume on God*, 108–109). Notice that Hume distinguishes between the argument for design as it applies to a view of the whole universe and as it applies to its parts (Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 12–17). According to Philo, the version of the argument from design that appeals to the parts of the universe (that is to say, from apparent design in biological structures) is stronger than the version of the argument that applies to the whole world (that is to say, from the simplicity of the order of nature). For illuminating Hume's conception of laws of nature, however, the second argument is the important one. Philo argues from the simplicity of the laws of nature to the existence of an intelligent author of those laws.

In the *Treatise,* Hume treats Copernicus's victory in astronomy as a victory for simplicity in science:

> Here, therefore, moral philosophy is in the same condition as natural, with regard to astronomy before the time of *Copernicus.* The antients, tho' sensible of that maxim, *that nature does nothing in vain,* contriv'd such intricate systems of the heavens, as seem'd inconsistent with true philosophy, and gave place at last to something more simple and natural. To invent without scruple a new principle to every new phænomenon, instead of adapting it to the old; to overload our hypotheses with a variety of this kind; are certain proofs, that none of these principles is the just one, and that we only desire, by a number of falshoods, to cover our ignorance of the truth. (T 2.1.3.7; SBN 282)

Nature is governed by few principles, Hume argues, so the simplicity of an empirically adequate theory is evidence of truth, in both astronomy and moral psychology.[26]

In part 12 of the *Dialogues*, after arguing that the practice of anatomists illustrates the principle that nature does nothing in vain, Philo argues from this methodological premise to the existence of God:

> One great foundation of the Copernican system is the maxim, *that nature acts by the simplest methods, and chooses the most proper means to any end*; and astronomers often, without thinking of it, lay this strong foundation of piety and religion. [The same thing is observable in other parts of philosophy: And] thus all the sciences almost lead us insensibly to acknowledge a first intelligent Author; and their authority is often so much the greater, as they do not directly profess that intention. (DNR 12.2; 116–17)[27]

I take the argument to run as follows:

1. If Copernicanism is true, then nature acts by the simplest methods.
2. If nature acts by the simplest methods, then there is an intelligent designer.
3. Copernicanism is true.

So, 4. There is an intelligent designer.

Suppose that there were no source of order in the world, neither a source of order internal to the things, nor a source of order outside of the things. That is, suppose that there is just an array of things with qualities at times and places and no explanatory connection between things at one time and place and things at another time and place, either when this connection is understood to arise from the things themselves or to be imposed on them from outside. On such a hypothesis, we would expect the objects and their qualities to be arranged higgledy-piggledy, with no discernible patterns. Hume's appeal to simplicity in astronomy

is an argument that we do not live in a higgledy-piggledy world. If we did, then simplicity would not be a guide to truth. But it is a guide to truth, since there are patterns in the world.[28]

As a matter of fact, it is not obviously true that Copernicus's system is simpler than Ptolemy's. In order to explain the celestial longitudes of the heavenly bodies, Copernicus required 18 circles and Ptolemy only needed fifteen (Gingerich, "The Copernican Revolution," 86–88). If we take the long view of the Copernican Revolution up to *Principia* in 1687, and we think of simplicity as a matter of reducing a theory to a simpler axiomatic base, Newton eventually explains the phenomena from a handful of simple laws in a way that Ptolemy had not. In a passage from the first *Enquiry* that I have cited four times already, Hume describes this development as follows:

> Astronomers had long contented themselves with proving, from the phaenomena, the true motions, order, and magnitude of the heavenly bodies: Till a philosopher, at last, arose, who seems, from the happiest reasoning, to have also determined the laws and forces, by which the revolutions of the planets are governed and directed. (EHU 1.15; SBN 14)

In that spirit, Hume declares that recent British discoveries in natural philosophy depend on the method of rendering "all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes" (T Intro; SBN xvii) and that imitating this method might lead to progress in the study of human nature. In the *Dialogues,* Philo seems to identify this method with philosophy itself (DNR 1.9; 36).

It is not *a priori* obvious that such a method will lead to success. There have to be simple principles out there to discover. The fact that the method does work tells us something about the universe.

Thinking about the issue schematically, such patterns could arise in two ways. They could arise from the things, or they could be imposed upon the things. But Hume has strenuous doubts about the existence of intelligible, explanatory relations among the things themselves. The basic problem is that we can always conceive of the cause without any particular effect: "If we reason *a priori*, any thing may appear able to produce any thing. The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun" (EHU 12.29; SBN 164). Since we can conceive of any cause as being followed by any effect, and since Hume thinks that conceivability entails possibility (EHU 4.2; SBN 25), it follows that there cannot be a conceivable, deductively valid inference from cause to effect. In the *Treatise,* he argues that if we ascribe "any real intelligible connexion" between objects, then we ascribe them to something that "is incompatible with those objects" (T 1.3.14.27; SBN 168).[29]

We might suppose that Hume does not need deductive necessity between cause and effect for the patterns to arise from the things and a weaker, physical necessity might suffice. But Hume has an account of physical necessity. Our idea of that sort of necessity signifies a regularity that produces an associative connection between perceptions of cause and effect (EHU 7.28–9; SBN 75–77). The regularity is the phenomenon that we are trying to explain

by appealing to a real relation between objects, and we cannot explain that relation by the regularity in turn. If the patterns we see in the world need explanation, and they do not arise from the objects in the patterns, then they are imposed from the outside. And that is what Philo concludes from the astronomical patterns that we observe.[30]

When Hume is a student at Edinburgh, he is probably assigned John Keill's *Introductio ad Veram Physicam* (Barfoot, "Hume and the Culture of Science," 152). Newton's first hypothesis in the first edition of *Principia* is "no more causes of natural things should be admitted than are both true and sufficient to explain their phenomena" (*Principia* 402=CW 794). Keill takes that hypothesis, turns it into an axiom, and gives it a theological underpinning: "The causes of natural things are those that are simplest and suffice to explain the phenomena: for nature always proceeds in the simplest and most expeditious method, because in this way of working the Divine Wisdom reveals itself better" (*Introductio* 79=*Introduction* 89).[31] Insofar as Philo speaks for Hume, Hume is sympathetic to the thought that Newtonian simplicity is grounded in something like God.

## 7. Humean Ideas of Laws of Nature

The reader may wonder how my interpretation fits with Hume's copy principle and his theory of ideas.[32] After all, analyzing our ideas of causation and tracing the origin of our ideas of necessity seem to lead Hume to a regularity theory of causation. We might think that a similar process would lead him to a regularity theory of laws. Tim Maudlin, for example, reconstructs the reasoning behind Hume's putative regularity theory of laws as follows:

> Hume begins by investigating the notion of cause and effect and finds within it a notion of necessary connection between events. He then worries about giving an empiricist account of the origin (and hence content!) of the idea of this necessary connection and finds that he is led either to constant conjunction between events or to a subjective sensation that accompanies an inference bred of long experience of constant conjunction. The 'necessity' must reduce to either to mere pattern or to a purely subjective sensation, and in neither case pertains solely to the two events thought to be necessarily conjoined. Although Hume does not focus so intently on the motion (*sic*) of a law of nature, the natural implication is that laws can be nothing but patterns of events either. (*Metaphysics Within Physics*, 20)

Granting that Maudlin has properly understood the roots of Hume's regularity account of causation, would similar reasoning inevitably lead Hume to a regularity theory of laws?

Hume does believe that the laws of nature are necessary. He implies that he believes that human actions are "subjected to the same laws of necessity with the operations of matter" (EHU 8.32; SBN 99). Since he thinks that laws are empirically discovered matters of fact (T 1.4.5.30; SBN 247–48, EHU 4.13; SBN 31–32), the relevant necessity must be the physical necessity described in section 7 of the first *Enquiry,* as opposed to the deductive necessity that is the

hallmark of relations of ideas. So, laws of nature are physically necessary, and this physical necessity consists in the constant conjunction of their instances or in the tendency of the mind to make inferences anticipating the outcomes of those laws (EHU 7.28–30; SBN 75–79).

But what we mean when we say that the laws of nature are physically necessary is secondary for our purposes. A general law can fall under Hume's idea of physical necessity and still govern the world, be objective, and be theoretically susceptible to violations. All that is required for a law to be necessary is for it to be regular and for it to be accompanied by certain inferences.

When the zealous and refined defenders of rational theology in the *Natural History* infer the existence of God from the unbroken course of the laws of nature, they are not making a point about the necessity of the laws. Rather, they are making an inference from their actually exceptionless character to their source. In the *Treatise,* Hume says that we do not need a distinct idea of God's own force or necessity to infer his existence from the order in the universe:

> The order of the universe proves an omnipotent mind; that is, a mind whose will is *constantly attended* with the obedience of every creature and being. Nothing more is requisite to give a foundation to all the articles of religion, nor is it necessary we shou'd form a distinct idea of the force and energy of the supreme Being. (T 1.3.14.12n.30; SBN 633n1)

For Hume, the order in the universe requires an explanation, whether or not our conception of the source of this order is accompanied by a peculiar idea of power.

A critic may retort that the relevant problem here is not whether or how Hume's idea of physical necessity applies to the laws of nature, but rather what sort of story he would tell about the origin of our idea of a law of nature. Does he suppose that this idea is simple or complex, and, if simple, what impression gives rise to it? Let me give Humean accounts of the two main early modern ways of thinking of the laws of nature. For the picture of laws as general volitions of God, we might suppose that he thinks we acquire it by reflection when considering our own general volitions and then joining that idea to our idea of God. (Hume has a standard empiricist account of the origin of our idea of God, EHU 2.6; SBN 19). For the axiomatic conception of law statements, he might say that we acquire it by considering the practices of natural philosophers when they "reduce the principles, productive of natural phænomena, to a greater simplicity . . . by means of reasonings from analogy, experience, and observation" (EHU 4.12; SBN 30).

We can see both of these conceptions of law at work in Hume's arguments. Philo (in part 12 of the *Dialogues*) and the zealous refined theists (in section 6 of the *Natural History*) argue from the simplicity and exceptionless character of laws in the axiomatic sense to the existence of laws as divine volitions. Where Hume argues that the laws of nature are especially well confirmed in his essay on miracles, he must have something like the axiomatic conception in mind, since for him the nature and activity of God are shrouded in doubt and uncertainty (DNR Intro 5; 128). But where he specifies what it would mean for there to be

a miracle at all, he is happy to borrow Malebranche's framework of general and particular volitions. Neither conception of laws poses any insuperable difficulty for concept formation on Hume's theory of ideas.

## 8. Concluding Conciliatory Concession

Having said all that, I want to back away from treating Hume as a simple theist. There is a paragraph in which he argues that the dispute between the theist and the atheist is merely verbal. I think it is subtle and important and that understanding it rightly is a key to understanding Hume's religious views. According to Graham Priest, the passage shows that "the content of the conclusion of the Argument from Design is absolutely zero" ("Hume's Final Argument," 351). I would not go quite that far, but the passage shows that Hume cannot be called a theist without qualification. Though I will not give a full discussion of the paragraph here, I do want to say enough to mollify those who love Hume for his atheism.

Hume gives us two criteria for something to count as God. First, it has to be responsible for the order that we find in the universe. Second, it has to be similar enough to a human mind to count as a mind.[33] In part 12 of the *Dialogues,* he has Philo argue that the first criterion has been met, but whether the second criterion is met is a verbal question that depends on how similar to a human mind the source of order needs to be to count as a god.

Philo argues we should take the first criterion to be met since successful natural philosophy, whether pagan or monotheistic, assumes that nature does nothing in vain. Anatomists reasonably assume that the organs they discover have a function (DNR 12.2; 116). The success of Copernicanism relative to its more complicated alternatives shows, "that nature acts by the simplest methods, and chooses the most proper means to any end" (ibid.). For Philo, these assumptions make sense only if the natural order has a cause (DNR 12.2–4; 116–18).

Philo argues that whether the second criterion is met is a matter of opinion and ultimately "a mere verbal controversy" (DNR 12.6; 119).[34] The atheist has to grant that there is "some remote analogy" between the source of order and a human intellect, if only because everything is at least a little bit like everything else (DNR 12.7; 120).[35] The theist has to grant, at least out of piety, that there is a great difference between "the *human* and the *divine* mind" (DNR 12.7; 120). Normally, the way to avoid verbal disputes is through clear definitions, but where the dispute is a matter of degree and not "susceptible to any exact mensuration," there is no possibility of defining terms that avoids the controversy (DNR 12.7; 119–20). Such disputes do not admit "of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination" (ibid., 120).

I think that Philo speaks for Hume on this point. Thus, those who think Hume is an atheist are not making a mistake, nor are those who think he is a theist. At a salon held by Baron d'Holbach in 1764, Hume declares that he has never seen an atheist and does not believe that they existed.[36] On the other hand, right before he dies in 1776, he tells James Boswell that he "never entertained any beleif in Religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke" (Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 597).[37] Philo's claim that the distinction between theism and atheism is a verbal dispute gives us a way to make these two stories compatible. Hume believes in God

in that he believes that there's a quasi-rational being who is the source of teleology and the order of nature. He rejects religion in that he denies that this source has moral attributes or a close resemblance to a human mind (Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 221–22). Just as Hume thinks it is a verbal dispute whether God exists, I think it is a verbal dispute whether Hume is an atheist.[38]

The literature on Hume's religious views is vast and complicated, but just about everyone can agree that he thinks that the source of order in the world is to some degree or other like a human intellect. On the other hand, it is perfectly reasonable to think of Hume as an atheist, for some purposes and in some moods, because he thinks the difference between the source of order in the universe and a human mind is too great to say that God created that order. Still, the fact that Hume thinks that the source of order in the world is radically unlike our intellect does not give us any reason to suppose that he denies that the universe is tightly and completely ordered by exceptionless, objective laws.

One might reasonably ask, if God is more like a rotting turnip than like a human mind, how are we supposed to think of the laws of nature as general volitions of God? Let me suggest that you imagine what you normally imagine when you think of God willing something, but with a turnip instead. No one in the history of philosophy emphasized the conceptual distinction between cause and effect more than Hume (T 1.3.6.1; SBN 86–87, EHU 7.6–8; SBN 63–64), a separability that Hume is willing to extend to volitions (EHU 7.20; SBN 69).[39] He thinks that he can conceive of any effect without its cause, including, I submit, a general volition. If you can do it as well, you can imagine laws as general volitions arising from anything.

At this point, we can explain Hume's asymmetrical borrowing of terminology from Malebranche. He needs the term 'particular volition' to pick out miracles in contrast with God's activity in bringing about the laws of nature. Since he does not believe in miracles, there is no question that his use of the term will bring about the suggestion that he thinks God is pretty similar to a human mind. But Hume does believe in laws of nature, and if he described them as general volitions of God, he would be making that false suggestion. So, he does not.

Insofar as Hume's view of the source of order in the world may be taken as theism or atheism depending on his mood and purpose, everything connected with this source of order has a similar ambiguity. I said earlier that when Hume says that the laws of nature govern events, he means that they exercise a controlling influence over them. Insofar as he thinks that the order of the universe arises from something like an intellect, then he can have a narrower political sense of 'govern' in mind: laws of nature govern the world in something like the way that the laws of supremely powerful monarch govern a nation. To the extent that Hume is an atheist, the laws themselves govern only in a derivative sense, one borrowed from and analogous to the sense that his predecessors used when they said that God governs the world.

To the extent that Hume is an atheist, it is a bit like he is carrying out the trick of pulling a tablecloth off while leaving the dishes and silverware on the table. What seemed to be an irreplaceable support for the dishes can be pulled away without much disruption. As Milton writes, "Once the idea of laws of nature had become generally accepted, it was possible (for

those who so wished) to reject the theological standpoint which had originally made the idea acceptable" ("Concept of the 'Laws of Nature,'" 195).

When I say that that Hume thinks of laws of nature as general governing principles susceptible to violation, I am not saying that he comes to that conception out of first principles from the *Treatise*. It is a standard view at the time, and one held by philosophers he is deeply engaged with. He modifies that view by adding a denial of the actuality of miracles, rejecting the benevolence of God, and emphasizing the dissimilarity between the source of order in the world and human beings. Philosophers make philosophy, but they do not make it from scratch.

## NOTES

1 I am grateful to Jan Cover, Mickey Lorkowski, Walter Ott, Sam Rickless, Matias Slavov, Linos Jacovides, and anonymous referees for comments on previous versions. I presented this material at a summer course on laws of nature at Central European University and at the Chicago Modern Philosophy Roundtable, and I'm grateful for the feedback I received there. I thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for its grant supporting this work.

2 This is, in effect, Tom Beauchamp and Alexander Rosenberg's (*Problem of Causation*, 84–88) approach to the problem.

3 See also Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, 139–40; George, *Everlasting Check*, 2–3.

4 See also Flew, *God and Philosophy*, 149–51, Everitt, "The Impossibility of Miracles," and Curd, "Miracles as Violations of Laws of Nature."

5 See also Beauchamp and Rosenberg, *Problem of Causation*, 137–45; Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*; 12–13, Millican, "Twenty Questions," 170–71; George, *Everlasting Check*, 3–6.

6 Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, 252n7, credits the insight to Tom Reed.

7 Alexander George observes, "what Hume claims here is simply that a miracle might occur and we might not know that it has. This is different from the claim that an event's being a miracle is independent of our epistemic state" (*Everlasting Check*, 5). It is compatible with everything that Hume says to say that for him which principles count as laws may depend on subjective, psychological, or epistemic considerations, so long as the principles themselves are objective in that they allow for the conceptual possibility of violations and these violations might be unobserved. George's own account of what Hume means by a law of nature seems to be mistaken, however, since, as George later concedes, his analysis makes the irrationality of believing in miracles tautologous in a way that does not fit well with the form of Hume's argument (*Everlasting Check*, 57; see Larmer, "Philosophical Fiasco," 101n21).

8 See also Loewer, "Humean Supervenience," 115; Albert, *After Physics*, 23–24.

9 Milton, "Concept of the 'Laws of Nature,'" 175.

10 See Oakley, "Christian Theology and the Newtonian Science"; Milton, "Concept of the 'Laws of Nature'"; and Harrison, "Concept of Laws of Nature."

11 See also Metzger, *Attraction Universelle*, 82–91; McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, 93; Harrison, "Concept of Laws of Nature," 26.

12 Metzger, *Attraction Universelle*, 122. Harrison emphasizes that Clarke treats laws as volitions (Harrison, "Concept of Laws of Nature," 26). He denies that Clarke approves of defining miracles as effects contrary to the course of nature brought about by supernatural agents (Harrison, "Newtonian Science," 538). If we look closely at Clarke's text, however, we see that he only rejects the definition if one mistakenly defines the course of nature as "the power of nature or the natural powers of created agents" (EV 149).

13 See also Hurlbutt, *Hume, Newton, and the Design Argument*, 60–62; Ott, "Berkeley's Best System"; Ryan, "Philo's Second Circumstance," 13–14.

14 Brandon Watson, "On Hume's Full Definition of Miracles," has drawn this connection in a blogpost. Similarly, Todd Ryan observes that Philo's discussion of laws as a source of misery is offered "in terms of the signature Malebranchean contrast between general laws and particular volitions" ("Philo's Second Circumstance," 7).

15 Radner, *Malebranche*, 30–32; Black, "Malebranche's Theodicy," 32, 38–40; Walsh and Stencil, "Malebranche," 227; Ryan, "Philo's Second Circumstance," 3.

16 Radner, *Malebranche*, 32; Nadler, "Occasionalism and General Will," 62–63; Walsh and Stencil, "Malebranche," 232–33.

17 Radner, *Malebranche*, 32–33; Walsh and Stencil, "Malebranche," 233–34, 236–37.

18 Falkenstein, "Hume's Project," argues for Hume's sincerity on this point.

19 Yoder, *Hume on God*, 83; Hardy, "Hume's Defense of True Religion," 254. Emily Kelahan argues that in the part of the sentence before the semicolon, Hume intends to assert only that there is some evidence for design and in the part after he intends to assert only that it is clear what the principles of genuine theism are ("Hume's Treatment of the Argument from Design," 466–67). If so, then the first part would be misleading about the clarity of the solution to the problem and the second part would be irrelevant to it.

20 Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 184–89; Yandell, "*Hume's 'Inexplicable Mystery'*," 10–16, Yoder, *Hume on God*, 88, 91–92.

21 Cleanthes cites Bacon's dictum in the *Dialogues* and Philo calls it "very judicious" *(*DNR 1.18; 41).

22 By "particular providence" in this context, Hume seems to mean a system of government of the world in which virtue is proportionally rewarded with happiness. See section 11 of the first *Enquiry* ("Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State") and EHU 11.20 in particular. In NHR 2.3, Hume uses the expression to mean, all the things that happen, which does not seem helpful here.

23 See also Holden, "Religion and Moral Prohibition," 193–96.

24 See also Yoder, *Hume on God*, 133–34.

25 Though Hume introduces the notion of laws of nature in "Of Suicide" by calling them "general and immutable laws ("Suicide," 580, 581), there is a passage where he uses a notion of *the ordinary course of the laws of nature*, which seems to amount to what would have happened without human action or motion (Stewart, "Religion and Rational Theology," 43–44). In this sense, "Every action, every motion of a man innovates in the order of some parts of matter, and diverts, from their ordinary course, the general laws of motion" ("Suicide," 582). Since this is ordinary and

unavoidable, it can't count as an "encroachment on the office of providence ("Suicide," 582). M. A. Stewart ("Religion and Rational Theology," 43–44) says that this passage shows that for Hume the inconsistency between putative miracles and the laws of nature is merely epistemological, but I cannot see how the passage shows that.

26 Wright, *Sceptical Realism*, 194–95, Demeter, *Hume and the Culture of Scottish Newtonianism*, 60–62.

27 The material in brackets was written in the margin of the manuscript. "Almost" must modify "insensibly" rather than "lead." The reference to the authority of pagan natural philosophers would not make sense if their principles did not lead to a theistic conclusion.

28 Eric Schliesser ("Copernican Revolutions," 231) argues this passage is not good evidence that Hume takes simplicity to be a guide to truth, since it occurs "in context of an error theory" that there is an intelligent designer of the universe. Schleisser's assumption that Hume rejects the argument from design in all its forms is part of a broader project to establish intellectual distance between Hume and Newton, a project that leads him to read what seem to me to be effusive expressions of praise for Newton and his work as expressions of serious misgivings (see Schliesser, "Hume's Attack on Newton's Philosophy," 170, 177, 183–85).

29 See Stanford, "The Manifest Connection," 346–47.

30 David Landy, *Hume's Science of Human Nature*, has recently emphasized the importance of inference to the best explanation in Hume's system.

31 See also, Wilson, *Seeking Nature's Logic*, 50.

32 Matias Slavov pressed this objection upon me.

33 In *The Natural History of Religion,* Hume argues, "To any one, who considers justly of the matter, it will appear, that the gods of all polytheists are no better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors," since they "acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world" (NHR 4.2).

34 Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 222; Garrett, "What's True," 215–17.

35 Yoder, *Hume on God*, 127–28.

36 Kemp Smith, *Philosophy of David Hume*, 37–38; Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 483; Yoder, *Hume on God*, 54–55.

37 Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*, 50–51.

38 I grant that one can stipulate a perfectly reasonable conception of theism according to which Hume is an atheist. See, e.g., Cordry, "Hume's Soft Atheism," 62.

39 To be clear, the argument there concerns volitions as causes of ideas.

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