

Sceptical Thoughts about Immortality

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Hume, Immortality, and the Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma

Peter Millican

Gilbert Ryle Fellow and Professor of Philosophy
Hertford College, University of Oxford

Visiting Professor, National University of Singapore

“Of the Immortality of the Soul”

“By the mere light of reason it seems difficult to prove the Immortality of the Soul. The arguments for it are commonly derived either from metaphysical topics, or moral, or physical. But in reality, it is the gospel, and the gospel alone, that has brought life and immortality to light.”

Metaphysical arguments: rubbish!

Moral arguments: rubbish!

Physical arguments: rubbish!

“Nothing could set in a fuller light the infinite obligations which mankind have to Divine revelation; since we find, that no other medium could ascertain this great and important truth.” (<https://davidhume.org/texts/is/>)

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Metaphysical Topics

- Immortality seems to require that we have a “soul” which is *immaterial*, and thus able to survive the death and destruction of the body.
- But there is no evidence whatever for an immaterial soul; and if there were “soulstuff”, analogy suggests that it would be recycled rather than persist as incorruptible “selves”.
- The analogy of nature tells strongly against it:
“Animals undoubtedly feel, think, love, hate, will, and even reason, though in a more imperfect manner than men: are their souls also immaterial and immortal?”

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Moral Topics

- There is no evidence for a deity having moral attributes beyond what are manifested in this world, and if there were such a deity,

“What cruelty, what iniquity, what injustice in nature, to confine all our concern, as well as all our knowledge, to the present life, if there be another scene still waiting us of infinitely greater consequence? Ought this barbarous deceit to be ascribed to a beneficent and wise Being? ...

Punishment, without any proper end or purpose, is inconsistent with our ideas of goodness and justice, and no end can be served by it after the whole scene is closed.”

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“Punishment ... should bear some proportion to the offence. Why then eternal punishment for the temporary offences of so frail a creature as man? ...

Heaven and hell suppose two distinct species of men, the good and the bad. But the greatest part of mankind float between vice and virtue.

Were one to go round the world with an intention of giving a good supper to the righteous and a sound drubbing to the wicked, he would frequently be embarrassed in his choice, and would find, that the merits and the demerits of most men and women scarcely amount to the value of either.

To suppose measures of approbation and blame, different from the human, confounds every thing. Whence do we learn, that there is such a thing as moral distinctions but from our own sentiments?”

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Physical Topics

“Where any two objects are so closely connected, that all alterations, which we have ever seen in the one, are attended with proportionable alterations in the other; we ought to conclude, by all rules of analogy, that, when there are still greater alterations produced in the former, and it is totally dissolved, there follows a total dissolution of the latter. [e.g. consider sleep or drunkenness]

The weakness of the body and that of the mind in infancy are exactly proportioned; their vigor in manhood; their sympathetic disorder in sickness; their common gradual decay in old age. The step further seems unavoidable; their common dissolution in death.

The last symptoms ... are disorder, weakness, insensibility, stupidity, the forerunners of its annihilation.”

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"Every thing is in common between soul and body. The organs of the one are all of them the organs of the other. The existence therefore of the one must be dependent on that of the other.

The souls of animals are allowed to be mortal; and these bear so near a resemblance to the souls of men, that the analogy from one to the other forms a very strong argument. Their bodies are not more resembling; yet no one rejects the arguments drawn from comparative anatomy. ...

Nothing in this world is perpetual. Every being, however seemingly firm, is in continual flux and change: ... How contrary to analogy, therefore, to imagine, that one single form, seemingly the frailest of any, and, from the slightest causes, subject to the greatest disorders, is immortal and indissoluble."

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"How to dispose of the infinite number of posthumous existences ought also to embarrass the religious theory. [And not only on our planet – there may be many others "peopled with intelligent, mortal beings] ... Ought such bold suppositions to be received by any philosophy; and that merely on the pretence of a bare possibility?

All doctrines are to be suspected, which are favoured by our passions. And the hopes and fears which gave rise to this doctrine, are very obvious.

By what arguments or analogies can we prove any state of existence, which no one ever saw, and which no wise resembles any that ever was seen? Who will repose such trust in any pretended philosophy, as to admit upon its testimony the reality of so marvellous a scene?"

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What Has Changed Since Hume?

- Evolutionary theory hugely strengthens Hume's case, not only by supporting his arguments from analogy. Why, for example, have we evolved large brains – at massive risk to childbearing mothers – if our thinking part can subsist independently of our bodies?
- Neurophysiology and cognitive sciences increasingly throw light on how our mental faculties function, with plenty of evidence for the dependence of our thinking on our physical constitution, and zero immaterialism.
- All systematic investigation of alleged paranormal phenomena has drawn a complete blank, supporting a "pessimistic induction" for supernaturalism.
- As regards natural theology, ...

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Natural Theology Summarised ...

- Ontological Arguments are pieces of clever logical trickery (e.g. trading on ambiguity or gratuitous modal claims) and give zero evidence for God (see <https://www.millican.org/papers/2018Anselm.pdf>, <https://www.millican.org/papers/2019LogicAtheism.pdf>).
- Cosmological Arguments presume that our instinctive judgements about causation and explanation, which have evolved from our experience *within* the world, can equally be applied *beyond* it, when everything we learn from fundamental science suggests that our intuitions are unreliable at quantum and universal levels. Even if accepted, these arguments cannot prove a deity with any moral characteristics (etc.).

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- Moral Arguments are hopeless, partly because our moral sensibilities make far more sense as evolved adaptations for cooperative living than as divinely implanted insights, and partly because the world gives no evidence of being morally governed. They might seem to point towards a good god, but can just as well (or badly) be used to argue for an evil god – see <https://www.millican.org/papers/1989DevAdv.pdf>.
- Design Arguments from biological nature have been fatally undermined by Darwinian evolution, which is supported by a massive variety of evidence (from fossils and comparative anatomy to DNA and biogeography). If all of this evidence is in fact illusory, then that would point towards a deceitful God, whose "Word" is therefore not to be trusted.

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Arguing from Consciousness?

- Consciousness remains a mystery, and hard to fit within standard scientific understanding. It is tempting to see this as pointing towards something fundamental in the universe, and maybe panpsychism ...
 - *Perhaps* this could be used to support Eastern theories of "immortality", but it looks unlikely to support survival of the individual consciousness.
 - And we are only in the very early days of brain science, quite likely requiring a conceptual revolution (comparable to what happened in physics) before we can make real progress.

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The Fine Tuning Argument

- Modern cosmology suggests that the physical constants of the universe are “fine tuned”: if they had been slightly different, there would have been no complex universe of stars and galaxies etc., and thus no evolution of living, moral beings.
 - For example, if gravity had been stronger (relative to the initial “Big Bang”), the universe would have collapsed too soon; if weaker, there would have been no coalescing of matter into galaxies and stars.
- Unlike the Design Argument by analogy which Hume attacked, this unambiguously privileges prior design (anticipating laws operating over billions of years) as the explanation for the universe.

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- Contemporary cosmology is too uncertain to give a clear verdict on the Fine Tuning Argument:
 - Relativity and Quantum Mechanics are in conflict.
 - “Dark matter” was corroborated only in 1980, and “dark energy” postulated in 1998; these are now reckoned to compose 95.44% of the universe!
 - It is hard to justify (or even make sense of) probability judgements about cosmic scenarios, when we only have our own limited experience of this one universe.
 - Some theories postulate zillions of universes, encompassing a massive variety of laws of nature. If such a theory were true, then the “fine tuning” of our universe could be explained away as a selection effect: it should not be surprising that we, as living beings, find ourselves in a life-favouring universe.

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But suppose that in 1,000 years ...

- A consistent, comprehensive, and extremely well-tested physical theory has been developed, with fundamental constants that have resisted all attempts at deeper explanation: they seem to be “brute facts”;
- This theory tells against “multiverse” hypotheses that could explain away apparent fine tuning.
- Cosmological theories can be systematically simulated by computer modelling, to investigate reliably the implications of theories involving *different* values of the fundamental constants; this has established that even tiny deviations from the observed actual values of the fundamental constants imply a lifeless universe.
- (see <https://www.millican.org/papers/2017CCDDReply.pdf>)

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Fine Tuned For What, Exactly?

- The evidence for Fine Tuning does not specifically concern the conditions for the evolution of *intelligent, moral, living beings*, but rather, for a complex universe of galaxies, stars, planets etc.
- So why pick on *intelligent life* as the target of design, when so little of the universe is suitable for life, and for only a tiny fraction of its existence in time? It seems better “designed” to produce galaxies, or black holes!
- We need some reason for claiming that life is of special significance (and not just to us). Maybe consciousness could provide the answer, if this proves resistant to scientific “reductionist” accounts?

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Fine Tuned By What, Exactly?

- Imagine you discover a bridge, constructed in such a finely-tuned way that the slightest change in structure would fail to support the load. Does this suggest:
 - That the materials of the bridge have been perfectly designed to support massive loads?
 - That the bridge’s designer has had to exercise utmost ingenuity to create a workable bridge, despite the limits of the materials available?
- An omniperfect Designer could create a universe bursting with morally sensitive life, just by divine *fiat*.
 - So fine-tuning does not suggest an *omnipotent* and *omniscient* god, so much as one who is doing the best He can within a framework of constraints.

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- If the Fine Tuning Argument works, giving up the claim to the *infinite* “God of the philosophers” may well seem a modest price to pay:
 - We still have a Designer of cosmic proportions, able to fix the fundamental constants of the universe.
- More worrying is a lack of evidence for the Designer’s *moral goodness*: even an *evil* god could welcome the evolution of conscious living beings, capable of immorality and suffering.
- And in any case, Fine Tuning over aeons, developing complex life by intermixed physical, biological and psychical evolution, would strongly tell against individual survival of selves.

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Learning from Hume on Miracles

- In assessing the strength of testimonial evidence – which like all empirical evidence must be based on experience – we find various circumstances that make a difference to its reliability, e.g.
 - the opposition of contrary testimony;
 - the character or number of the witnesses;
 - the manner of their delivering their testimony.
 - Another factor we ought to consider is
 - the unusualness of the reported event.
- (<https://davidhume.org/texts/e/10> paras 6-8, and see <https://www.millican.org/papers/2011Miracles.pdf>)

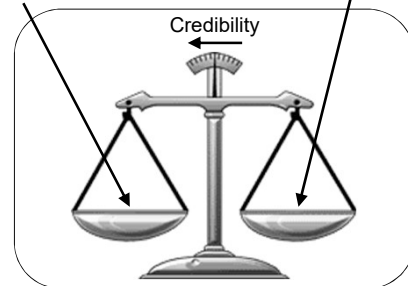
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In favour of the testimony

Consistency of the testimony
Character of the witnesses
Number of the witnesses
Manner of delivery

Against the testimony

Unusualness of the event



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“Hume’s Maxim”

- “no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish ...” (*Enquiry* 10.13)
- Hume here seems to understand “more miraculous” as “even less probable”. So ...
- “Testimony *T* cannot establish fact *M* unless *T* is of such a kind, that its *falsehood* would be even less probable than *M* itself.”

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A Diagnostic Example

- I am concerned about a genetic disease that becomes apparent only around age 65, and afflicts one in a million of the population.
- I therefore take a test, which has a 99.9% chance of correctly reporting one’s genetic disease state. It comes out positive! ☹️
- Hume asks:
“Would the falsehood of the test be more surprising than your having the disease?”

Probability and the Diagnostic Test

- Probability of the disease = 1 in 1,000,000
- Probability of false test = 0.1% (1 in 1,000)
- Take 1,000,000,000 people of whom:
 - 1,000 have the disease
 - 99.9% of them test positive: 999 true positives
 - 999,999,000 do not have the disease
 - 0.01% of them test positive: 999,999 false positives
- Probability I have it is 999,999 : 999 = 1,001 : 1 (i.e. 1 in 1,002 or a bit less than 0.1%).

A Counterexample to Hume’s Maxim

- Hume’s Maxim fails, however, when there are many different ways of getting something wrong.
- Suppose a newspaper – which gets things wrong 1% of the time – reports that Smith’s ticket 271 won (out of a thousand tickets).
- 1% (probability of falsehood) is greater than 0.1% (probability of ticket winning), but we would still believe it, and indeed should.
- The relevant figure to compare with 0.1% is not the general probability of falsehood (i.e. 1%), but rather, the probability that ticket 271 would falsely be reported as winning.

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More Counterexamples

- Suppose my son runs into the house saying “A red lorry just bashed the wing-mirror off a yellow Mercedes at the corner”. Should I believe him?
 - Yes – the probability that he would report *that very kind of event* if it *hadn’t* happened is even less than the tiny probability that such an event *did* happen.
- Imagine a newspaper report:

“Tonight, a comet will be visible in a clear sky near the stars γ -Pegasi and χ -Pegasi.”

What is the probability that the newspaper would make *that very report* (“near the stars γ -Pegasi and χ -Pegasi” etc.) *falsely*?

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A Revised Humean Maxim

- We must give up reference to any abstract “probability of the falsehood of the testimony *considered apart and in itself*”: probability will always be relative to what is reported.
- Then we can formulate a Revised Maxim:
 - “No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle M , unless the testimony for M is of such a kind, that the occurrence of a false M report of that kind (*given that M does not in fact occur*) would be even less probable than M itself.”

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Explaining Away the Testimony

- The Revised Maxim says that a report of M is credible only if the occurrence of such an M -report in the absence of M would be even more miraculous than M itself.
 - This is correct and provable (on the reasonable assumption that the non-reporting of miracle M would not be *even more* miraculous than M itself).
 - It focuses attention on *how likely miracle reports are to arise from natural causes such as human cognitive errors*. Hume discusses this sort of thing in “Of Miracles”, Part 2.

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Contrary Religions

- Suppose that miracle M_1 supports religion R_1 , miracle M_2 supports religion R_2 , and that R_1 and R_2 disagree on crucial points.
- Then, Hume thinks (E 10.24), we have:

$$\begin{array}{rcl}
 M_1 \rightarrow R_1 & & \\
 R_1 \rightarrow \neg R_2 & & \\
 M_2 \rightarrow R_2 & \therefore & \neg R_2 \rightarrow \neg M_2 \\
 \hline
 M_1 \rightarrow \neg M_2 & &
 \end{array}$$
- So if religions conflict, then the miracles that support those religions also conflict.

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The “Contrary Religions” Fallacy

- Hume’s argument would hold only if the inferential relationships were *certain*.
- But if M_1 supports supernaturalism, which in turn makes M_2 more probable, then
 - M_1 can make M_2 more probable, even if the religions with which they are associated, R_1 and R_2 , contradict each other!
 - Mutual support applies most to *common features* (e.g. in this case, supernaturalism) and least to *conflicting features* (e.g. incompatible doctrines).

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A Dilemma for the Supernaturalist

- Do supernatural phenomena occur only in connection with true religion?
 - If so, then the supernatural claims within different religions compete with each other, and indicate that such claims are unreliable;
 - If not, then:
 - Such phenomena cannot provide a proof of any distinctive religious doctrine;
 - Such widespread phenomena – associated with competing religions – invite a natural explanation (and experience confirms this).

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The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma

“That in so far as miracle reports or religious experiences point towards specific aspects of particular religions, their diversity undermines their evidential force; while in so far as miracle reports or religious experiences involve a ‘common core’ of similarity, they point towards a common cause of these phenomena that is natural rather than supernatural.”

Thornhill-Miller and Millican, 2015
<https://www.millican.org/papers/2015CCDD.pdf>

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An Empirical, Not A Priori, Dilemma

- It is an *empirical* fact that the “common core” of religious phenomena are relatively easy to explain in natural terms (e.g. “common core” religious experiences don’t seem to yield any testable paranormal ability).
- This is awkward for the supernaturalist: if there are supernatural forces at work, why don’t they leave distinctive signs?
- Ockham’s Razor has an obvious attraction here: we “have no need of that hypothesis”.

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Near-Death Experiences (NDEs)

- Striking and consistent common features:
 - Out-of-body experience (OBE)
 - Viewing of body
 - Entering/emerging from darkness
 - Encounter with ancestors or dead relatives
 - Presence of beings of light
 - Judgement/evaluation (life review)
 - Reaching obstacles/barriers or limits
 - Journey to other realms (home or origin)
 - “Oneness” and association of self with ultimate reality or the divine

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NDE Origin of Afterlife Beliefs?

- Gregory Shushan (2009) surveys five major geographically distant, linguistically isolated early world traditions with no known contact:
 - Analysed diverse written accounts from: Old & Middle Kingdom Egypt, Sumerian & Old Babylonian Mesopotamia, India, Pre-Buddhist China, Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica;
 - Afterlife conceptions (though culturally conditioned in detail) share broad similarities across cultures, and appear to emerge from very similar cross-cultural reports of NDEs.

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NDEs Naturally Explained

- Anthropology: Shushan (2012) extended his research to isolated indigenous groups in modern history, with similar results.
- Medicine/Physiology: Marsh (2010) shows lack of blood to pre-frontal cortex, posterior parietal lobe, and dopaminergic system produce OBE; while the “tunnel of light” is produced by oxygen deprivation to occipital cortex.
- So common features can be explained naturally; NDEs thus provide no evidence of a supernatural reality or afterlife.

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“Sick Men’s Dreams”

“Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world.

You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are any thing but sick men’s dreams: Or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical asseverations of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational.”

David Hume, *Natural History of Religion* 15.6
(<https://davidhume.org/texts/n/15#6>)



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