Euthanasia

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Euthanasia, the term used to describe mercy killings, is a topic that causes great controversy in the United States. Actually it is voluntary active euthanasia that the controversy stems from because passive euthanasia is legal and socially accepted. In active euthanasia the terminally ill person is given something to kill them, but in passive euthanasia the person is just left to die of natural causes. Also, no one really argues over involuntary euthanasia because essentially it is murder. Another option that is similar to active euthanasia is physician assisted suicide, which is where a patient kills themselves with the guidance of a physician. Many people argue over whether voluntary active euthanasia is moral and that even though implementing it does have its risks, that it is a better option than not allowing it to be a legal choice for the terminally ill.

The first argument that I will propose (Argument A) is that voluntary active euthanasia is moral. I believe that Dan W. Brock sets forth a great argument defending this belief in the article "Voluntary Active Euthanasia". Brock defends the morality of voluntary active euthanasia with the same reasons that are given when explaining the right to refuse medical treatment. These two reasons are autonomy and well-being. Autonomy means that on is self-governing within the limits of justice. Autonomy preserves a persons sense of control and dignity. If granted autonomy then one can make the choices that will determine how one will live one's life. Autonomy essentially asks the question: who owns your life? Since we live in a free society, the answer should be the individual. By keeping voluntary active euthanasia illegal, the government is
restricting everyone from deciding one of the most basic choices in life, whether to live or die. Well-being refers to the happiness and quality of a person's life. So if someone's life has become more of a burden and is no longer worth living, it would be acting in the interest of their well-being to let them die quickly (Brock 70-72).

In fact it seems that it may be more moral to kill someone rather than just taking them off life support and then making them suffer from embarrassment and pain until they finally die of whatever ails them. Passive euthanasia is not really passive because unhooking someone from life support is in itself an action. So if you are going to perform some action and it will result in the death of the patient, then it seems to be in the best interest of the patient to allow them to die quickly if they so choose.

A strong objection to Argument A is that in voluntary active euthanasia someone actually kills the patient, but in passive euthanasia the person dies naturally. So voluntary active euthanasia equals killing, regardless if the patient consents to it and killing an innocent person is intrinsically wrong. In his article "Killing and Allowing to Die", Daniel Callahan explains this idea by using moral culpability. He says that if someone actually injects a person with a lethal injection then that person is the physical cause of death. However by removing a respirator from someone that can not breathe, the actual cause of death is the disease that stopped the breathing in the first place. So if a person kills a terminally ill person without a moral right to do so, then they are morally culpable (Callahan 68).

This objection depends on the idea that killing is immoral in cases of euthanasia. As I mentioned above, it seems that it may be more moral to kill someone then to just let them die, an action that doesn't have a predetermined amount of time. However, by legalizing voluntary active euthanasia it would be up to the individual to decide if they think that euthanasia is moral. If someone believes it is all right, then they have that option and if they don't then they aren't forced to choose euthanasia. This does not interfere with anyone's autonomy because people with entirely opposing beliefs on the subject are both allowed to choose what is right to them. If voluntary active euthanasia remains illegal then
some people are not allowed to make a decision for themselves even though it does not harm anyone else's right, just because some people believe it should be that way. This goes totally against the idea of autonomy and can possibly harm a person's well-being in the process.

Now, assuming that it is agreed that voluntary active euthanasia is moral, there is still the question of whether the risks of legalizing are too risky for society. First of all, I will explain the most serious risks that could result from legalizing voluntary active euthanasia. In "Objections to the Institutionalism of Euthanasia", Stephen G. Potts outlines nine risks that he foresees for society if legalization takes place. Of these nine, three of his arguments seem like they describe serious risks. The first risk is the difficulty of oversight and regulation. This worry is that if euthanasia were legalized then abuses would start to take place in situations where a large inheritance is at stake or a doctor makes a mistake in diagnosing the treatment of a patient and wants to cover his tracks. The second risk, the slippery slope effect, is very similar to the first risk. This risk deals with the fear that if we legalize voluntary active euthanasia, it will lead to nonvoluntary euthanasia. This would put all the comatose and demented patients at risk of being killed. Then it would lead to involuntary euthanasia, where the "polluters of the gene pool" or the unwanted in society will be killed against their will. The third valid risk is pressure on the patient. There is a fear that if euthanasia were legalized, that the patients would feel that they are a burden to their family and would be more likely to pick euthanasia, not because they want to, but because their family is pressuring them. A final serious risk is cost and benefits. This worry can be taken two ways. Potts argues that the poor have the most to lose by legalizing euthanasia because it is cheaper (Potts 73-77). In the decision of the court case *Compassion in Dying v. State of Washington*, while Judge Noonan explains the decision in a case about physician assisted suicide he also makes a great argument about costs and benefits. He argues that because the poor are given less money for health care, they are less likely to have their pain alleviated. So for them euthanasia would end up being chosen more
often, so that they could finally be relieved from the pain that those more well off would not have to deal with (Noonan 100).

Since these risks are just probabilities of what could happen and not facts, it makes it difficult to know for sure whether the pro-legalization or anti-legalization advocates have a better argument. However, I argue (Argument B), that with thorough government regulation the risks that legalization causes can be greatly reduced. So much in fact that not legalizing voluntary active euthanasia would be a greater risk of autonomy and well-being then keeping it illegal.

If the government came up with thorough regulations, voluntary active euthanasia would not be a serious threat to society. In all of the risks that were mentioned earlier, they all stem from a problem of enforcement. The problem of oversight, regulation, and slippery slope is that the power to kill will be abused. The people who would suffer would be the incompetent or the unwanted people of society. Also the fear that euthanasia could be used to hide mistakes of doctors or for financial gain of family members falls into this category. The regulations that Oregon enacted in Measure 16 (Mappes 60) in favor of physician assisted suicide are a great starting point to counter these abuses. By taking this measure and changing it to fit with voluntary active euthanasia the requirements would be: 1) that the patient must give an oral request and reiterate that request fifteen days later, and would also require a written request that is witnessed by two witnesses. 2) Before killing the patient 15 days must pass after the oral request and 48 hours after the written request. 3) The attending physician must inform the patient of all choices available and I would add that a lawyer be present during this period and during the signing of the written contract to safeguard the doctor. 4) There must be a second opinion from another doctor who would also reiterate all the options. 5) It must be clear that the request is voluntary and was made by a patient capable of decision making(for example, not someone clinically depressed). I would also add that all the steps involved be video recorded for proof that the doctor followed all the regulations. 6) Another stipulation that I would add would be that at least two family members be notified of the decision, to make sure the doctor is not persuading the patient unfairly. 7) Of course the death would have to be reported to the
proper authority and an autopsy could always be available if necessary. These stipulations will check that there isn't pressure from one person that may cause the patient to do something that they don't want to do by forcing many different individuals to be involved.

The last two risks not covered by these regulations are costs and benefits. Potts' argument that the poor will be inclined to opt for euthanasia because of the financial burden of terminal health care, seems to be a weak argument. In fact the middle and upper class have more to lose financially because if you are poor the government picks up the bill. Where as the middle and upper class have to pay their own bills. However, Judge Noonan argues that the poor would most likely choose euthanasia because they don't have the resources to obtain the quality of care people with money do. So often the choice of euthanasia may seem to be the best choice when dealing with their well-being (Noonan 100). However, as long as insurance companies keep the options that they now have, voluntary active euthanasia would not cause the poor to lose any of their choices, but instead increase their number of choices. There could be a problem if all of a sudden the insurance agencies stopped covering treatments that kept the terminally ill alive. There really isn't a way to make it illegal to drop treatments, but the government could counter this by offering monetary rewards to insurance agencies who have these treatments. This is a plausible plan that is already being considered for countering the problem with insurance agencies not covering certain treatments and necessities such as blood sugar monitors, to prevent people with serious problems such as diabetes from choosing their insurance.

The objections to Argument B such as the regulations are too strict or that no doctor would perform euthanasia due to the fear of lawsuits, do not hold up if procedure is followed correctly. If voluntary euthanasia was handled as a legal contractual agreement, where lawyers are present, the whole situation protects both the patient and the doctor from a lawsuit. Plus these procedures, which don't seem too strict since we are talking about human life, would have major punishments for those who do not follow them. Also there are many organizations already and more can be formed, who set out to protect people such as the handicapped or the "unwanted"
people of society. They would be there to watch out for the groups that are considered to be in danger of the slippery slope argument.

Neither my argument or the opposition's argument is foolproof. It is impossible to prove what would happen if voluntary active euthanasia were legalized unless it is tried. So the question then becomes, which argument poses the greatest risk to autonomy and well-being. When it comes to autonomy, there is no doubt that by prohibiting euthanasia, autonomy is clearly denied. The choice about living or dying is taken away from the individual, and instead decided by the government. When someone chooses to live or die it doesn't harm any one else's rights. However, if voluntary active euthanasia were allowed, then autonomy would only be at risk in cases where there has been an illegal action or when someone is pressured into their decision. With all the safeguards built in to the regulation, these risks seem less serious. Even if it ended up that strict regulation prevent doctors from performing euthanasia, then nothing more would be lost than if we never tried to legalize.

As far as well-being goes, it is a proven fact that with the system we have now, people go through unnecessary pain and suffering because they are not allowed the option of a quick and painless death. If legalized, obviously these people would be relieved of their pain and suffering. The risk then faced is the well-being of those who do not consent to euthanasia, and as I said before, there are safeguards that can be implemented. They may not counter all abuses, but I would say for the most part they probably would.

In conclusion, it is hard to definitely know that legalization of voluntary active euthanasia is the best choice, even when there are clear threats to autonomy and well-being if it isn't legalized. There is no way to know enough about what would happen in the future, to know for sure that good regulations could prevent abuses and pressures. However, there is an absolute denial of autonomy and well-being in the current law. In the future, at least there are plans that could be enacted that could possibly work to protect autonomy and well-being for everyone. The current system has no chance of that because it undoubtedly denies the rights of people to make
decisions about their own life, in the best interest of their well-being.¹

Nominated by:
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¹This paper was presented at the third West Virginia University Philosophy Department’s In-House Undergraduate Conference in Philosophy, held on April 4, 1998.
Ought I To Worry About Being Dead?

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Introduction
In the play “Spoonface Steinberg,” first broadcast on Radio Four in 1997, playwright Lee Hall depicts the prospect of death from the point-of-view of a young girl who knows that she is going to die of leukemia. I would like to begin my paper with a quote from this play:

“When you think about dying,” she says “it is very hard to do. It is to think about what is not. To not be, and never to be again. It is even more than emptiness. If you think of emptiness, it is full of nothing. And death is more than this. Death is even less than nothing.”

In the same year, British artist Damien Hirst exhibited a work that involved the corpse of a shark suspended in formaldehyde gel. It was entitled: “The Physical Impossibility of Death in The Mind of Someone Living”

The question I wish to ask is: if death is so difficult for us to imagine, why do we so naturally assume that it's something to be afraid of?

I would like to posit a few assumptions before I begin to attempt an answer to this question. My arguments, developed elsewhere, make use of a broader account of harm and well-being than that which I shall use in this paper, owing to the limited space available. For the purposes of this paper, then, let us assume that every harm is analogous to a limited period of physical pain in so far as it must be experienced at a certain point in time. Secondly, I will assume that there is no such thing as the afterlife, in order to avoid addressing an
entirely different set of arguments concerning the immortality of the soul. Death, then, is the total absence of any experience: it is an experiential blank The Ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus holds this view of death on the basis of his conception of the soul as a temporary configuration of atomic particles which is completely destroyed at the moment of death. Combining this with his hedonism (which, again, I will assume in order to approach the argument on his terms) he argues that, because death is the total absence of any experience, and so cannot be seen as a bad (or good) thing, there exist no rational grounds on which we may justify our fear of death. He says:

“Accustom yourself to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil lie in sensation, whereas death is the absence of sensation”

Letter to Menoeceus 124-7

The Roman philosopher Lucretius provides an additional argument for being unafraid of death with what may be termed the symmetry or mirror objection. If death is the mere absence of the goods of life, he asks, as opposed to any bad or painful experience itself, then why should I experience painful feelings when I anticipate my death, but not when I think about the experiential blank that existed previous to my birth? He asks us to:

“Look back again to see how the past ages of everlasting time, before we are born, have been as naught to us. These then nature holds up to us as a mirror of the time that is to come, when we are dead and gone. Is there aught that seems terrible in this.. ?”

On The Nature Of Things III 971-7

With these arguments of Epicurus and Lucretius in mind, I wish to address two questions, which are inter-connected but not the same. First, following Derek Parfit’s discussion of temporal neutrality, I will examine the importance of Lucretius symmetry argument, in an attempt to answer the question of whether it is possible for us to have symmetric attitudes towards past and future events. If the holding of neutral or symmetric attitudes towards past and future can be shown to be irrational or inconceivable, then this may enable me to reject Lucretius’ argument simply by stating that temporal location itself provides a reason for why we may hold
different attitudes towards the same experience (or, in the case of death, total lack of experience). Whatever the conclusion of this investigation, however, there remains the Epicurean problem of whether I am justified in feeling anything but total indifference towards my own non-existence. Therefore, my second question is whether it is possible to defeat Epicurus by means of a proof of the claim that my death itself can somehow be considered bad for me.

Part One

So to the first question. It is certainly considered natural that we should possess asymmetric attitudes towards time. In Reasons and Persons, Parfit conducts a thought experiment to illustrate exactly how acceptable such attitudes generally are. He imagines himself to be in hospital, awaiting a kind of surgery for which he will not be allowed any anesthetics. This sort of surgery has a 100% success rate, so he is not worried about its effects. Under a new policy, any memories the patient has of the operation will afterwards be erased by a drug. Now imagine that Parfit has just woken up, and he cannot remember having gone to sleep. He asks the nurse when his operation will be taking place, and how long it will take. The nurse can remember the facts about two different patients, but she cannot remember which set of facts applies to Parfit. One patient had the operation yesterday and it lasted for ten hours. The other patient is due to have the operation later today, and it will only take one hour. Naturally, Parfit would prefer to be the former patient because, although that patient has experienced more pain than the other patient will, his pain is in the past.

Why does it seem so natural to us to be more concerned about the future than about the past? One obvious answer is that we can affect the future, whereas we are powerless to affect the past. However, as Parfit points out, this distinction does not have universal application, as there are cases in which we are not able to affect future events. Imagine, for example, that I am suffering from some sort of disease and have been told, by several doctors, that at some time within the next year, I will lose the ability to see for a limited period of time. I believe that the suffering I will experience during this time is inevitable (assuming that I will stay alive), and
therefore I have feelings of painful anticipation when I think about what the future holds. This is a case in which I believe myself to be powerless to affect the future in exactly the same way as I am powerless to affect past events, and yet I have much greater concern about this future suffering than I do about any equal, or even greater, amount of suffering that I may have experienced in the past. Thus it seems that our asymmetric attitudes towards past and future cannot be adequately defended by a straightforward appeal to our control of events, or lack thereof.

A further attempt to establish the rationality of our asymmetric attitudes involves an appeal to a particular view of time, namely the ‘A-series’ view outlined by John McTaggart. A supporter of the A-series view sees time as a continuous flow of events from far future into near future; then into present; and then into past and further past. A supporter of the contrary view of time, the ‘B-series,’ however, rejects the idea of the ‘flow’ of time. He draws a strict parallel between temporal and spatial relations, considering both to be relative to, and dependent on, the point-of-view of a conscious observer. In other words, just as the truth of any statement of the form ‘x is here,’ or ‘x is fifty degrees north-west of here,’ depends upon the spatial location of the utterer, the truth of any statement of the form ‘x is now,’ or ‘x was three days ago,’ depends upon the temporal location of the utterer. In addition, a supporter of the B-series will cite several conceptual problems associated with the A-series. For example, if time flows, at what speed does it flow? The reply ‘at a rate of one second per second’ hardly seems satisfactory. One might also ask what exactly time flows in.

Nevertheless, the A-series is in possession of much intuitive plausibility. We do naturally feel that time in some way flows independently of you or me, and accordingly we are likely to believe

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2 Prior “Changes in Events and Changes in Things” in The Philosophy of Time Le Poidevin and Macbeath (eds), OUP 1993: Prior mentions the metaphysical queerness of the notion of ‘Supertime’.
that even if there were no conscious observers at all, the scope of the present moment would continue to progress and change. Furthermore, it seems that the feelings of anticipation which we associate with the future but not with the past are in some way based upon the fact that we tend to see future events as ‘approaching’ us, getting closer and closer, whereas past events are stuck, unchangingly, in the past: we do not care whether they are near or far. As Parfit mentions, under the B-series view, this tendency is irrational. To talk of future events getting ‘closer and closer’ is merely to say that, at future moments, a given event will be closer to what is then the present moment than it is to what is now the present moment, from my point-of-view. Indeed, if one accepts the B-series, thus rejecting the objective reality of temporal becoming, this consequence seems unavoidable, and hence there seems to be no reason to anticipate future events in any special sort of way. The only option remaining for the A-series supporter seems, then, to claim that the truth of the A-series is fundamental and cannot be undermined by such challenges.

Parfit is not convinced of the effectiveness of this last attempted defense of the A-series, and, in view of his argument, neither am I. He undertakes another thought experiment. He imagines that he is an exile from the country in which his mother still lives. He receives the news that she has a terminal disease and will not live for very much longer. In addition, he is told that the disease has begun causing her severe pain which cannot be relieved, and he feels extremely distressed at the thought that his mother will, in the remainder of her life, experience such pain. The next day Parfit is told that he has been partly misinformed. In actual fact, his mother did undergo months of suffering, but she is now dead. So the question is whether it is still intuitively acceptable to us that Parfit should be distressed, even though he now knows that his mother’s suffering is in the past rather than in the future. Remember that we are concerned here only with Parfit’s pain at the thought of his mother’s suffering: as far as we are able, we should detach this from the feelings of grief which he presumably experiences at the thought of her death itself. Parfit argues that it is intuitively the case that he
will feel virtually the same amount of pain at the thought of his mother’s suffering both before and after his information is corrected.

This example shows that, in certain cases—namely cases of experiences other than my own—symmetric (or, at least, virtually symmetric) attitudes towards past and future events seem altogether rational. It is successful in illustrating the existence of a set of temporally symmetric, yet rational, responses which, I think, represent a significant dilemma for the supporter of the A-series. Either he must admit the falsity of the A-series, or, if he maintains that the fundamental truth of the A-series implies temporal asymmetry, he must refute the rationality of this set of responses, hence damaging his own position by allowing it to entail a highly counter-intuitive claim. Furthermore, the fact that our attitudes towards others, but not towards ourselves, appear to be symmetric might be seen to add weight to the B-series view, as a B-series supporter could account for this with the claim that the concepts of past, present and future are necessarily linked to the point-of-view of a certain conscious observer. In other words, under the B-series view, it might appear quite logical that past and future are only relevant when I’m thinking about my own experiences.

I have now outlined, I believe, the ways in which two important attempted defenses of our asymmetric temporal attitudes have proved unsuccessful. There is one last path open to the defender of these attitudes. He might argue that, although there does not seem to be a way of proving that temporal neutrality is irrational, ultimately this does not matter, because the idea of adopting symmetric attitudes towards past and future is simply inconceivable. Certainly, it does appear true to say that some of the mental states which are frequently possessed by the average human being seem to be necessarily directed towards the future. Parfit suggests, however, that our belief in the necessity of a given attitude being future-directed is sometimes the result of linguistic illusion: for example, what we may call a ‘hope’ for the future or a ‘wish’ about the past are essentially different ways of talking about a desire. Nevertheless, this does not seem to be the case for all attitudes—intentions, resolutions and so on do only seem capable of being future-directed. The feelings of painful anticipation which are relevant to our present
discussion about fear of death do seem to be unparalleled among that
set of attitudes which we may adopt towards past events. So does
this mean that it is inconceivable that we might look at past and
future non-existence from a temporally neutral perspective?

I do not think so. As Parfit points out, just because there may be
attitudes which cannot be adopted towards both future and past in an
identical form, this does not imply the inconceivability of a person
who feels equal pleasure or pain at the thought of a given event,
whether it be in the past or in the future. Thus, whilst it may perhaps
be the case that my attitude towards death would involve feelings of
anticipation, whereas my attitude towards pre-natal non-existence
would be more like regret, they might nevertheless be absolutely
equal in the degree of suffering which they caused me. Clearly, a
temporally neutral person would be very different from you or I, but
there seems to be no reason to think that his behavior might not be
coherent and consistent. Epicurus himself related to this idea, saying
that, on his dying day, the happiness of his memories outweighed the
pain he was enduring. Hence, I believe temporal neutrality to be
conceivable, and thus I conclude that appeals to both its irrationality
and its inconceivability have failed to yield a satisfactory solution to
the mirror problem posed by Lucretius.

\textbf{Part Two}

We move on now to Epicurus and the question of why, if it
cannot be explained by temporal asymmetry, we still think that a
person’s death is bad for him. Before we address Epicurus’ question
directly, let us make a few more assumptions. First, we are talking
here about the reasons for my own fear of my own death, so any
worry I may have about those I shall leave behind me does not come
into the equation. Second, having ruled out the possibility of an
afterlife, we are assuming that my fear of death does not involve any
worry about what it might be like to be dead, as it won’t be like
anything at all. As Epicurus says:

“... when we exist death is not present, and when death is present
we do not exist”

\textit{Letter to Menoeceus} 124-7
Third, for the purposes of argument, we shall assume that there is some sort of good involved in life, the absence of which would represent some kind of loss. Lastly, it should be noticed that, although I shall continue to talk about ‘fear’ of death, in view of the conclusion of my discussion of temporal symmetry, perhaps a temporally neutral term such as ‘regret’ or ‘sadness’ would be more accurate.

One immediate response, then, to the question of why I fear my death might be something like: ‘I do not fear my own death exactly, rather I fear the fact that I shall no longer be alive.’ Maybe death is a bad thing because it involves the loss of the good of life. Haji calls this argument the *deprivation thesis*.

An Epicurean will challenge the deprivation thesis by reiterating the claim that death is an experiential blank, and the argument that, as such, it cannot involve loss any more than it can involve any other sort of experience. Rosenbaum suggests that the general acceptability of referring to somebody’s death as *that person's* loss is misleading, saying:

“It is all right, I suppose, to *call* a person's death a loss for the person, but it is clearly not like paradigmatic cases of losses that are bad for persons”

“How to Be Dead and Not Care..” p. 127

In spite of this, however, several philosophers subscribe to the deprivation thesis. To justify this, it must be argued that, even though death is an experiential blank, it is nevertheless possible for a dead person to ‘experience’ loss.

One such argument is put forward by Thomas Nagel. He makes an analogy between the ‘bad’ of being dead and the ‘bad’ of, for example, having nasty rumors spread about you without your knowledge. Even if you never actually found out about these rumors, it would still seem plausible that we might consider their existence

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to have caused you to suffer a misfortune. Hence, Nagel asserts that the experience of pain or pleasure is not restricted to cases of acquaintance with the cause of it.

So has Nagel shown that it is possible for a dead person to experience loss, and, in this way, shown that there are rational grounds for our fear of death? Again, I do not think so. In any case, he has certainly failed to show why death is worse than pre-natal non-existence. Furthermore, Rosenbaum points out that some further argument is required to back up the controversial claim that experience can involve anything other than a causal relationship between subject and object (that is, the object of the attitude causes the attitude in the subject). It is, of course, true to say that events which we don’t experience directly, even those which never have and never will obtain, can be the objects of our psychological attitudes (Henry VIII’s last wife probably feared that her head might be chopped off). However, this fact leaves Nagel in a dilemma concerning exactly how to characterize such events, and how to distinguish them from events which cause our experiences directly. On the one hand, he might claim that the set of events which we do causally experience is identical to that set of events which can be the objects of our experience. However, the concept of an event being simultaneously both the cause and only the object of an experience is absurd. Thus it seems that a distinction must be drawn between those events which can be the causes, and those which can only be the objects, of our experiences. In this case, however, Nagel’s argument becomes irrelevant to the debate over the rationality of fearing death. It may or may not be true that my death is the object of my experience (specifically my experience of my feelings about death), but the Epicurean can simply reply to this that I only truly experience those events which cause my experiences: an answer which is both intuitively acceptable and which entails that I cannot truly experience my death because it is not something which causes the relevant experience. Thus Nagel’s argument illustrates for us exactly how counter-intuitive it can be to attempt to detach the concept of experience from the concept of causal or direct experience.
Clearly, something must be added to the deprivation thesis if it is to provide an answer to Epicurus’ question. Kamm suggests that the crucial difference between death and pre-natal non-existence is that the former represents some sort of decline, whereas the latter involves an incline from non-existence into life. However, if, as I have shown, we have no reason to hold asymmetric attitudes towards past and future, from where do we receive this distinction? Nagel argues that death is a decline because it involves the absence of something which could have continued, namely life, whereas it is logically impossible that I might have been born earlier, and hence the period before my birth does not represent any kind of loss or deprivation. The reason behind Nagel’s claim is that, allowing for a short period in which I may have been born prematurely, I would not have been the same person as I am if I had been born earlier than I actually was. This is, at the very least, a controversial metaphysical claim, for which Nagel appears to offer no support. Rosenbaum comments that, unless we assume an asymmetry between the past and future, there does not seem to be any justification for claiming that my death date is not equally as necessary to my being who I am as my birth date. Parfit, too, rejects Nagel’s assertion, stating that, even if it were true that I could not have been born any earlier, there is no general conceptual difficulty associated with the notion of regretting what is logically impossible—he compares the severe distress of the Pythagoreans when they learnt that the square root of two was not a rational number.

In conclusion, then, I would say that, assuming both hedonism and a view of harm and well-being as temporally contained, no convincing argument can be provided which succeeds in refuting Epicurus’ claim that death, as an experiential blank, is not worthy of our fear. Finally, I would like to mention Rosenbaum’s comment that:

“Epicurus believed that unreflective common sense frequently was a source of bemusement and misery, and he wished to make common sense conform to the results of philosophical reflection”

“How To Be Dead and Not Care..” p. 126.
As philosophers, I hardly think we can argue with that.\(^5\)

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Bibliography


\(^5\)This paper was presented at the 1998 University of Birmingham Undergraduate Conference.
Belief

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Traditionally, propositions are some sort of autonomous abstract entity having two roles, one as bearers of truth and another as the object of propositional attitudes. This notion has come under considerable attack, most notably from Quine and his thesis of the Indeterminacy of Translation and his attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction. Now we may consider Quine’s position too extreme, certainly if we don’t accept his approach to meaning, but his arguments and their development by such as Davidson certainly show that propositions as abstract entities are otiose. Following Wittgenstein, we also reach this conclusion, for we do not need propositions as some ‘third realm’ to allow the possibility of communication as we are not, as it were, trapped inside our heads. In this essay, I shall attempt to show how we could offer an analysis of belief without propositions as their object.

In ‘On Saying That’¹, Davidson gives and analysis of indirect speech and suggests that it can serve as a general analysis of intentional contexts and hence of belief. An intentional context is one in which intersubstitutivity of co-extensional terms fails to preserve truth-value. Belief clearly provides such a context since someone could believe that Benjamin Franklin flew kites in lightning storms, but not that the first Postmaster General of the United States flew kites, for example.

¹Words and Objections: Essays on the Work of W.V. Quine ed. D. Davidson & J. Hintikka

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Davidson’s approach to indirect speech, then, is as follows: when I say that Galileo said that the Earth moved, what I am doing is representing Galileo and myself as samesayers. The notion of samesaying is a semantic primitive provided by radical interpretation and the concept of synonymy between utterances that it licenses. The way I make this representation of samesaying is by referring to Galileo, saying a sentence synonymous with one of his and saying that my doing so makes us samesayers.

The logical form of these indirect discourse sentences is given by an expression referring to an utterance. The next sentence gives the content of the utterance referred to, but has no logical or semantic connection with the original attribution of saying. Hence the label ‘paratactic’ given to Davidson's analysis, parataxis meaning the juxtaposition of two clauses without a conjunction between them.

The extension of this approach to belief contexts is not straightforward, however. A belief is not an utterance, so we cannot present ourselves and the believer as samesayers. Davidson does not suggest in ‘On Saying That’ how the extension should go, but the obvious approach to take would be to construe belief as a disposition to assert a sentence. Then for us to report someone’s belief is to make an utterance synonymous to a sentence they have a disposition to assert.²

It could be argued that we are reintroducing propositions here, but certainly not the traditional notion of propositions. What we are introducing are synonymy classes for individual speakers, which could seem like propositions in that they are what is common to propositional attitude sentences. But they are not traditional propositions as they are not autonomous entities and they are not the bearers of truth.

It may seem that the argument provided so far is not very convincing as an argument that belief must be a disposition to assert a sentence. All we have shown is one possible construction; not that it is the correct one. It is Davidson's thesis of radical interpretation

²Treating utterances as equivalent to sentences relativized to a speaker and time.
that is the real force behind what we have been doing and looking
more closely at this, we see why, for Davidson, belief (and thought)
must be tied so closely to language.

Davidson’s theory of meaning consists in giving a Tarski style
truth predicate. For this purely extensional notion to provide and
adequate account of meaning, he has to show how translation
between languages is possible without smuggling in any intentional
concepts. This is the purpose of radical interpretation.

The link between translation and belief is obvious, we cannot
hope to understand what somebody means by a foreign sentence
unless we know what his background beliefs are. For instance, if
someone says ‘I keep many rhinoceri in my fridge and freshly
squeeze a couple every morning for breakfast’. we have to decide if
he is talking nonsense or just has very strange beliefs about
rhinoceri. (This example is frivolous, but the point is an obvious one,
I believe).

The radical interpreter, however, starts with no theories of the
relationship between the speaker’s utterances and beliefs; and purely
by studying assent and dissent patterns to stimulus sentences, builds
up simultaneously a theory of the speaker’s beliefs and intentions
and a recursive, truth-theoretic interpretation of his language.

For this to be at all possible, the radical interpreter has to apply a
‘Principle of Charity’—to assume that the speaker’s beliefs are
correct more often than not and that they speak the truth more often
then not.

Another way to pt it is that the radical interpreter discovers what
sentences the speaker holds true. What sentences someone holds true
is a function of their beliefs and of what they mean by a sentence.
The interpreter, having found the held-true sentences, can then get at
what the speaker means by a sentence by using the principle of
charity and the notions of objective truth and error.

Then, as Davidson⁴ says, ‘The concept of belief....stands ready to
take up the slack between objective truth and the held true, and we

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⁴‘Thought and Talk’ in *Mind and Language* S. Guttenplan ed. 1975 OUP
come to understand it just in this connection.' The interpreter has the
notion of objective truth since he himself can speak (understand) his
own language. All this shows why we often speak of it only making
sense to talk of belief where the possibility of error exists, again
Davidson: ‘...as a private attitude [belief] is not intelligible, except
as an adjustment to the public norm provided by language.’

The argument is that only and interpreter can have the concept of
belief, but can we say that someone or something could have a belief
without the concept of belief? We are forced to deny this since, again
the old chestnut-we can’t be said to have a belief unless we
understand the possibility of being mistaken, which requires the
notion of true or false beliefs. The concept of belief, then, is given
rise to by radical interpretation, so it only makes sense of a language
speaker (interpreter) to say that he has beliefs. We may take this as
support for the suggestion that belief is a disposition to assert a
sentence.

Can animals have beliefs? Consider Malcolm’s example of
the dog chasing the squirrel in the woods and barking up the wrong
tree. It is tempting to say that the dog believes that the squirrel is up
the tree. We can reconcile this with the arguments above by saying
that we can attribute beliefs to animals just to the extent that they can
speak a language. Can we attribute language to them? This is a rather
arbitrary question. They inhabit such a different world from us, it is
hard to say what would count as language. It is certainly not clear
which of our language concepts would apply to them, and to that
extent we can disregard the question.

Wittgenstein’s approach to language is diametrically opposed to
Davidson’s. Davidson requires that the same sentence (relativized to
a given language) always has the same meaning—what he calls the
autonomy of meaning. Because the sentence has this fixed meaning
it can be used in various different speech acts with differing
elocutionary and perlocutionary forces. This notion of autonomy is
obviously intimately linked to radical interpretation.

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4 'Thoughtless Brutes' N. Malcolm in Proc. & Addr. APA 1972-3
Wittgenstein on the other hand would completely disagree. The meaning of a word or sentence is given by its use in a specific language game. This is one of the points he makes in his discussion of Moore's paradox.\(^5\)

The Paradox is to do with sentences of the form \( \text{`p but I do not believe } \text{p}' \), for instance ‘It is raining, but I do not believe that it is raining’.

The temptation here is to explain the absurdity of such sentences by saying that the assertion \( \text{p} \) and the negative belief statement concerning \( \text{p} \) have contradictory content. We would need then to produce an elaborate logic of assertion to show how this would work and why it is restricted to first-person ascriptions of belief.

The Wittgensteinian argument is that such an approach is completely misguided. We have just been misled by the preconception that words always have the same function, that we should analyze first-person belief statements in the same way as third-person ones. The fact that we can generate Moorean paradoxes for the first person case should just show us that we are dealing with a different language game here. The prime distinction is that first-person belief statements, he argues, do not make a report about the state of the speaker—the reason is the familiar one—the infallibility of first person belief statements. Thus the remark\(^6\) ‘Don’t regard a hesitant assertion as an assertion of hesitancy’. My saying ‘I believe it is going to rain’ is not attributing a degree of less than certainty in some sentence, it is an expression of that uncertainty.

In the case of third-person ascriptions, Wittgenstein says\(^7\): ‘Believing is a state of mind. It has duration; and that independently of the duration of its expression in a sentence, for example. So it is a kind of disposition of the believing person.’

\(^5\)Philosophical Investigations sect. II.x

\(^6\)Phil. Inv. pg. 192.

\(^7\)Phil. Inv. pg. 191.
Wittgenstein’s argument has certainly not shown that first-person belief statements never describe states of the utterer, however. In some cases, saying you believe something is ‘hesitancy behavior’, but consider someone saying the Nicene Creed. ‘I believe in one Holy, Roman and apostolic catholic Church.’—surely they are giving in some sense a description of their state, certainly a description of their commitments which is not contained in the belief statement itself. We cannot take Wittgenstein as having ruled out the possibility of analyzing some or most first-person belief statements dispositionally. What does seem right is ruling Moore’s paradoxes as absurd or possibly contradictory as they serve no purpose in any language game. Davidson can take a similar approach: a radical interpreter would not be able to offer an interpretation of the sentence, so it is meaningless.

But what happens if we make the replacement in our Moore’s paradox that we should make under the belief as disposition theory? ‘It is raining, but I do not have disposition to assert that.’ This sentence is non-contradictory and meaningful, so can we take belief to be a disposition to assert a sentence? To generate a contradiction, we would have to greatly strengthen the notion of disposition to assert over our normal idea of a psychological disposition, in fact to make it more like a physical disposition.

The brittleness of glass is a disposition—to break when dropped etc. The breaking when dropped is a criterion for the disposition, that is, if the breaking occurs, then the glass has the disposition. So in this case, ‘The glass broke (when dropped 1 foot onto the tiled floor), but was not brittle’ is a contradiction. The question is, can we usefully analyze belief as a disposition in a similar way?

In the case of the brittleness of glass, the disposition just is the microstate of the object. This microstate along with physical laws will completely determine what happens to the glass in a variety of situations, and it is a subset of these (e.g. breaking when dropped ones,) that are appropriate to the disposition brittleness. This is why the occurrence of an appropriate breaking will be a criterion for brittleness. The physical laws are given, so the disposition is just identified as the microstate.
What reason have we for thinking that it might be appropriate to treat belief as more akin to a physical disposition than to a usual psychological disposition (the disposition to become angry quickly), and consider the tale of the irascible monk.

Once upon a time, in a crowded city, there was a monk who lived in a serene monastery cut off from the hustle and bustle of the market place by high marble walls. This monk lived his peacefully in the monastery, contemplating the Ultimate; and died one day having never uttered a cross word to anyone. Does it make sense to say of this monk that, although he never showed it, he was irascible? Because if he had gone out into the crowded, busy, market place, then he would have had all number of irritating stimuli and often become angry?

We would want to deny that irascibility was applicable to the monk, even in the face of this counterfactual claim. Note that the question is not an epistemological one—if the monk was always getting angry in private, which no one ever saw, then it is quite obvious that he was irascible. The reason that we are denying the intelligibility of an ascription of irascibility to the monk is because a psychological disposition like irascibility is constituted by its occurrences; they were not criteria for the disposition. If we are talking of a criterion, then there is something behind the criterion: that which it is a criterion of. So if we could construct a counterfactual that would be a criterion for a disposition, then we must admit that the disposition can coherently be applied in our world.

For example, consider that our monk has a blood clotting disorder. In his monastery there are no sharp objects, so he never cuts himself or bleeds. But we can make perfect sense of the counterfactual that if he had ever cut himself, he would have bleed copiously, leading us to diagnose the blood-clotting problem. Thus we can say that the monk did not indeed have the disorder.

We can obviously imagine counterfactual situations where people are led to act on the basis of beliefs that they have never exhibited, so belief does not fall into the same category as irascibility. If someone acts on a belief, then that act, be it an utterance or bodily movement, is a criterion for the appropriate
belief. Since a belief has criteria and beliefs are not just constituted by appropriate acts, we are justified in treating belief as a disposition more akin to a physical than psychological disposition.

Let us call the disposition to assert relevant to our analysis of belief ‘disposition-to-assert\(_B\)’. To solve the relevant Moore's paradox, we need asserting \(p\) to be a criterion for disposition-to-assert\(_B\) the sentence \(p\). That is, we require that only if I have a disposition-to-assert\(_B\) the sentence \(p\) will I assert \(p\). We need still further constraints—what about taciturnity, a disposition not to assert anything? Then disposition-to-assert\(_B\) needs strong ceteris paribus clauses, the idea being that verifying instances of disposition-to-assert\(_B\) take place under standard loquaciousness conditions.

All we are doing is saying ‘believes’ in an unnecessarily complicated way, certainly not offering an analysis of belief. What we should take from the paratactic analysis of belief sentences is not an analysis of belief itself, but a way of giving the content of belief that removes the temptation to think of there being some object of belief like the traditional proposition.

How does the paratactic approach deal with cases where there really do seem to be objects of belief? We can answer this by saying that sentences like ‘I believe in God’ are elliptical for ‘I believe that God exists’. This works for such simple sentences, but again consider the case of the Nicene Creed, how would ellipsis work here?

To think that this sort of case provides a special difficulty for the paratactic account is to neglect the holistic nature of belief that goes hand in hand with radical interpretation. Here beliefs are identified by their place in the entire structure of beliefs, so there is really no difference between identifying one belief like ‘I believe that God exists’ and the set of interlocking beliefs that are expressed by assertion of the Nicene Creed. It seems that a relational account of belief, the obvious alternative in these situations would have just as much of a problem with the Nicene Creed—belief as a relation between me and what?

We have seen then that the analysis of belief as a disposition is ultimately fruitless, but we can take the paratactic analysis as a way of giving the content of beliefs directly, whilst denying that beliefs
have an object. Davidson's account of belief from radical interpretation may break down in some first-person cases where Wittgensteinian ‘hesitancy behavior’ is more a more appropriate description, but Wittgenstein has failed to show that these cases are of more than peripheral importance.\footnote{This paper was presented at the 1998 University of Birmingham Undergraduate Conference.}

Nominated by:
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Faith or “Superstitious Delusion”?:
A Study of David Hume’s Critique of Miracles

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Miracles have popularly been used by different religions as “evidence” for the truth of their religious beliefs. David Hume (1711-1776), not very convinced of the truth of religion in general, decided in his An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748), to question whether people are justified in believing in miracles. The response to Hume’s questioning is found in Section X of the Enquiry, under the subtitle “Of Miracles.” There, Hume claims to have an argument that proves that people aren’t justified in believing in miracles:

I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument... which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures. For so long, I presume, will the accounts of miracles and prodigies be found in all history, sacred and profane (Enquiry, 73).

Given the claim that Hume makes above, the question that this paper will address is whether Hume’s argument really shows that belief in miracles is erroneous. To do this, we will first identify what can be called Hume’s metaphysical argument against miracles, then will look at some critiques of this argument, and finally will examine what can be called Hume’s epistemological argument against miracles. In the course of this paper, I hope to show that Hume’s metaphysical argument against miracles fails to show that belief in miracles in erroneous, while his epistemological critique against miracles succeeds.

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Hume’s Metaphysical Argument Against Miracles

The simplest way to look at Hume’s metaphysical argument against miracles is to see it as an argument with two premises and a conclusion. The first premise of Hume’s argument is his definition of a miracle. A miracle, according to Hume, is defined as a “violation of the laws of nature” (Enquiry, 76). Hume then moves on to assert his second premise, that the laws of nature are inviolable, since “firm and unalterable experience has established these laws” (Enquiry, 76). In order to explain to his readers what he means by “laws of nature,” Hume offers some examples, such as “all men must die; that lead cannot, of itself, remain suspended in the air; that fire consumes wood,” etc. (Enquiry, 76). Why are these considered “laws of nature”? Because, Hume asserts, the above mentioned events meet the criteria that judges whether or not something is a law of nature. According to this criterion, a law of nature must consist of a cause and effect relationship found “in all countries and all ages, to have been constantly conjoined together” (Enquiry, 73). Since men and death, lead and falling, and fire and consumption of wood always appear to be “constantly conjoined together,” in every age and in every country, then these events, according to Hume’s criteria, can therefore be considered laws of nature. At this point Hume concludes that a miracle can never occur—for “nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happen in the common course of nature” (Enquiry, 76). Hume is asserting that an event could only be considered miraculous if it violated a law that has never, in the natural course of nature, been violated (e.g. lead and falling). Yet, Hume asserts that nature is governed by laws that do not allow for any exceptions (for it is their “exceptionless” properties that make them laws of nature). Therefore, miracles, which must violate a law of nature to be considered as such (by their definition), cannot exist. And thus, because miracles cannot exist, Hume concludes that a person cannot be rationally justified in believing in miracles.

Critiques of Hume’s Metaphysical Argument Against Miracles

There are objections that can be raised to both of the premises in Hume’s argument against miracles. The first premise is generally
well-accepted, but some people do disagree with Hume’s definition of a miracle. One of these thinkers is James E. Gilman. Gilman argues that “it is possible to argue for the view that miracles either conform to or counteract, but never violate, laws of nature” (in his “Reconceiving Miracles,” hereafter, “RM,” 480). How can Gilman defend this view? He asserts that even though the laws of nature account for “universal dispositions of natural processes,” one need not feel “compelled to claim that they are violated ‘when behavior disposed toward them does not occur’ or when behavior possessing a different dispositional property does occur” (“RM,” 479). It seems that Gilman is asserting that a miracle is not anti-natural; so strictly speaking, it does not violate that which is natural, such as natural laws. Cornelius Van Til shares Gilman’s view on this matter, but expounds upon it by describing what he sees as a “theocentric-universe.” Van Til, like Gilman, would argue that miracles are not a violation of natural laws, but Van Til would argue this to be true because he asserts that the laws of nature are whatever God does. So, Van Til would argue that laws of nature, as people know them, are merely generalizations of God’s method of working in the universe. Van Til asserts that miracles are possible because “God may at any time take one fact and set it into a new relation to created law... there is no inherent reason in the facts or laws themselves why this should not be done” (Defense, 27). So, he would not define a miracle as a violation of a natural law; rather, he might assert that a miracle is a natural law, that occurs less frequently than other natural laws. Gilman’s and Van Til’s criticisms of Hume’s definition may raise some questions about the soundness of Hume’s argument against miracles. In other words, if a person has reason to doubt that Hume’s first premise is true, then he or she might doubt that Hume’s argument really shows that miracles are ontologically impossible. And if miracles are ontologically possible, as Gilman and Van Til assert, then a person could be justified in believing in miracles. Gilman’s and Van Til’s argument may be convincing to some people, but their argument doesn’t have the logical force that the criticisms against the second premise have. So now, we will move on to critique Hume’s second premise.
The second premise, that the laws of nature are inviolable, is disputed, again, by Gilman. In reaction to the assertion that Hume makes in Section X, Gilman argues that Hume, in accordance with Newtonian cosmology, falsely assumes that the forces and processes of the universe are enslaved to deterministic and inviolable laws which admit of no exceptions so that miraculous events as exceptions to those laws are a fortiori ruled out. Besides begging the question, this conception of the laws of nature is really as incredulous as the Newtonian cosmology from which it is derived.” (“RM,” 478)

In this excerpt, Gilman critiques the soundness of Hume’s argument for miracles by asserting that Hume is committing the fallacy of “begging the question” when Hume asserts that the laws of nature are inviolable. Gilman’s assertion is a fair one; by asserting that the laws of nature are inviolable, Hume is assuming in his premise what is to be proved. This fallacy already leads one to question the validity of Hume’s argument. But, in addition to “begging the question,” Hume is also assuming that the laws of nature are inviolable without showing that they are inviolable. In fact, it seems that he has done more to prove the opposite (as will later be argued): that the laws of nature are violable.

In the quote above, Gilman asserts that Hume actually does believe that the “forces and processes of the universe” are “enslaved to deterministic and inviolable laws which admit of no exceptions” (“RM,” 478). However, I would argue that though Hume is inconsistent when he talks about the laws of nature, on his own terms, he should conclude that the laws of nature are violable. Why can it be asserted that Hume really believes that the laws of nature are violable, rather than inviolable? Because most of Hume’s work, except for Section X, appeals to the views of empiricism. If someone only read Section X “On Miracles”, he or she might conclude that Hume isn’t an empiricist because the assertion that the laws of nature are inviolable is inconsistent with empiricism (as will later be shown).

Generally, an empiricist believes that experience is the sole source of knowledge. And if experience is the sole source of knowledge, then humans can only know things with probability
rather than certainty. In fact, Hume himself, in Section IV, entitled “Skeptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding,” explains why the laws of nature could not be inviolable:

The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality. *That the sun will not rise tomorrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, *that it will rise*. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood (*Enquiry*, 15).

In this quote, Hume is actually asserting that there is no way to prove that anything that we know from past experiences must occur in the future—even when it comes to the sun rising. Hume clearly states his views on the limits of experience, stating: “when any natural object or event is presented, it is impossible for us, by any sagacity or penetration, to discover, or even conjecture, without experience, what event will result from it, or to carry our foresight beyond that object, which is immediately present to the memory and senses” (*Enquiry*, 50). In this quote, Hume argues that experience limits us to the present—we cannot be sure of what the future holds. In addition, Hume notes that it entails no logical contradiction for anything that we know today to change tomorrow. Hume in Section IV is asserting that there is no logical reason why humans have to die, why lead has to float, why fire has to consume wood, or why the sun has to rise. In this section (IV), Hume is asserting that from tomorrow on, it is logically possible that no human will ever die again, that lead will float, that fire won’t consume wood, or that the sun will not rise. Section X is the only section where Hume contradicts his position in Section IV—that the laws of nature are violable. Consider also that Hume asserts that there is no true connection, no necessity binding a cause to its effect. He asserts that any notion of cause and effect would come from the associations of ideas, not from a natural power that prescribes that an event must happen according to natural laws. Hume *denies* that the law of causality is truly a law of ontology, stating: “there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, anything which can suggest the idea of power and necessity” (*Enquiry*, 41). Thus, if we are “Humeans,” we cannot prove that
humans will die in the future, or that the sun will rise—as Hume says, this attempt would be in vain. Thus, it would be impossible, as an “Humean,” to assert that there are natural laws that the universe must conform to. With only experience as one’s sole source of knowledge, and without the laws of causality, one could not assert that natural laws are inviolable.

Another problem with Hume’s second premise, that the laws of nature are inviolable (besides the fact that it is inconsistent with his prevailing philosophy), is that it cannot survive Hume’s own critique of human reasoning. In Section IV of the Enquiry, Hume introduces what is popularly called the “Humean Fork.” He asserts that “all reasonings may be divided into two kinds, namely demonstrative reasoning, or that concerning relations of ideas, and moral reasoning, or that concerning matters of fact and existence” (Enquiry, 22). So, according to Hume, the assertion that the laws of nature are inviolable must either be a product of demonstrative reasoning, or it must concern matters of fact and existence. If Hume’s assertion is a product of demonstrative reasoning, then it tells us nothing about reality. Thus, we could never know whether there are really extramental laws of nature that inviolably govern the universe. But, if Hume contends that his assertion about the laws of nature concerns matters of fact and existence, then he would have to believe that natural laws could be experienced. And to in fact claim that the laws of nature are inviolable, Hume would have had to experience natural laws. This means that he would have to have an impression of natural laws. But Hume couldn’t possibly have had an experiential impression of natural laws because natural laws are not capable of being sensed. Thus, if Hume is asserting that natural laws, violable or inviolable, exist in reality, then he is making a truth claim that goes beyond the limits of experiential knowledge—Hume would be violating the tenets of his own philosophy.

Hume’s Epistemological Argument Against Miracles
If Hume’s metaphysical argument against miracles is meant to be a metaphysical argument, meaning that it makes a truth claim about reality, then, as the logical problems above reveal, the metaphysical argument is not a sound argument. And if Hume’s argument fails to
show that miracles are ontologically impossible, then, in this sense, he is failing to give a good reason why people should not believe in miracles. However, Hume’s epistemological criticisms of miracles are perhaps more convincing. These epistemological criticisms of miracles don’t prove that miracles are ontologically impossible, but give reasons why people shouldn’t believe in miracles.

One of the main principles that Hume mentions in the beginning of Section X is that “a wise man... proportions his belief to the evidence” (*Enquiry*, 73). So, by applying this principle or maxim to the evidence for miracles, a question is raised: since most of the “evidence” for miracles comes from personal testimony, how should the wise man evaluate the testimony which gives an account of the miraculous?

Hume would argue that there is no testimony that is good enough to demand the belief of a wise man. Firstly, Hume asserts that in general, “miracle-attesters” are not reliable witnesses. He asserts that most of them lack “unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves” (*Enquiry*, 78). Hume also argues that we cannot assume that miracle-attesters are “of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others” (*Enquiry*, 78). He adds that there are few miracle-attesters “of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood” (*Enquiry*, 78).

To give credence to his assertion above, that so-called miracles are really just products of human imagination rather than occurrences in reality, Hume offers reasons why a person might claim that he or she had seen a miracle, when in fact, he or she had not. Hume asserts that a person might imagine that he or she had seen a miracle because of the joy that such a claim excites in him or her. Because some people derive joy from thinking about miracles and the unusual, some people might believe too easily that they had witnessed a miracle. Hume argues that the “passion of surprise and wonder, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events... [many] love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others” (*Enquiry*, 78).
Besides the pleasure that a person might get out of believing that he or she had witnessed a miracle, Hume also proposes that a person might also pretend that he or she had witnessed a miracle “for the sake of promoting so holy a cause” as giving credence to his or her religion (Enquiry, 79).

These criticisms are interesting, but they don’t have a “logical punch” that demands the assent of observer. It may or may not be true that “miracle-attesters” are not trustworthy. But, Hume doesn’t stop here. The above epistemological criticism of miracles can be viewed as a preparation for a more convincing epistemological criticism of miracles.

In addition to his assertion that “miracle-attesters” generally aren’t trustworthy, and giving psychological reasons why he thinks this to be the case, Hume lays down an undeniable fact: many miracles have been fabricated in the past. And if there is a checkered history surrounding miracles, he asserts that the wise man cannot completely believe in miracles (since a “Humean’s” only source of knowledge is experience). Hume states:

The many instances of forged miracles, and prophecies, and supernatural events, which, in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence, or which detect themselves by their absurdity, prove sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvelous, and ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind (Enquiry, 79).

It may be logically possible that some people have truly witnessed miracles, but how can a person who has never experienced a miracle be persuaded to believe what the “miracle-attester” says, since some “miracle-attesters” have been frauds? According to Hume, and the tenets of empiricism, one should only believe in experience. But, if a person has never experienced a given event, then he or she must look to the experiential testimony of others. But if the testimony of others is questionable, as the testimony of “miracle-attesters” is (since “miracle-attesters” have forged miracles before), then, according to Hume, a wise man, who looks at miracles proportionally the evidence, could only look at miracles as highly questionable, or as potentially forged, firstly, because most people rarely or never personally experience miracles that violate the laws of nature, and
secondly because the little evidence the wise man has of miracles (“miracle-attester” testimony) is highly questionable. And if belief is reserved for only those things which a person can assent to because the truth of that in question is highly probable, then, according to Hume, a person could not justifiably believe in miracles—for miracles are not highly probable.

This argument is more convincing than Hume’s metaphysical argument against miracles since this argument doesn’t suffer from any fallacies or logical contradictions. The only criticism(s) that could be made against this argument would have to discredit either (1) the truth of the maxim that a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence or, (2) the truth of the empiricist assertion that experience is a human’s sole source of knowledge.

Conclusion
In conclusion, Hume’s metaphysical argument against miracles, if analyzed from a metaphysical perspective, suffers from many flaws, especially in the second premise. Thus, it seems that Hume failed to show that miracles are either really or logically impossible. And thus, Hume’s metaphysical argument alone doesn’t prove (in it’s failure to show that miracles are ontologically impossible) that a person is not justified in believing in miracles. However, Hume’s epistemological critique of miracles is more successful. And, if his aim was to show that a wise man cannot justifiably believe in miracles if testimony is his only “evidence,” and if the two above mentioned presuppositions to his epistemological argument are true, then he has succeeded in showing that a person cannot justifiably believe in miracles.

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Works Consulted

Refuting the Evil Genius Argument

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Descartes made a powerful and far-reaching supposition in Meditation I:

I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me... and if this means it is not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of any truth, I may at least do what is in my power [i.e. suspend my judgement], and with firm purpose avoid giving credence to any false thing, or being imposed upon by this arch-deceiver, however powerful and deceitful he may be.

I must emphasize that this supposition by Descartes is not his true belief, he only proposes it. I do not believe that Descartes adequately and definitively responds to the evil genius argument. Some people, including myself, believe that the appeal to God as the ultimate solution to the argument only hampers and confounds the problem. It is my intent to offer another argument against the evil genius argument. This argument does not appeal to a divine being and is intended to show that the evil genius argument cannot reasonably be accepted by anyone.

In my interpretation of the evil genius argument I take this evil genius to be a total deceiver. Remember, Descartes says (of the evil genius), "(He)...has employed his whole energies in deceiving me." I believe that Descartes is not even in a position to suspend judgment on the argument for the evil genius. Suspending judgment would be the reasonable thing to do, but I submit that, given the argument as it is, Descartes is not in a position to reason. Reasoning to the point of
suspending judgment means that Descartes must be following logical rules, these logical rules must be true and consistent. With an evil genius tricking Descartes at every turn, how can he even trust these logical rules? If he does not know if the physical world exists, how can he use rules that were refined through experience in the suspect world? Clearly, if the evil genius can cause Descartes to doubt everything, he should also give Descartes reason to doubt reason. To have reason to doubt reason is a clear contradiction, if one uses logic. It is saying, "Given that I have reason, then possibly I don't have reason." So Descartes can not use reason to come to the conclusion that must suspend judgment on everything. I must conclude that Descartes is being unreasonable in suspending judgment. I also must conclude that the evil genius argument, as I understand it, is a non-argument. It is, in effect, self-nullifying. Let me now explain it in argument form in order to better illustrate my point.

The Argument from Reason

(1) There may be, for all I know, an evil genius who is completely deceiving me.
(2) If (1) then I must suspend judgment about having any knowledge.

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(3) I must suspend judgment about having any knowledge.
(4) If (3), then I must suspend judgment on my knowledge of logic.

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(5) I must suspend judgement on my knowledge of logic.
(6) If (5), then I can't logically conclude that (1) is true, or whether or not I should suspend judgment on it.

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(7) I can't logically conclude that (1) is true, or false, or whether or not I should suspend judgment on it.
(8) If (7), then I can not reasonably argue for the possibility of (1).

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(9) I can not reasonably argue for the possibility of (1).
I grant (1) for the sake of the argument. The rationale for (2) is the following: Since I am uncertain as to whether or not there is an evil genius tricking me, I must doubt everything because the evil genius may be tricking me into believing something is so, when it actually is not. Intermediate conclusion (3) is the affirmation of the conclusion of (2). Since knowledge of logic is included in the set of any knowledge, then given (3), the conclusion must follow. (5) is an intermediate conclusion and is the affirmation of the conclusion of (4). (6) says given (5), I can't come to any logical conclusions about (1) because my possibly flawed logic could lead me to the wrong conclusion. Since it could lead me to the wrong conclusion I can not use it to determine, with certainty, whether or not the evil genius exists. (7) is the affirmation of the conclusion of (6). (8) says given (7), then I can not create any reasonable argument for the possibility of the evil genius. (9) is the conclusion and affirms the conclusion of (8).

There is at least one objection to the preceding argument. This objection is that I still have not proven that there is not an evil genius tricking me into believing that things, besides the evil genius and myself, exist when in fact they do not. A person who expresses this argument could say that I have only found a way to sweep away arguments about the evil genius, but in fact the evil genius could exist, only I have no way of discovering this fact. In my argument I have erased all chance in discovering whether or not the evil genius does exist. This person would go on to say that denying the ability to reason about the evil genius does not make him non-existent.

At first glance the above appears to be a powerful objection to my "Argument from Reason" however, it is not. I simply need to ask the doubter what I should say about the evil genius. He may say, "Well, you should suspend judgment because you do not know if the genius exists or not." I then must respond, "If I do that then I must also suspend judgment about reason, if I want to remain consistent." He may then respond, "Well, you could suspend judgment about reason, but still use it to arrive at some conclusion about the evil genius." I simply could not accept his last statement to be intelligible. My final reply would be "I must doubt reason, but still use it? That is a ridiculous claim!". As I said before, a skeptic's
doubted reason could lead him to the wrong conclusion, therefore it can not be used to conclude with certainty, anything about the evil genius. Making any conclusion includes suspending judgment about the evil genius. If he were to use his doubted reason to show that the evil genius is a possibility, it seems that he must even doubt the possibility of the evil genius. Even when he is presented with the proof of the consistency of logic, given to him possibly from the evil genius, he must doubt even that. That same skeptic should doubt that even his reasoning center, be it his brain or mind or whatever, exists. This same skeptic should doubt his own existence. This skeptic could not say, "I think, therefore I am," because this skeptic doubts the foundation for his logical statement. He would have to say, "I think therefore I am, but since I use reason to come to this conclusion, it is possible that my reason is wrong and I actually do not exist, I just think I do." How could he even reason that he thinks? I believe this skeptic's statement that, "You could use reason even if you doubt it", to be absurd.

Since I have no way to say rationally whether the evil genius really exists or not, and I can not rationally suspend judgment, I must declare the "Evil Genius Argument" a non-argument. The argument for the evil genius is not rational. The irrational believer in the evil genius must bear the burden of proof in supporting him. I have no idea how a person with this belief could even set out to develop a rational argument for the evil genius, let alone provide evidence for his existence.¹

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¹ This paper was presented at the third West Virginia University Philosophy Department’s In-House Undergraduate Conference in Philosophy, held on April 4, 1998.
Is it good to be noble? A critical examination of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals*

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Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* draws conclusions about mankind and its morality systems that many of its readers would be loath to accept. The unpalatableness of his claims to modern tastes does not however constitute a sufficient criticism in philosophy. As Nietzsche himself writes, “whether they are to your taste, these fruits of ours.... what matters that to us, us the philosophers.”¹ (Pref., 2,3) This is a valuable point. It is the task of philosophy to critically examine the logical structure of arguments and the validity of the assumptions on which they are based; to be swayed by arguments, not by tastes.

The following paper will attempt to conduct such a critical examination with one exception. Little or no attempt will be made to examine the validity of the assumptions upon which Nietzsche draws his conclusions. This is not to say that his assumptions ought not to be subjected to analysis. Nietzsche’s aphoristic style is such that a great number of his assertions are more assumed than established by argument. This would tend to make a critical examination of the assumptions underlying Nietzsche’s genealogy both an exhaustive and difficult process. As a measure of expedience therefore, we will

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¹ Unless otherwise specified, references are to Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Russell and Russell inc., New York, 1964. Nietzsche’s work is separated into both chapters and sections. In all references to this work, I supply firstly the chapter, secondly the section and finally the page number. Therefore, the reference above (pref., 2,3) is from the second section of the preface and on the third page.

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confine ourselves to the following question: do Nietzsche’s arguments, when taken to their logical conclusion, constitute a reason to reject the dominant morality in favour of that of the nobility? To understand this question, it is first necessary to understand the basic structure of Nietzsche’s claims.

There are many conclusions drawn by Nietzsche in his polemic but perhaps the most damning and powerful of these concerns the dominant modern morality. Our modern notion ‘evil’, he argues, is founded on resentment. As resentment is widely held to be an ‘evil’, then it seems to follow that our ideas of ‘evil’ are vilely derived. In short, ‘evil’ is a notion that condemns its own existence. Furthermore, Nietzsche claims that ‘good’, as popularly conceived, was created out of the “counterfeiting and self-deception of weakness” (1,13,47). That is, our notions of ‘good’ are also built on faulty (or at least questionable) foundations. Philosophically, the truth of such claims does not necessarily constitute a definitive criticism of modern morality. As Ayer writes, the fact that a conclusion does not follow from its putative premise is not sufficient to show that it is false².³ As a result, in order to overthrow modern morality, it is not enough to simply criticise “the way it came into being”⁴. For this reason, Nietzsche goes one step further. Not only does he argue that modern morality is based on doubtful (in fact hateful) premises, but that it is simply a distortion of a pre-existing moral code that is free from such problems. This noble morality is based not on hate and deception, but on joy and affirmation. Why, Nietzsche questions, would we follow a code based on resentment and delusion when a positive, heroic alternative is before us?

³ This point should be qualified. Nietzsche is seeking to accomplish through the Genealogy of Morals a paradigm shift in morality. The dominant morality, he argues, is derived from problematic origins. The validity of these criticisms would certainly entail a challenge to the dominant paradigm. Yet in order to accomplish a paradigm shift, to overthrow modern morality, an alternative must be advanced. People will not reject their system of regulating behaviour if there is no alternative before them. Better to live under a bad system than none at all.
Before we can answer this, we should first come to some understanding of the arguments that Nietzsche believes entitles him to frame such a question. Nietzsche’s polemic begins with a simple argument from philology. His study of languages uncovered a consistent link between the words “good” and “noble”. In English, the link is fairly clear. We speak of “noble actions” and “noble sentiments” to refer to actions or sentiments we hold to be “good”. This link, consistent over several languages, can be explained, Nietzsche maintains, through a historical understanding of the nobility. The nobles, by virtue of their power, had control over language: “they say ‘this is that, and that,’ they seal finally every object and every event with a sound, and thereby at the same time take possession of it. (1,2,21) If this is the case, then the term ‘noble’ was originally created by the nobility themselves. The original meaning of the word ‘noble’ was simply self-descriptive. It denoted only the ruling class and its members. This “essentially unsymbolic” (1,6,27) descriptive term eventually took on broader dimensions. The actions of the aristocracy became referred to as ‘noble actions’. In this way, ‘noble’ came not only to refer to the ruling class and its members, but also to their actions. Just as actions were invested with the title ‘noble’, so too the dispositions, natures and qualities of the aristocracy became ‘noble’. At some stage in this process, however, the term ‘noble’ ceased to be merely descriptive. A new symbolic element emerged and in this symbolism, comes the first signs of moral language. Nietzsche attributes this development to self-affirmation. Compelled by their love of self-affirmation, the nobility came to view the word ‘noble’, being as it is a self-description, as thereby containing an affirmation. Anything ‘noble’, as a consequence, came to have positive connotations. Following this line of argument, it is not difficult to understand the link between ‘noble’ and ‘good’. Both have become general terms of affirmation.

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5 Nietzsche is not explicit in outlining when or how this process took place.
6 In Nietzsche’s own words, “every aristocratic morality springs from a triumphant affirmation of its own demands” (1,10,34).
In order to clarify what was meant by the affirmation ‘noble’ the ruling class further created a term for those who were not noble. In English, there are many antonyms for ‘noble’ (consider ‘slave’, ‘peasant’, ‘commoner’). The most clear example of Nietzsche’s argument however, can be found in the word ‘ignoble’. Literally (or ‘unsybolically’), the word simply means “not noble in respect of birth, position or reputation.” This is a clear parallel to the original meaning of ‘noble’ as it refers simply to ‘persons, their birth, condition etc.’ Furthermore, ‘ignoble, like its counterpart, has a more symbolic meaning. It also means ‘not noble in disposition, nature, or quality.’ That is, it refers not only to the lower class and its members, but also to their “actions, aims, (and) desires.”

This symbolic aspect of the word ‘ignoble’, can be readily understood by Nietzsche’s theory. While ‘noble’ is an affirmation, ‘ignoble’ (meaning as it does, ‘not noble’) is a negation. As such, anything ‘noble’ carries praise while the title ‘ignoble’ bares the burden of censure. In sum, ‘good’, being a general term of affirmation, is linked to (in fact derived from) the word ‘noble’, while ‘bad’, being a general term of censure or negation, is causally linked to ‘ignoble’.

Nietzsche’s arguments seek to reject the notion that our ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are innate. He claims that these are simply words that derive from earlier antitheses (noble/ignoble). These antitheses were in fact created by the ruling class. That is, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ were created not given. One may wish to respond to that by saying that all words were created and that the person who first names a concept does not necessarily create it. Such a response however involves a misunderstanding of Nietzsche’s claims. Nietzsche argues that the nobles actually created both the concept and the term. In fact, his claim is much stronger. The concept is secondary to the term.

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8 ibid.
9 ibid.
10 ibid.
all the ideas of ancient man have... to be understood in their initial stages, in a sense which is, to an almost inconceivable extent, crude, coarse, physical and narrow, and above all essentially unsymbolical (1,6,27)

Nietzsche appears to deny the idea that concepts have any existence separate from or before language. If this is true, then it seems to follow that in creating the unsymbolic term ‘noble’, the aristocracy are responsible for creating the concept of ‘noble’ and, by extension, the concept of ‘good’. We will explore later whether or not this argument is valid.

Another consequence of Nietzsche’s argument involves a curious reading of values. The concept of values, he claims, was originally no more than a reference to the actions and dispositions of the nobility in contrast to the peasants. ‘Noble actions’ simply meant ‘actions of the nobles’. The affirmation attached to the word ‘noble’, lent the actions an air of commendation. In this way, the actions and dispositions of the nobility came to be valued as ‘good’. Pride, ambition, barbarism and lust provide just a few examples of noble values. ‘Ignoble characteristics’ are similarly determined. By terming any action ‘ignoble’, with the inherent negation that word bares, it thereby becomes censured as ‘bad’. Typical slave characteristics, for example patience, forbearance, meekness, discipline and temperance, therefore become valued negatively.

This is surely a strange calculation. If this was the original value system, some radical transvaluation must have occurred at some point. Modern morality seems diametrically opposed to this original Master morality. Those characteristics valued as ‘good’ by the nobility are largely viewed by the common mind as ‘evils’ to be avoided. The nobility also censures those characteristics that modern man generally strives to attain. Is the dominant morality therefore close to that of the slave morality? If so, some attempt must be made to explain how the noble morality was overthrown and how the slave morality came to the fore.

Nietzsche does indeed argue that the dominant value system of today is derived from that of the slaves. His explanation of how this transvaluation occurred forms the second part *The Genealogy of Morals.*
The transvaluation of values has its origin, Nietzsche argues, in the sacerdotal aristocracies; societies “where the highest caste is at the same time the priestly caste” (1,6,26). These castes are, by their nature, weaker than the noble aristocracies. They turn “away from action” (1,6,27), advocate privation and suffer from “the morbidity and neurasthenia of priests of all periods” (1,6,27). Set against a “flowering, rich, and even effervescing healthiness” (1,7,21), the sacerdotal aristocracies were at a decided disadvantage in those situations where “the priestly caste and the warrior caste jealously clash with one another and find themselves unable to come to terms” (1,7,29). The resulting feeling of weakness engendered in the priestly caste further feelings of resentment and it is this resentment that forms the catalyst for an alternate morality system: The revolt of the slaves in morals begins in the very principle of resentment becoming creative and giving birth to values. (1,10,34) Discontentment about oppression becomes resentment towards the oppressor. The oppressor, the nobility, becomes the embodiment of all the evils that the oppressed face. Everything that is characteristically noble is seen, “by the venomous eye of resentment” (1,11,39), as vile and hateful. Priestly morality therefore rejected as ‘evil’ all those sentiments, actions and values that are characteristically noble. It should be remembered at this point that these very characteristics form the basis of the noble concept of ‘good’. This is how, Nietzsche argues, the word ‘evil’ came to denote such characteristics as ambition, pride, vengeance, fury and so forth in the priestly mind.

It still remains to explain the genealogy of the priest’s alternative notion of what is ‘good’. Nietzsche does so with the aid of the analogy of the lamb and the bird of prey. The lambs, resenting their oppressors, allege that “these birds of prey are evil” (1,13,45). On the strength of this conclusion, the lamb then asks “he who is as far removed from being a bird of prey, who is rather its opposite, a lamb- is he not good?” (1,13,45) This seems a fairly reasonable conclusion. If something is evil, then surely its direct opposite must be good. The lambs, regarding themselves as the direct opposite of the birds of prey, therefore come to think of themselves as ‘good’. By extension, everything characteristically ‘lambish’ also comes to
be seen as commendable. This same reasoning is attributed by Nietzsche to the priests. The priest, who regards everything noble as being ‘evil’, comes to affirm himself (whom he regards as opposite to the ‘vile nobility’) as ‘good’. Consequently, the priests begin to view everything that is characteristic of themselves (such as patience, humility, meekness, etc.) as ‘good’.

It is hardly surprising that the plebeian class embraced this new morality. Being even weaker than the priestly aristocracy, the slaves suffered the oppression and tyranny of the nobility to a greater degree. The analogy of the lamb and the bird of prey with which Nietzsche explained the relationship between the priests and the nobility, is even more accurate a description of the slave/noble relations.

Having laid out this much of Nietzsche’s argument, it is now clear how he thinks that the two opposing morality systems came into being. The nobility, joyously content with their own situation, thought “we are ‘good’, so whatever is ‘not us’ must therefore be bad”. In reaction to the oppression of the nobles, the priests thought “they’ are evil, so whatever is their opposite, namely ‘us’, must therefore be ‘good’” (1,13,45). There is a clear parallel in the opposing morality systems. Both affirm themselves as ‘good’ and negate their opposites as the contrary of ‘good’. For the nobility, the contrary of ‘good’ is referred to as ‘bad’. For the slave, ‘not good’ is given the name ‘evil’.¹¹ There is also a clear difference in the thinking and motives behind the two opposing morality systems. It is this difference which Nietzsche believes gives merit to the nobility and condemnation to the slaves.

The noble morality, we have said, sprang from a joyous self-affirmation. They cherished the notion of ‘good’ and only as an

¹¹ It should be noted that, for Nietzsche, the slave’s use of the word ‘evil’ rather than ‘bad’ is highly significant. In the word ‘bad’, he claims, there is “an admixture of nonchalance, of casualness, of boredom, of impatience, even of personal exultation” (1,10,35). Compare this to the “vindicative hatred and revengefulness of the weak” (1,10,35) that he associates with the word ‘evil’. This very word, ‘evil’, has clear vile connotations (at least as Nietzsche portrays it).
afterthought, “a pale late-born foil” (1,10,35), did they create the term ‘bad’ to clarify the meaning of ‘good’. The priests, on the other hand, spurred on by resentment, began with the term ‘evil’ as a reference to their oppressors. After calling the nobility ‘evil’, they then thought that they themselves must be ‘good’. The nobility’s morality system, as painted by Nietzsche, is joyous and positive, effervescent with action and free from malice. His portrait of the slave morality is quite different. The slave is resentful and negative, fundamentally reactive, and consumed by malicious feelings towards the nobility. The following passage from Berkowitz perhaps provides the clearest expression of what conclusions Nietzsche believes we should draw from these cited differences:

Whereas the nobleman’s ‘good’ is a spontaneous invention that reflects the goodness of his spirit, the slavish man’s ‘good’ is a make-shift conceptualisation that reveals his sordid desire to blunt the nobleman’s power.  

At this point, it may be helpful to repeat the question with which this paper is concerned. That is, do Nietzsche’s arguments, when taken to their logical conclusion, constitute a valid reason for rejecting the dominant morality in favour of that of the nobility? Thus far, we have been concerned with clarifying Nietzsche’s arguments in an attempt to establish the meaningfulness of this question. What follows will be a somewhat indirect attempt at a solution. It will begin by exploring what intuitively appears to be a problem in Nietzsche’s genealogy. As will be outlined, Nietzsche does have a strong defence against this problem. It is this defence that is of particular relevance to our question. It will be seen that while protecting Nietzsche’s genealogy from criticisms in one direction this defence exposes serious problems in another. By exploring these problems and analysing Nietzsche’s possible defences, the scope of Nietzsche’s criticisms of the slave morality becomes progressively narrow. In short, by establishing what Nietzsche cannot say, we begin to focus more sharply on what

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reason, if any, remains to reject the dominant morality in favour of the morality of the nobles.

The first possible criticism we will explore is whether Nietzsche’s genealogy is complete. Any genealogy, by definition, should search for the genesis, the origin of a particular phenomenon. As the phenomenon in question is morality Nietzsche’s genealogy should surely address the origin of our morals. Nietzsche assumes in entitling his polemic *The Genealogy of Morals* that there was no system of morality prior to the ruling class’ creation of the term ‘noble’. This assumption is far from a priori valid. In order for the noble class to have created a name for themselves, they as a class must have existed before the term ‘noble’ and consequently, before the existence of moral values. This raises an interesting question. How is it possible to have a ruling class without values? The nobility about which Nietzsche writes is violent, barbarous and ambitious; seemingly at the whim of every desire or inclination. This violence and barbarity must at least have been restrained to some degree for them to enjoy any social cohesion or stability. This restraint, if it were to be effected, would surely have been reciprocal (that is, agreed) restraint. If there was agreed restraint prior to the creation of the term ‘noble’, Nietzsche faces some serious problems—after all, what would prompt the nobility to show a restraint so apparently contrary to their nature?

One obviously unacceptable response would be to argue that the nobles restrained from certain behaviours because they felt it was right to do so. If certain behaviours were judged in terms of rights and wrongs prior to the creation of the term ‘noble’, then morality is younger than Nietzsche’s genealogy suggests. Equally as unacceptable would be to suggest that restraint amongst the nobles

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13 By agreed restraint, I do not necessarily mean a conscious, written or spoken agreement. It may have been subtle, unspoken, even unconscious.

14 It should be made clear that Nietzsche does not wish to deny the existence of restraint amongst the nobility. The following quote about the nobility makes this entirely clear:

“when out of the bounds of their circle... they enjoy their freedom from all social control”. (111,39-40)
was innate. Restraint requires, amongst other traits, discipline, forbearance and tolerance. These traits are characteristic of the slave notion of ‘good’ that Nietzsche is seeking to criticise. Consequently, to suggest that restraint amongst the nobles was innate, is tantamount to claiming that much of the slave morality is innate. Nietzsche would most certainly not wish to make such a claim. In sum, Nietzsche’s explanation for noble restraint must involve an account free from suggestions of right and wrong and from innate tendencies.

In part four of the preface, Nietzsche does intimate an explanation for social restraint. He puts forward “equilibrium as the hypothesis of all contract and consequently of all law.” (Pref., 4,7) The social restraint amongst the nobles was a result of “a balance between persons of approximately equal power” (1,4,6-7). In aphorism 112 of The dawn of Day, Nietzsche argues that concessions of power (that is, restraint) are “actuated by wisdom, fear and prudence”. It is wise in so far as reciprocal restraints have benefits, fear-driven because struggle may be “dangerous or inopportune” and prudent because it promotes alliances in case of a “hostile third power”. This explanation satisfies the two restrictions layed out in the preceding paragraph. It seeks to explain social restraint without recourse to suggestions of either rights and wrongs or innate tendencies. The argument also has the strength that it accounts for the fact that the noble’s restraint did not apply to the plebeian class. Between the nobility and the slaves there was no balance of power. As an equilibrium of power is a prerequisite for restraint, the nobility had no need to restrain their behaviour toward the slaves.15 The greatest strength of the equilibrium argument, however, undoubtedly lies in its defence against one attack on Nietzsche’s genealogy. If it could be shown that morality predates the creation of the term ‘noble’, Nietzsche’s polemic would thereby fail in its attempt to provide a genealogy of morals. This failure would be assured if agreed restraint amongst the nobility required pre-existing moral laws. The equilibrium argument, offering as it does an explanation of

15 Nietzsche makes this point clear by referring to the noble’s relations with the slaves as “the wilderness” (1,11,40). For the nobles, it is a world without restraint.
social contract that is free from suggestions of morality, avoids such a problem. If this argument is valid, then social cohesion amongst the nobility cannot be used as a stick with which to beat Nietzsche’s genealogy.

The validity of Nietzsche’s equilibrium argument may free his polemic from accusations that social cohesion amongst the nobility point to pre-existing moral laws. It does so, however, at a cost. By accepting the existence of restraint amongst the nobility, the strengths of some of Nietzsche’s criticisms of the slave morality are weakened. One of the major criticisms he wages against the slave morality is that “its action is fundamentally a reaction” (1,10,35). The cowardice and weakness Nietzsche believes are entailed in such reaction is emphasised by the contrast he claims is offered by the nobility. The nobility, in Nietzsche’s words, “acts and grows spontaneously” (1,10,35). This action and spontaneity is questioned however, by the equilibrium argument. The actions of the nobility, in so far as they result from a balance of contending strengths, must surely be fundamentally *reactions*. They must, like the slaves, restrain their behaviour because of the power of others. This reaction poses another problem. By terming their actions towards each other ‘noble actions’, the nobility would thereby echo the message that Nietzsche deridingly attributes to the slave morality—“it is good to do nothing for which we are not strong enough”. An excerpt from Nietzsche’s attack on the self-deception of the slave morality exemplifies the problem:

> this dismal state of affairs, this prudence of the lower order... has, thanks to the counterfeiting and self-deception of weakness, come to masquerade in the pomp of an ascetic, mute, and expectant virtue, just as though the very weakness of the weak... were a voluntary result, something wished, chosen, a deed, an act of merit. (1,13,47)

The actions of the slaves are a result, this implies, of the power of others and it is therefore a self-deception to interpret these actions in terms of merit. The equilibrium argument suggests that the actions of the nobility in their relations to one another are likewise determined by relative power. If so, surely it would be a self-deception for the nobility to attribute merit to their restrained reactions.
One possible retort to this criticism would be to grant that the actions of the nobility in their relations with each other are restrained and reactionary but still maintain that, when in “the wilderness” (1,11,40), their actions are pro-active and spontaneous. As was outlined earlier, when the nobility confronts the plebeian class, the requirement for restraint is absent. Noble actions in this respect are not determined by relative weakness but are (perhaps) the result of volition and strength. In the above quote, Nietzsche argued that it is a self-deception to attribute merit to actions in the absence of volition. If indeed the actions of the nobility toward the slaves involves volition, then entitling such actions ‘noble’ does not involve “the counterfeiting and self-deception of weakness” (1,13,47).

The validity of the above defence depends on whether the actions of the nobility toward those of less power can justifiably be attributed to volition. If it is not an act of volition, then it can hardly be justifiably termed an act of merit\(^\text{16}\). However, in part 13 of the first essay, Nietzsche denies the nobility of choice in their behaviour toward the slaves. He argues that it is a “misleading error of language” (1,13,45) to maintain that the nobility has a choice in exerting power over the weak. Nietzsche is quite categorical on this point:

The popular morality separate(s) strength from the expression of strength, as though behind the strong man there existed some indifferent neutral substratum, which enjoyed a caprice or option as to whether or not it should express strength. But there is no substratum, there is no ‘being’ behind doing, working or becoming; “the doer” is a mere appendage to the action. The action is everything. (1,13,45)

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\(^{16}\) The link between merit and volition assumed in this conclusion is based on Nietzsche’s own criticisms of the slave morality. According to Nietzsche, the self-deception of the slave morality adhered in attributing virtue to actions “as though ... they were a voluntary result, something wished, chosen, a deed, an act of merit” (1,13,47). This suggests that one cannot justifiably claim virtue or merit to one’s actions in the absence of volition. Nietzsche’s notion of what is entailed in volition will be outlined later.
Is it Good to be Noble?

The above quotation argues that, in their behaviour towards the slaves, the nobility does display action and spontaneity. Indeed, according to Nietzsche’s portrait, their behaviours are so purely actions that they are not even a reaction to the will. This appears to present the noble morality with problems. In painting the nobility as active and spontaneous in their behaviour towards the slaves Nietzsche does not necessarily free the noble morality of the charge of self-deception. To avoid this charge, Nietzsche seems compelled to establish that the actions of the nobility are the result of volition. If volition implies choice then clearly it is not a capacity belonging to the nobility. We may remember that, according to Nietzsche, the self-deceived thinking of the slave morality could be captured thus: “it is good to do nothing for which we are not strong enough” (1,13,47). The nobility, though quite different, may seem to share a similar self-deception. They have no choice but to be active and spontaneous oppressors of the weak. In terming these actions ‘noble’, there is an inherent praise and affirmation. Is it not fair, in the light of Nietzsche’s polemic, to paraphrase the thinking of the noble morality as ‘it is good to do something over which we have no control’?

Perhaps Nietzsche would respond to this question by saying that the above use of the term ‘good’ is misapplied in respect to the nobility. The nobility do not couch ‘good’ in terms of merit and choice. The word ‘noble’ came to have positive connotations not because their actions were chosen but simply because their actions

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17 By ‘will’ I mean the will as popularly conceived. We normally mean by ‘will’ the faculty of choosing or deciding. Nietzsche’s use of will is quite different. He includes willing as a “quantum of force” (1,13,45) wholly devoid of “caprice or option” (1,13,45) (see part 13). The meaningfulness of such a definition is not abundantly clear. What is will if not choice? Nietzsche’s answer to this question will be explored later.

18 The link between volition and choice assumed in this argument would be denied by Nietzsche. As will be seen, Nietzsche claims that volition is an act of the will and that the will does not involve choice. As a result, by denying the nobility of choice in their actions, Nietzsche does not believe that he thereby denies the nobility of volition.
were their actions. As was outlined earlier, it was the self-affirmation that came to be attached to the term ‘noble’ that explains its positive connotations. This response seems to beg the following question: in what sense can the nobility meaningfully use the words ‘our actions’ to refer to actions over which they had no choice? Nietzsche’s response would arguably be to claim that this question involves a misunderstanding of the concept of ‘free will’. The above question assumes that the words ‘our actions’ must necessarily refer to some “neutral indifferent substratum” (1,13,45), some “being behind doing” (1,13,46) that is capable of “caprice or option” (1,13,45). It is this very assumption that Nietzsche is seeking to deny. There is, he argues, “no being behind doing” (1,13,46). The will is not external, guiding the course of action, it is just another “quantum of force” (1,13,45) wholly devoid of caprice or option. At this point in the genealogy, Nietzsche gets a little caught up in his own hyperboles. Exactly what the will is (if not the ability to chose) is never fully articulated. What follows is an attempt to piece together Nietzsche’s conceptualisation of the will.

The will, for Nietzsche, seems to be akin to a wish or desire. An inherent part of strength, he claims, is “a wish to overpower, a wish to overthrow, a wish to become master, a thirst for antagonisms and triumphs” (1,13,45). Interestingly, there is also an inherent wish attached to weakness. Namely, the wish “to express itself as a strength” (1,13,45). Both the weak and the strong therefore have a will. Both the weak and the strong also act on that will. Perhaps Nietzsche would maintain that what separates the will of the strong from that of the weak is freedom. That is, the nobility posses free will\(^{19}\), the slaves do not. Once again a redefinition is required. Free will, in this sense does not hold the popular meaning of freedom as the ability to determine one’s actions in accordance with one’s wishes. The will of the strong is free only in the sense that its action is unrestrained. The will of the weak, being a reaction to the strength of others, cannot be said to be unrestrained and consequently, it cannot be said to be free.

\(^{19}\) At least in their actions toward the weak.
At this point we finally seem to have found a reason for rejecting the slave morality in favour of that of the nobility. Earlier, it was argued that in order to claim merit for one’s actions, these actions must be the result of volition. That is, they must be an act of a free will. By establishing that the actions of the nobility (in their relations to the slaves) meet the requirements for free will\(^{20}\), Nietzsche thereby allows for these actions to be considered in terms of merit. If Nietzsche is right in maintaining that only the nobles possess free will and if free will (understood as freedom from restraint as opposed to freedom of choice) is something which we truly value, then surely the noble morality boasts an advantage over its rival. This conclusion is of course only as strong as the two clauses upon which it depends. Two questions therefore need to be answered. Firstly, is it true that the creators of the slave morality did not possess free will?\(^{21}\) Secondly, do we truly value free will?\(^{22}\) If either of these questions is answered negatively, the nobility’s possession of free will cannot be regarded as an advantage over the slaves.

The answer to the first question is arguably ‘no’. Free will, as Nietzsche has defined it, is a property exclusive to strength. Though the creators of the slave morality were no doubt weak in many respects, Nietzsche does attribute to them one clear strength: “the priests are, as is notorious, the worst enemies - why? Because they are the weakest.” (1,7, 29) This idea (that weakness is a strength) is not so paradoxical as it sounds. Because they are physically weak, the priests develop intellectual strengths. They become the “most

\(^{20}\) That is, Nietzsche’s requirements for free will.

\(^{21}\) This question refers to free will as Nietzsche has defined it. It could be reworded thus: do the creators of the slave morality meet Nietzsche’s requirements for free will?

\(^{22}\) This second question, as it is worded, may appear somewhat strange. One may be tempted to argue that of course we value free will. It should be noted however, that Nietzsche’s definition of free will is radically different from free will as popularly conceived. Nietzsche’s definition denies free will of choice and it may be that it is the capacity to chose that we truly value. In other words, Nietzsche may have removed from the concept of free will the very property that gives it value.
crafty... most cleverest” (1,7, 29) enemies. The superior cunning of the priests over the nobles certainly constitutes a strength. Indeed it is this very strength that largely accounts for the decline of the noble morality. With this in mind, the priestly revenge that Nietzsche portrays in the latter half of the first essay becomes a willed action resulting from and enabled by a position of intellectual strength. According to Nietzsche’s equilibrium argument, restraint is a result of a balance of powers and is therefore inapplicable to those in a position of strength. To summarise, the will for revenge acted upon by the priests was unrestrained and therefore (according to Nietzsche’s definition) free.

The conclusion that priestly revenge meets Nietzsche’s requirements for an act of free will, suggests that the possession of free will cannot be used as a means of distinguishing between the noble and slave moralities. After all, both classes seem to possess free will. Consequently, if free will is a prerequisite for merit, then both classes may claim merit for their actions. This is not the only consequence however. Nietzsche argued earlier that the strong have no option but to express their strength and therefore ought not to be blamed for their actions. Following this argument, the priests cannot be blamed for their revenge upon the nobles - they had no choice. The second consequence of the attributing of revenge to free will is that it exposes the pure physical strength of the nobility as a weakness. When confronted by intellectual strength, a disregard for strategy in favour of a “careful cult of the physical” (1,7,29) places one at a decided disadvantage. This is a clear problem for Nietzsche. The word ‘noble’, it has been argued, refers not to the actions of the nobility amongst themselves but to their actions toward the weak. These actions inspire amongst the weak the cultivation of intellectual strengths. These intellectual strengths express themselves as revenge and this revenge in turn shifts the balance of power away from the nobility and toward the priest. In other words, the very actions that the ruling class affirms as ‘noble’ are self-defeating.

Before addressing this claim it may be helpful to recount the arguments that led up to this point. The first consequence of the equilibrium argument was that the distinction between the nobles as active and the slaves as reactive was not so clear as originally
supposed. In their relations to each other, it was found that the actions of the nobility, in so far as they were a balance of contending strengths, were fundamentally *reactions*. This finding exposed another possible problem. Because the actions of the slaves were a result of the power of others, Nietzsche argued that it was a self-deception to attribute these actions to merit. If the actions of the nobility also resulted from the power of others, then the charge of self-deception is equally applicable. Nietzsche’s defence against these two problems was then explored. Nietzsche seemed to grant that the actions of the nobility in their relations to each other were reactionary and restrained but still maintained that, when in the wilderness (that is, in their behaviour toward the slaves), the nobility were pro-active and spontaneous. This defence seemed to present a clear advantage for the noble morality over that of the slave. If merit requires volition and if the pro-active behaviours of the nobility were the result of volition then these behaviours may perhaps involve merit. This apparent merit of the nobles then appeared to be denied by one of Nietzsche’s own arguments. The nobles, he claimed, had no choice over their actions. If volition was a prerequisite of merit and if volition entailed choice, it followed that the nobles could not without self-deception regard their actions in terms of merit. It seemed from this that there was little difference between the noble and the slave in this regard; neither could claim merit for their actions. Nietzsche’s response to this apparent similarity was to argue that the nobles, unlike the slaves, did not seek to claim that their actions were chosen and therefore meritorious. The word ‘noble’ came to have positive connotations not because their actions were chosen but because their actions were their actions. After outlining Nietzsche’s definition of free will, it then became clear why Nietzsche believed we should admire the actions of the nobility. Only the actions of the strong, according to Nietzsche’s definition, involved free will. This appeared to imply that Free will is a capacity belonging solely to the nobility. By defining volition as the act of a free will, it then seemed to follow that only the nobility could claim merit for their actions. Once again, one of Nietzsche’s own arguments denied the nobility of this advantage. It was found that the priest’s action of revenge meets Nietzsche’s requirements for free
will and, by extension, Nietzsche’s requirements for an act of merit. This finding led to another consequence. The purely physical actions of the nobility were found to be weaknesses when confronted by the superior cunning of the priests. Finally, as this superior cunning was inspired by the actions of the nobility, noble actions were then criticised for being self-defeating.

This final criticism seems to present serious problems for Nietzsche and the noble morality. After all, Nietzsche wants the reader to admire the actions of the nobility. Further, Nietzsche wants the reader to embrace a morality based on noble actions. If these actions are self-defeating, does this not constitute a reason for rejecting the noble morality? Nietzsche appears to have a response to this question. He does not deny that noble actions inspire amongst the weak the development of superior cunning. Quite the contrary. In part 10 of the first essay, Nietzsche admits that such a development is inevitable. “A race of such resentful men”, he grants, “will of necessity eventually prove more prudent than any aristocratic race”. He then continues to offer an explanation for this superior prudence of the weak:

it (the resentful race) will honour prudence on a quite different scale, as, in fact, a paramount condition of existence, while prudence among aristocratic men is apt to be tinged with a delicate flavour of luxury and refinement... indeed, a certain lack of prudence, such as a vehement and valiant charge... (is a sign) by which at all times nobles have recognised each other”. (1,10,37)

Inherent in the above quotation is a defence of the noble’s lack of prudence; a defence that Nietzsche began early in the first essay. The suggestion is that while the slaves honour prudence, the nobility honour an often opposing virtue - valiance. The heroism that Nietzsche believes is entailed in valiance, when contrasted to the cowardly, scheming nature he links with prudence, explains why Nietzsche appears untroubled by the self-defeating nature of noble actions - concern for self-survival is ignoble! Rather quixotically, Nietzsche’s arguments for rejecting the slave morality in favour of the noble’s seems to reduce to the following choice: “wouldn’t you
prefer a morality based on valiant (if self-defeating) action than one based on prudence, scheming and self-deception?" 23

On the surface, this appears to be a fairly reasonable argument. If one shares Nietzsche’s appraisal of valiance and prudence, a rejection of the slave morality seems to follow logically. Considered in more depth, however, a very clear and serious problem arises. Nietzsche is encouraging the reader to value, as he does, valiance over prudence. To do so, it will be seen, involves the same “self-deception of weakness” (1,13,47) for which Nietzsche condemns the dominant morality.

The inherent desire of weakness, it will be remembered, is “to express itself as strength”. Acting upon this desire, the priests self-deceivingly (according to Nietzsche) began to consider their actions as strengths and the actions of their enemies (the nobility) as weaknesses. Fuelled by a resentment that Nietzsche believes is necessarily attached to the state of weakness, the oppressive actions of the nobility came to be regarded as evils. In the context of the “thousand-year fight” (1,16,53) between the values of the noble and the slave, the noble’s blyth disregard for strategy and prudence has undoubtedly been a weakness. Conversely, the craftiness and cunning of the priest has been a decided strength. In clear opposition to this, Nietzsche portrays valiance (which is characterised by a disregard for strategy) as a strength and prudence (characterised by craft and cunning) as a weakness. It seems that the very weakness that accounts for the decline of the noble morality is regarded by Nietzsche as a strength. Nietzsche’s own words make the point clear:

An inability to take seriously for any length of time their enemies, their disasters, their misdeeds- that is the sign of the full

23 Consider the following quotation:

“one may perfectly be justified in being always afraid of the blonde beast... but who would not a hundred times prefer to be afraid, when one at the same time admires, than to be immune from fear, at the cost of being perpetually obsessed with the loathsome spectacle of the distorted, the dwarfed, the stunted, the envenomed?” (1,11,42)
strong natures who possess a superfluity of moulding plastic force, that heals completely and produces forgetfulness (1,10,38). This is a strange calculation. The noble’s were unable to take their enemies (that is, the priests) seriously. Exposing this, their enemies, employing a superior cunning, became victorious. Yet despite this, Nietzsche encourages the reader to regard this inability as “the sign of full strong natures” (1,10,38). Moreover, the inability to match the prudence of the priests is called a disregard for prudence. This disregard for prudence is then given the title ‘valiance’ 24. By affirming ‘valiance’ as good, it seems that the nobles are effectively echoing the self-deceived thinking of the weak: “it is good to do nothing for which we are not strong enough” (1,13,47). Their version of this type of thinking may be characterised as follows: “it is good to disregard a prudence of which we are incapable”.

The self-deceived portrait of the nobility is not yet complete. We have seen how the nobility express their weakness as a strength but we are yet to see how they ‘distort’ the strength of the priest (that is, prudence) into a weakness. Nietzsche earlier argued that in the nobility’s version of the concept ‘nt good’ there was “too strong an admixture of nonchalance, of casualness, of boredom, of impatience, even of personal exultation, for it to be capable of distorting its victim into a real caricature or a real monstrosity”. One would expect that as a result of this, the nobility, in their regard for the qualities of prudence (such as strategic thinking, cunning and craft), would display more contempt than resentment. If Nietzsche may reasonably be regarded as the champion of the thinking of the nobility in the modern world, this expectation would be disappointed. Faced with what he refers to as “the loathsome spectacle of the distorted” 25, Nietzsche’s portrayal of priestly revenge and cunning is far from

24 Compare this to one of Nietzsche’s criticisms of the priest’s mentality: “the inoffensive character of the weak, the very cowardice in which he is rich, his standing at the door, his forced necessity of waiting, gain here fine names, such as ‘patience’ which is called ‘virtue’; not being able to avenge one’s self, is called not wishing to avenge one’s self, perhaps even forgiveness” (1,14,48).
25 The term “loathsome” clearly bares more affinity to hatred than contempt.
Is it Good to be Noble?

nonchalant and casual. In the following passage, Nietzsche characterizes the priestly traits of revenge and cunning as more than ‘bad’:

It can be fairly stated that it is on the soil of this essentially dangerous form of human society, the sacerdotal form, that man really becomes for the first time an interesting animal, that it is in this form that the soul of man has in a higher sense attained depths and become evil. (1,6,28)

It is tempting, in light of the above quote, to assert that Nietzsche here exposes himself as psychologically interesting. His polemic, in its praise of valiance and disparagement of prudence, seems to display the very psychology for which Nietzsche rejects the weak.26 However, such an assertion is beyond the scope of the question with which this essay is concerned. Nietzsche’s reason for rejecting the slave morality in favour of that of the nobles was reduced to the following form: “it is better to be guided by a morality based upon valiant (though self-defeating) action than one based on resentment, self-deception and prudence. The foregoing analysis suggested that this very statement involves the self-deception of weakness. It would therefore be self-contradictory, if one follows Nietzsche’s arguments, to consider this claim as offering a justifiable reason for a paradigm shift in modern morality.

As was noted earlier in the essay, in order to justify a shift in paradigm, it is insufficient to simply show that the existing paradigm is flawed. While the discovery of problems may reinforce the need to search for alternatives, a society will not reject its system for regulating behaviour unless an alternative is advanced that is free from such problems. The criticisms that Nietzsche levels against the dominant morality, if valid, may suggest a need to question society’s system of valuing. When taken to their logical conclusion, his arguments were not found, however, to constitute a justifiable reason

26 Indeed, such a reading would present an interesting twist to Nietzsche’s polemic. The unsubstantiated accusations Nietzsche makes against the Jews, (namely, that the Jews created Christianity in order to vanquish the aristocratic ideals) may be reinterpreted as a distortion “by the venomous eye of resentfulness” (1,11.39).
for rejecting the dominant morality in favour of a noble-based alternative. Both the slave and noble classes were found to involve restraint. Both classes also met Nietzsche’s requirements for free will. Neither class could boast that their actions were the result of merit and in fact, the position for Nietzsche is worse. With their indifference to strategy in favour of “a careful cult of the physical” (1,7,29), the noble morality was exposed as suffering from an additional problem: the actions upon which the nobles based their morality were found to be self-defeating. In short, Nietzsche’s polemic does not offer a clear path beyond ‘good’ and ‘evil’.

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SCHELING’S PHILOSOPHY OF ART

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Out of the intensity of the human soul are born physical manifestations of divinity. They transcend the temporality and ephemerality of the nature of mankind to touch the face of God. How do human beings express passion in aesthetic acts to such a degree which even they cannot understand from whence those acts came? To look upon perhaps the aesthetic pinnacle of cryptic human belief and imagination, Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, is to gaze upon the beauty of human form freed in the mystery of divinity and human faith. This work seeks and explores the regions of human fright as risen from the melancholy depths of the soul. Yet its beauty takes us into its very essence and away from the bounds of physical reality and into the realm of abstract spirited passion. In this we seek reflection. In reflection we are made better.

Freidrich Wilhelm Joseph Von Schelling engages in a philosophical journey to establish a system for determining the philosophical principle which reduces nature and intelligence to the unity of a principle higher than either. This culminates in the elevation of artistic expression as the absolute organ of philosophy and the unifying principle. In order to begin to examine a masterpiece of artistic human endeavor which transcends natural human capability through Schelling’s philosophy of art, it is necessary to grasp that system which guides us to the philosophical principle from whence Schelling’s philosophy of art came. One cannot explicate the great aesthetic expressions of humanity which transcend our normal capabilities without tracing the Schellingian thought which leads us to such a revelation.
The system of transcendental idealism is what Schelling viewed as the mode of determining that unifying principle which draws both nature and intelligence into each other and which reduces them before its greater philosophical point. The aim of philosophy is to explain that esoteric harmony between the subject and the object which makes knowledge possible. It is the relationship between human subjective perception and the object of perception which allows for an acquiring of worldly knowledge.

In philosophically examining the subject and the object, one can see a relation to intelligence and nature. Human intellect constitutes the vehicle of the subject, the human being, in perceiving the object which comes from nature. Therefore Schelling’s conception of nature is one which is self-active and rises up into the various intellects of human beings. Knowledge, according to Schelling was but one of the vantage points from which the universe could be assessed, the other vantage point is born out of the philosophy of nature. Neither of these exist independently, however. They are both aspects of philosophy and philosophy may start with either of them.

The problem with starting philosophical endeavor with nature is that one would have to explain how nature would become an object of intelligence. This, however, can be answered by simply examining the human mind. Reason constitutes the essence of man. Therefore, nature as perceived by man through rationality, must become an object of his intelligence. On the other hand, when intelligence is made the starting point of philosophical contemplation, the question becomes how intelligence could come before nature in an objective world. In answering that, however, one could say that the objects of the knowable world are derived from the nature of human intellect.

Why is it important to know this bifurcation which Schelling articulates as the components philosophy? It is important to know this because although both nature and intelligence are the components of philosophy, they do not constitute that starting point of philosophy. The beginning point of philosophy must come from turning away from all objects of knowledge as such, and allowing consciousness to illuminate consciousness itself.
The one basic prejudice, to which all others reduce, is no other than this: *that there are things outside us*. This is a conviction that rests neither on grounds nor inferences (since there is not a single reputable proof of it) and yet cannot be extirpated by any argument to the contrary...

If you wish to know, than you must build a bridge to the subjective world. The bridge is built by a moment of abstraction. The *act of abstraction* is the means by which the philosopher seeks to find the various factors that make knowledge possible. This moment of abstraction constitutes the pure consciousness itself. It constitutes the act of pure thinking which is the very source of perception which is the very source of intellect.

Yet it is not by this abstraction that a true philosophical system can be made. An abstract conception is a group of common attributes which stem from objects as they are presented in our immediate experience. Therefore, it cannot be forced to yield an answer to the question as to the ultimate condition in knowledge of those objects. The method for yielding knowledge is perception and not conception. Both conception and perception are equally important, however, in achieving the true philosophical system.

The philosopher, therefore, not only produces certain objects, but also contemplates intelligence while in the process of producing them. The philosopher is like the artist who, while creating the art, engages in deep contemplation. Philosophy, according to Schelling, is an aesthetic act which is born from the productive imagination of human beings. Philosophy is not a logical act, but an aesthetic act.

The philosopher, therefore, engages in the activity of the free act of imagination. This activity is purely self-consciousness. In self-consciousness the self must divide itself from itself. The “one” is the desire to know itself. Out of the primordial unity their comes this *will* which is this act of free thought. Matter is spread over space and time and has arisen out of the act of self-consciousness. It has to reflect, in itself, the structure of self-consciousness. Self-

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consciousness becomes the consciousness of consciousness. The philosopher produces the self-consciousness and then registers, mentally, what he contemplates in producing it. Without the self-consciousness there would be no means of contemplation. There would be no self.

However, since self-consciousness is free and pure thinking, it is limited when objects enter its realm. When human beings are forced into the realm of empirical consciousness through perception, the free act of thinking is limited to that which is acquired as a result of perception of objects. Thinking is no longer free, but bound to the conception of certain objects.

The question remains, “If philosophy is the task of explaining the harmony between the subject and the object, how is that explanation made?” It is clear that empirical consciousness and the perceptions of the subject limit the aspect of pure thinking in human beings. If philosophy is an aesthetic act born from the productive imagination of human beings, than what is the instrument of true philosophic enlightenment? It seems that consciousness and rationality in any form is limited by the limited human mind. In fact, Schelling saw the true *organon* of philosophy as that which is the physical manifestation and projection of human passion. To search for that which unifies the subject and the object and which simultaneously reduces them in the light of a transcendent principle, is to examine that which is created out of both the subject and the object but which rises above both.

The object of the transcendental principle is the subject and therefore the organ or philosophical contemplation in the *inner sense*. The object of this contemplation cannot be or become an object of outer intuition. This object therefore can be nothing more than an object of intellect. Therefore, in the act of philosophical contemplation, the philosopher is both the subject and the object. The philosopher must always be engaged in the act of producing unique acts of intellect and he must be constantly contemplating those acts. Through this activity, there is born an object. This activity springs forth from the imagination of human beings.

Thus philosophy depends as much as art does on the productive capacity, and the difference between them rests merely on the
different direction taken by the productive forces. For whereas in art the production is directed outwards, so as to reflect the unknown by means of products, philosophical production is directed immediately inwards, so as to reflect it in intellectual intuition. The proper sense by which this philosophy must be apprehended is thus the *aesthetic* sense, and that is why philosophy of art is the true organon of philosophy.²

The philosophy of Art is bipartite in that it consists of two antithetical points: the intellectual intuition and the aesthetic intuition. The intellectual intuition flourishes within the mind of the philosopher alone. It is the inner passions of the yearning mind and the great desires to give birth to new products which sustains intellectual intuition. Aesthetic intuition is the objective form of the intellectual intuition. Philosophy which is granted this objectivity becomes art. “Art brings the *whole man* as he is to that point, namely to a knowledge of the highest, and this is what underlies the eternal difference and the marvel of art.”³

Aesthetic intuition is esoteric. Very few people will fully grasp it the first time. One has to not only be able to intuit the subject itself, but also be directed into the object and then back into the subject. The subject has to be looking into the world in order to be the subject, but the world must grow transparent in order to come back to itself.

Envision, for example the image of your face upon rippling water. As the water ripples, you can only see distorted colors, but as the water calms the image of your face slowly constructs itself in the reflection of the glassy water. This is what the work of art must do. It must bring you into the subject and beyond it into the world of the object and contemplation, and then back into the subject again. Engaging the observer in the work of art, the art piece becomes the catalyst for philosophical contemplation and the inspiration of others to give birth to new ideas. The work of art, therefore, becomes the true tool or *organon* for philosophy. In bringing the subject into the

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object and then elevating the subject into a new and unique realm of philosophical contemplation, the subject and object are unified and humbled in the presence of free, imaginative, aesthetic, contemplation.

It is now that I wish to see the truth of this Schellingian philosophical revelation through a true work which was hewn out of the very stuff of spirited human passion and deep intellectual intuition. The great work aesthetic manifestation of human spirit and intellect, Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, casts its cryptic chaotic glow on the wall of the Sistine Chapel. It seeks to illuminate the divinity of that place and to instill in its observers a wonder and a fear. It champions the anatomy of the human body and shape. The work is the very zenith of human horror and yet it transmutes the agony and suffering into a certain beauty.

How then, does this work exhibit the Schellingian philosophy of art? Viewing the painting, one is drawn into the structure of the work. The grace of the forms and the figures work to transmute the horror into celebrated beauty. Yet the obvious beauty of the painting is transcended by the presence of cryptic figures such as wingless angels and St. Bartholomew grasping the empty skin of a man which bares the stamp of Michelangelo’s self-portrait. The mystery of the painting draws the observer in and the painting itself fades into contemplation of perhaps the vision of the misdirection of mankind into controlling that which is governed by a force of divinity. Suddenly the work becomes transparent and gives birth to philosophical and theological contemplation.

What the transcendental philosopher sees is that the work of art is the concrete embodiment of intellectual intuition. Intellectual intuition is empty whereas art is completely full. Art becomes, in Michelangelo’s painting, the objectification of intellectual intuition. It is the objectification of what Michelangelo believed to be the punishment of mankind and the grandeur of the risen bodies of the righteous. It is the objectification of what he intuited to be divine retribution. The last judgment is the classic work of art which includes images and depicted ideas which are still interpreted today. Indeed, the Schellingian definition of true art is one which always be interpreted without one final interpretation.
Yet the philosophy of art is not only concerned with the objectification of intellectual intuition. Nor is its focus merely on the resolution of the harmony between the subject and the object in philosophy. Genius has a place in art as well. In fact Genius resides solely in art and not in science according to Schelling.

So far as particularly concerns the relation of art to science, the two are utterly opposed in tendency... For though science at its highest level has one and the same business as art, this business, owing to the manner of affecting it is an endless one for science...4

Art has to undergo the activity that nature undergoes. It must involve the totality of the artist both body and soul. It cannot simply be a working of the mind. The artist must throw his whole self into the work. The art must engage us in both our minds and bodies. How is a work of art ahead of science? Only if the work of art is an accurate mirror image of the totality will it be completely ahead of science. The totality must be given in a consummate work of art.

How does Michelangelo’s Last Judgment reflect this totality? The work gives birth to an infinite amount of interpretations. As long as their are human beings, the Last Judgment will always find itself under the new focus of human beings who endeavor to grasp the indeterminate. Reality is best understood, not through determinate ideas and concepts, but through indeterminate aesthetic ideas. Why is this so? This is so because it appeals to the indeterminacy that is inherent in the human race. We are all different. We come from different contexts and different faiths. Exalted is that work of art which can ignite the passionate spirit of a human beings! Yes, Michelangelo’s painting falls under the category of Judeo-Christian myth, but it speaks much more than a visual depiction of myth. Examining the expression of the face of the perfectly constructed Christ one can only be caught in a struggle for the meaning of the expression of his face and the great gesture which he makes in front of the burning sun.

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In examining the angels who support the “pillar of passion” the look of innocence befalls their serious faces. The nature of the Last Judgment is that it incorporates within itself a relationship that is indeterminate. It is without bounds. It exposes the very roots of freedom and triggers the philosophical contemplation of its observers. Freedom, in this incredibly horrifying painting, is conceivable because it gives birth to many interpretations.

If aesthetic intuition is merely transcendental intuition become objective, it is self-evident that art is at once the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy, which ever and again continues to speak to us of what philosophy cannot depict in external form, namely the unconscious element in acting and producing and its original identity with the conscious. Art is the eternal organ of philosophy. Philosophy cannot do its work without the poetic intervention with which art forever and again speaks to us. We cannot conceptualize the freedom which is unleashed in a great work of art, but we can know that freedom and experience that freedom. The Last Judgment is clearly more than anything that one can explain through science. Its essence is the contribution of freedom which is ultimately rooted in the creative force that constitutes itself in reality itself. The inspiration which pours forth from the very hand of God is liberating to the human being. This liberation is a process which evolves unconsciously but which moves in conjunction with the consciousness of the artist.

Schelling believed that there was a possibility of the return to the primordial element because that element is inexhaustible. Clearly the chaos of the Last Judgment as it is surrounded by the utter elevation and damnation of mankind and presented in the most cryptic depictions of human forms is reverting back to a primordial element, the will. This painting is the unleashed pure passion of the human spirit as it is incapable of being harnessed by law, dogma, or concepts.

Schelling’s philosophy of art reveals one last element which projects itself onto the canvas of the human mind. His philosophical

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insight that the fundamental idea is not conceptual but aesthetic gives rise to a new level of understanding about divinity and human reality. If the greatest truth is born out of works which are fundamentally mystery, then God is a mind who has lifted himself out of his own physical element. The word which comes up out of him is never fully comprehensible. Therefore the fundament of reality in its deepest foundation is mystery.

Out of the great human endeavor to know, we have come to realize that human beings have been given gifts of aesthetic imagination which far surpass that very endeavor and lead into the wonderment of mystery. Out of the works of Michelangelo, Shakespeare, DaVinci, Beethoven, and many others through the history of lasting aesthetic masterworks we have been allowed to know the mystery of realm of divinity. In experiencing that divinity we have been led to a path which discards the plight to apprehend and to control and to know everything for the new and more fulfilling endeavor to bask in the warming light of human freedom. This is the transcendental ideal of F.W.J. Schelling.

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In his article “Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge”1 Laurence BonJour identifies the “epistemic regress problem” as the central target of a theory of empirical knowledge. The problem can be stated as the question: How can an infinite regress of justification be avoided in an account of the justification of empirical beliefs? BonJour attempts to show that externalism cannot answer this question, and is therefore not a satisfactory theory of empirical knowledge.

What is meant by “justification”? BonJour says that knowledge requires epistemic justification. He first says that “the distinguishing characteristic of this particular species of justification is its internal relationship to the cognitive goal of truth.” He further clarifies this, saying it “means at the minimum that one accepts only beliefs that there is adequate reason to think are true.” All of this makes it quite clear that epistemic justification concerns how one should reject or accept beliefs. In other words, epistemic justification concerns the subjective basis for accepting or rejecting beliefs. It follows from this that the epistemic regress problem concerns a regress in a person’s subjective justifications for holding their beliefs.

Since BonJour’s article is an attack on externalism, it is necessary to understand what his precise conception of externalism is. BonJour’s argument is quite general, and he has a lot to say about

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the version(s) of externalism that he is concerned with. His first statement is as follows:

On this view [the externalist view], the epistemic justification or reasonableness of a basic belief depends on the obtaining of an appropriate relation, generally causal or nomological in character, between the believer and the world.

This is the key statement about externalism in the article. It is clear from it that we must forget about BonJour’s earlier definition of epistemic justification, which concerned the subjective assessment of one’s beliefs. Under externalism, epistemic justification is a matter of the objective existence of a relationship between the world and the believer. However, throughout the article, BonJour seems to treat the following two claims as if they meant the same thing:

1) Knowledge must be justified (it is traditionally defined as justified true belief).
2) The subject must be justified—that is, for a person to have knowledge, they must be justified in having the belief.

These are the two definitions of epistemic justification that he gives. BonJour seems to think that for a belief to be justified such that it counts as knowledge, the subject must be justified in having the belief. However, externalism claims the negation of this. This problem recurs throughout his article.

BonJour says he is concerned with “versions of externalism that claim to solve the regress problem.” However, it seems clear that the regress problem cannot be understood in the terms in which it was originally defined, which stated that the problem concerned a regress in a person’s subjective justifications for holding their beliefs. Under externalism, epistemic justification is about the objective conditions under which a belief counts as (or is “justified” as) knowledge. Therefore, the regress must be in terms of those objective conditions. However, a theory that says that the justification of a belief depends on an external relation necessarily entails that one cannot justify one’s choice of beliefs, because it is in the nature of external
relations not to be cognitively accessible. To go back to the quote: “the epistemic justification or reasonableness of a basic belief depends on the obtaining of an appropriate relation...” The word “reasonableness” is significant. BonJour says “epistemic justification or reasonableness” as if the two terms were interchangeable. This is misleading. In the externalist definition of epistemic justification, which is the one under consideration, whether or not belief is knowledge depends on an external relation which cannot be cognitively grasped. Yet the natural reading of “reasonableness” is that it is something which can be cognitively grasped. This is shown by the fact that objectively, propositions are never “reasonable”—they are only ever true or false. It is only subjectively that propositions can appear reasonable or unreasonable. Of course one would hope that, as a matter of fact, the beliefs that we subjectively consider to be “reasonable” are those that have the external relation, because we want our beliefs to be true. However, the claim that externalism wants to make is precisely that the justification of a belief necessary for the belief to count as knowledge, which BonJour calls “epistemic justification,” is definitely not to be identified with what is commonly thought of as “reasonableness”.

This is made quite clear later when BonJour says that on the externalist view, a person may be ever so irrational and irresponsible in accepting a belief, when judged in light of his own subjective conception of the situation, and may still turn out to be epistemically justified.

In rejecting the what he calls “more radical views,” he says:

If the externalist does not want even to claim that beliefs satisfying his conditions are epistemically justified or reasonable, then it is obviously no objection that they seem in some cases to be quite unjustified and unreasonable.

He again identifies “epistemically justified” with “reasonable”. It is not a radical but a basic externalist view that a belief does not have to be subjectively “reasonable” for it to count as knowledge, yet the
belief must be epistemically justified in the sense that an external relation must hold.

Now we come to BonJour’s fundamental intuitive problem with externalism: *why* should the mere fact that an external relation obtains between the state of affairs that $P$ and S’s belief that $P$ mean that S’s belief is “epistemically justified,” when the relation in question is entirely unknown (and perhaps unknowable) to S?

The question implies that the external relation could obtain without the belief being epistemically justified, contrary to the earlier externalist definition of epistemic justification. It is true that it might seem subjectively very unreasonable to hold the belief, but by definition the belief would still be epistemically justified.

Externalists would deny that there is a solution to the regress problem as defined by BonJour; he makes it a problem of the regress of justification for subjectively choosing beliefs, rather than a problem of how beliefs can objectively satisfy the conditions for being knowledge.

BonJour says that

In the end it may be possible to make intuitive sense of externalism only by construing the externalist as simply abandoning the traditional idea of epistemic justification or rationality and along with it anything resembling the traditional conception of knowledge.

Against an externalist position that seriously adopts such a gambit, the criticisms developed in the present paper are of course entirely ineffective.

I have been arguing that it is not merely what BonJour calls radical externalist theories that abandon the “traditional idea of epistemic justification.” At the beginning of the article, BonJour himself gives a basic definition of externalism such that *all* externalist theories are immune from his criticism. Given an externalist view, the regress problem in the form stated by BonJour simply disappears. The question remains as to whether BonJour is right that externalism is widely at odds with what he calls the
“traditional conception of knowledge.” I shall argue that in fact externalism yields results which are intuitively appealing.

The central claim of externalism concerns the way in which the subject acquires a belief. BonJour’s main concern seems to be with the rational process of deciding which beliefs to accept and which to reject. However, could it not be that most beliefs are acquired without the subject going through any such rational process? When we see a table in a room, we tend to believe immediately that there is a table in the room, without consciously examining the rationality of that belief. This could be called “unreflective” belief. Finding a rationale for beliefs is usually a retrospective activity. The belief comes first, and then, sometimes, one reflects on and examines the belief.

BonJour uses examples of cases of clairvoyance in an attempt to show that externalism is counter-intuitive. In the case of clairvoyance, if you just acquired beliefs unreflectingly (as in the way you often believe there is a table when you see one) that it could give you knowledge in the same way sight gives knowledge. This can be illustrated by altering one of BonJour’s examples. Clairvoyance has the characteristic of being a power that one person has that others do not have and cannot imagine. Take BonJour’s case IV. Suppose that everyone in the world is blind, but that suddenly one person acquires the power of sight. This person is in analogous situation to someone with clairvoyant powers, given that clairvoyance is a legitimate and reliable power. In these circumstances, it would be tempting for everyone else, still blind, to say that the sighted person did not know all these things that he suddenly claimed to know. Yet we are intuitively inclined to say that the sighted person does know about the things he sees. In the same way, surely it must be admitted that, if clairvoyance really was a reliable power, it would be correct to say that the clairvoyant had knowledge. The inclination to say that the clairvoyant does not have such knowledge is simply a result of the instinct that says that clairvoyance does not and could not happen. The same kind of instinct a community of blind people might have regarding vision, if they had never encountered sighted people before.

Take an alternative version of Case IV:
Norman has completely reliable visual perception. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. (If this is counter-intuitive, should it not also be so in the case of clairvoyance, given it were a genuine cognitive power?) One day Norman comes to believe that the sky is a different color from the land, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. (Again, if this is counter-intuitive, then the objection applies to clairvoyance also.) In fact, the belief is true and results from his visual power, under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.

This no longer seems to work as an example, yet if clairvoyance were legitimate, surely it should work. BonJour originally rejected using ordinary examples of perception because:

one central issue between externalism and other foundationalist and non-foundationalist views is precisely whether in such cases a further basis for justification beyond the externalist one is typically present. Thus it will be useful to begin by considering...cases of a less familiar sort where it will be easier to stipulate...that only the externalist sort of justification is present.

I do not understand exactly what could constitute a further basis for justification, or how such an unspecified basis is excluded by using the example of clairvoyance. In the case of sight, the very fact of having a belief (e.g, that there is a table in the room) seems to be a reason for thinking that the belief is true, and it also seems inevitable that you should know how you came to have the belief—that is, you saw a table, so you believe there is a table. If BonJour is trying to say that these characteristics do not apply to clairvoyance, it may be that beliefs acquired through clairvoyance could never count as knowledge in externalist terms. This is because if one had no idea where a belief had come from, then inevitably one would reflect on how rational it would be to hold that belief. Such beliefs would
inevitably not be unreflective. But I would argue that, under externalism, having knowledge is not compatible with reflecting on one’s beliefs. I shall argue that, if one reflects on a belief, that belief cannot possibly count as knowledge.

It is reflection itself that opens the door to an infinite regress of justification. When one tries to decide if one’s belief is reasonable, one examines the process the end-product of which is the belief. Suppose that one then rejected a belief that one had previously accepted. It is clear that one’s examination of the process by which the belief was acquired must now itself be considered as part of that very process, and subject to reflection and examination. And so on, ad infinitum. Even if one decided, on reflection, to retain the belief, the externalist condition no longer holds. This condition states that an appropriate relation must hold between the truth of P and the belief in P. But, after reflection, one knows that the reflection is part of that relation, and therefore, because an element of the relation is now known to be internal and subjective rather than external, the relation cannot possibly be “appropriate”. This is because the belief that P now depends on factors that have nothing to do with the fact that P, and is known to so depend. This can be shown with reference to clairvoyance. If clairvoyance were genuine cognitive power and Norman acquired his beliefs through clairvoyance without reflecting on them, then all the externalist conditions would hold: the belief would be true, and the external relationship constituted by the act of clairvoyance would exist. Therefore Norman would know those things he saw via his clairvoyant power. However, given that BonJour states that Norman “possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it,” Norman is very likely to reflect on how rational it is to stick to his suddenly acquired beliefs. In that case, his eventual belief would be an outcome not only of clairvoyance, but also of the process by which he decided whether or not the belief was rational. Since he felt this process was necessary in the first place, he must doubt his beliefs, and therefore he does not know. He knows that he has had to subjectively decide whether to hold to his belief, and that if he had thought differently he could have made the opposite decision.
This idea does seem to be intuitively appealing. Generally people will say that they know all kinds of straightforward things, for example they might say that they know that there is a table in the room. However, on reflection, people will admit that they do not know things: if you suggest that their seeing a table is a hallucination, they will admit that it is possible that there is not a table in the room, although very unlikely. But having admitted the possibility, they will also admit that they do not, strictly speaking, know that there is a table in the room. According to externalism, this is correct—although previously they did know there was a table in the room, now they no longer know this. The act of reflecting on the belief changes the nature of the relationship between the state of affairs that P and the belief that P, so that the externalist condition is no longer satisfied. To put it another way, the more you think, the less you know. It follows that a philosopher, who spend a lot of time reflecting on his beliefs, will know very little compare to an unreflective man in the street.

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Knowing That One Knows

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Many forms skepticism arise not from doubts about the possibility of knowledge, but about the possibility of knowing that one has knowledge. On many externalist accounts, for example, one can know a fact without knowing, or even believing, that one knows it. If one were to hold that this second-order knowledge were never possible, one could be led to a “weak” epistemological skepticism, in which one could never apportion knowledge, even though there could be such a thing as knowledge. In this essay I want to explore the conditions for knowing that one knows, and hence examine the possibility of such a thing in light of various epistemological theories.

So what conditions must be fulfilled in order for “x knows that x knows p” to be true? In what follows, I will assume the basic form of an analysis of knowledge to be “true belief + X,”, or:

\[(\alpha) \text{Kp} \equiv (p \land Bp \land Xp)\]

The generality of this formula is, I believe, sufficient to capture most or even all analyses of knowledge for which the “core” condition is true belief. X could, therefore, be any bundle of properties, internal or external to the putative knower, related or unrelated to the fact of his believing p, but which along with true belief imply knowledge. Candidates for X might therefore be that there is an appropriate causal connection between p and Bp (characteristic of “causal” theories of knowledge) that belief in p was acquired by a reliable method of belief-formation (reliabilism),
that belief in \( p \) is in some other sense “justified” (justificationism), and so on. With this formula in hand, we can now see what the conditions for knowledge of knowledge would be.

Taking the identity:

\[(\beta) \ Kp \equiv KKp\]
we can substitute equivalence in place of “Kp” to obtain:

\[(\gamma) \ KKp \equiv K(p \land Bp \land Xp)\]

It seems unproblematic to assume that knowing a conjunction is identical to knowing each of its conjunct, so we can rewrite (\( \gamma \)) as:

\[(\delta) \ Kkp \equiv (Kp \land Kbp \land KXp)\]

Expanding the Ks, again using identity (\( \alpha \)), we finally obtain the following:

\[(\varepsilon) \ Kkp \equiv (p \land Bp \land Xp) \land (Bp \land Bbp \land Xbp) \land (Xp \land Bxp \land Xxp)\]

In other words, to know that one knows that p, the following conditions must hold:

(i) \( p \): that \( p \) is the case
(ii) \( Bp \): that one believes that \( p \)
(iii) \( Xp \): that \( p \) satisfies condition \( X \)
(iv) \( BBp \): that one believes oneself to believe \( p \)
(v) \( XBp \): that one’s belief of \( p \) satisfies condition \( X \)
(vi) \( Bxp \): that one believes \( p \) to satisfy condition \( X \)

\[1^\text{Expanding the first ‘K’ on the right-hand side of (\( \beta \)) gives us this:}
(\( \gamma’ \)) \( Kkp \equiv (Kp \land Bkp \land XKp)\)
(\( \delta’ \)) \( Kkp \equiv (p \land Bp \land Xp) \land B(p \land Bp \land Xp) \land X(p \land Bp \land Xp)\)

This is equivalent to (\( \varepsilon \)) only if we allow \( B \) and \( X \) to distribute. That belief of a conjunction is identical to belief in its conjuncts seems unproblematic, but with \( X \) it seems less straightforward. Suppose, for example, that a conjunction \( (p \land q) \) caused my belief in \( (p \land q) \). Is this identical to the fact of \( p \) causing my belief in \( p \), and the fact of \( q \) causing my belief in \( q \)? The causal theorist must allow that it is in order for \( X \), and therefore \( K \), to distribute over conjunctions.
and (vii) \( X_{\text{xp}} \): that the fact of \( p \)'s satisfying \( x \) condition \( X \) itself satisfies condition \( X \).

What would it mean to say that these conditions obtained, then, within various epistemological theories?

(i), (ii) and (iii) together constitute simply the fact of knowing \( p \). In some versions of the KK-thesis, these three conditions together imply the other four.\(^2\)

Intuitively, we might expect (iv) to follow from (ii) (the “BB-thesis). But in fact this is by no means obvious. Obviously, in any situation in which one is prepared to assert that one believed \( p \), it must be the case that one believed this. But is it conceivable that one believe a proposition without being aware that one held this attitude towards it. It is not uncommon to hear utterances like “I’m not sure whether I believe that.” On the other hand, it might be objected that if one is “not sure” whether one believes \( p \), it simply means that one does not believe \( p \). For belief entails some form of commitment to the truth of a proposition, whereas not being sure whether one believes seems to entail neutrality on the issue. So being unsure of whether or not \( Bp \) could be seen as simply being unsure of whether \( p \).\(^3\) One way or another, it is not as obvious as it may seem that (ii) in any way entails (iv).

Condition (v)—that one’s belief in \( p \) satisfies condition \( X \)—seems potentially problematic. For it is by no means clear that the kinds of properties possessed by the facts that constitute the content

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\(^2\) This is if one takes the KK-thesis to be trivially true. Such a position might be held, for example, by an internalist for whom knowledge-conditions were all cognitively accessible. But one might also hold the KK-thesis as an extra condition for knowledge itself. This would be the case if one were not prepared to accept as knowledge any belief which, although perhaps satisfying relevant external conditions, the putative knower is herself unsure about.

\(^3\) A behaviourist might object that if beliefs are dispositions, it seems entirely reasonable to say that one does not know whether or not one believes a proposition. For the situations in which the disposition is relevant might not have occurred yet. I might not know, for instance, whether I believe “Blair’s backing Britain” until I reach the polling station with pen in hand, but it would still be the case today that I am either going to vote Labour or not tomorrow.
of belief (“it is raining,” “Bernard is smoking in the study,” etc.) can be possessed by the beliefs themselves. Of course, this depends entirely on what the X is that one is proposing completes an analysis of knowledge. For example, if X is the stipulation that belief in its argument (the fact in question) be required by a reliable method of belief-formation (reliabilism), then it must be the case that my belief that I believe p has been acquired thus for me to know that I know p. But what constitutes a “reliable” method of ascertaining whether or not I believed some fact? Is it enough to assume that my beliefs and their contents are all cognitively accessible? We have seen earlier that this might not be the case. What exactly is my method of finding out what my beliefs are? Is the connection between my believing p and my believing that I believed it a “causal” one, as would be required by causal analysis of knowledge? As discussed above, an argument exists for saying that one’s belief that one believes p is just belief in p, making the connection a logical one. But if the mere possibility exists of me being mistaken in my appraisal of my beliefs, the consequences to those theories for which X as a set of conditions for “correct” belief acquisition could be severe. For example, if my beliefs about my beliefs were only right, say, half the time, the reliabilist would certainly have to rule out the possibility of my ever knowing that I know anything. At the very least, the connection between Bp and BBp becomes an important area of inquiry.

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How Long is the Present?

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When we examine our notion of the present and our experience of it we are confronted by a paradox. The present, upon examination, reduces to having no duration at all, as any interval of time, no matter how small, can always be divided into parts which are either past or future. Our experience of time, however, obviously takes up time as we could experience nothing at all if there were no time in which to experience it. Furthermore, we do experience things as present by virtue of the fact that we can coherently answer the question “What are you doing now?”. There exists then a difference between our experience of time and the objective reality of time. How do we square our experience of the present with the fact that the present has in fact no duration at all?

The paradox we are confronted with can be set out as three propositions, each of which is plausible but which together form an inconsistent set:

(1) The present has no duration.
(2) We experience the present.
(3) What we experience takes up time.

In answer to this paradox philosophers have developed the doctrine of the specious present (specious meaning deceptively plausible but false) which allows for the fact that our experience of time does not correlate with the objective reality of time. Rather than denying premise (2) the doctrine explains how we experience things as present when they are not in fact present in reality, but this doctrine is not without its problems. James said;
The original paragon and prototype of all conceived times is the specious present, the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible. [1890, p.631]

The doctrine of the specious present is therefore a psychological doctrine as opposed to a metaphysical one. McTaggart [1927, p.27] argued that in order to posit the objective reality of time at all we must accept the subjectivity of the specious present. This is illustrated by a reductio ad absurdum of an objectivist account of the specious present. If our experience of time corresponds directly with the objective reality of time then whatever is experienced as earlier than, simultaneous with, and later than our specious present is also correspondingly objectively past, present and future. However it has been shown that the length of the specious present varies according to circumstances and people. An event M may be in X's specious present but no longer in Y's specious present, which means that event M is simultaneously objectively present and objectively past. Clearly this cannot be the case so the specious present is subjective. Firstly it is difficult to see how the lengths of people's specious presents have been calculated. Psychological experiments have been conducted to try and calculate the maximum number of monotone sounds in a sequence that a person could identify without error (without counting as this would confer a system of symbols onto the sensation rather than recording ones apprehension of 'pure' sensation) These experiments produced widely divergent results among different people. This does not, however, necessarily indicate a wide divergence of lengths of specious presents among different individuals. At most, this experiment discovered what the maximum duration was in which a set of sound could be recognised without error, not whether these sounds were represented as present or not. J.D.Mabbott recognised the invalidity of these experiments saying that they "discovered the group could be identified without error, and inferred that it was therefore remembered as a whole and must accordingly have been heard as a whole." [1951, p.156]. Thus the results that yielded a specious present varying from six seconds up to thirty-six seconds were invalid. This is fairly obvious as postulating a specious present of even six seconds seems to make no sense at all. In counting from one to six, by the time you have uttered "six" you...
are aware that the utterance "one" is in the past. Secondly, the subjectivity of the specious present also seems to make little sense. If our specious presents are of varying lengths and differ from person to person then things such as effective warnings ("Duck!") could not take place. The fact that such communication is possible seems to indicate that McTaggart's argument is incorrect. We must differentiate here between what I think are two senses of the term 'specious present'. There is the sense in which the 'specious present' can be defined as the length of time for which past perceptions directly affect present ones. In this case a 'specious present' of six seconds is not implausible although I would prefer to describe this by the term immediate memory. In this discussion I am only concerned with the 'specious present' as referring to the length of time for which we perceive things as present.

Plumer presents an alternative doctrine to explain our experience of time which he calls the doctrine of the sensory present as he wishes to differentiate raw sensation from perception which is "conceptually or propositionally interpreted ('informed') sensation" [1985, p.20] He asks the question:

Does sensation at an instant encompass objects as they are over an interval or objects as they are at an instant, in other words is the sensory present an interval or an instant? [p.21]

He gives reasons for postulating the sensory present as an interval and systematically rejects each one. Firstly, we could not understand a spoken sentence if the sensory present were not an interval. However, this implies that the sensory present is of varying lengths according to the lengths of the sentences we understand. We can understand whole paragraphs of speech but we do not infer that our sensory present encompasses the entire temporal duration taken to utter this paragraph. In addition, the reason why we understand spoken sentences is that we understand the words as spoken successively rather than as all spoken within one sensory present. Secondly, some motions or changes are sensible whereas others are too fast or too slow for us to directly sense indicating that, if our sensory present has a duration at all, then its duration is either longer or shorter than is necessary for us to directly sense the said motions or changes. As Broad says, "a change must surpass a minimum
speed if it is to be sensed as such." [1923, p.352]. Plumer looks at Broad's example of the difference between seeing the second hand on a watch move and seeing that an hour hand has moved. The first we sense directly and the second we infer from previous observations of the position of the hour hand. However, if we sense the movement of the second hand directly then our sensory present must have a duration of less than one second in order for us to sense the change. Broad says that we experience the operation of the second hand all at once:

The qualitative differences between its earlier and its later seconds will be sensed together. [1923, p.352]

This is clearly not the case because it is in virtue of the fact that we sense the events as temporally separate- the second hand pointing to twelve occurring before the second hand pointing to twelve-o-one- that we can call the change a movement. If we sensed the earlier and later sections together we would not be able to tell in which direction the second hand is moving. As we know the movement is clockwise then we clearly do not sense the two different positions of the second hand together. As Russell says:

When I see a rapid movement, such as that of a falling star... I am aware that one part of the movement is earlier than another, in spite of the whole being comprised within one specious present; if I were not aware of this, I should not know whether the movement had been from A to B or B to A, or even that change had occurred. [1948, p.226]

The fact that we do not sense a blur fanning between twelve and twelve-o-one backs up this conclusion. Broad appears to be trying to say that we sense the two positions of the second hand together in that our perception of the second hand will be contained within one specious present. He is not altogether incorrect here in that if he is trying to argue for the specious present being an interval then he must also argue that any change we sense as occurring now must be contained within that specious present. The fact that we can sense the two positions of the second hand as temporally separate indicates that if the specious present is an interval as Broad suggests then it is an interval of less than one second. Plumer argues that this indicates that the sensory present is therefore an instant:
Sensation at an instant (A) encompasses objects as they are at an instant (C), not as they are over some fraction of a second. [p.27] He equates seeing a second hand move with seeing a minute or an hour hand move. If we watch a minute hand for fifteen seconds or an hour hand for five minutes we will see them move slightly clockwise. All that differentiates the three cases is a degree of speed. We may be able to notice change quickly and call it sensation or the change may be 'insensibly slow' if it takes longer but we do not sense any of these changes as present. Plumer gives the sensory present no duration at all so during all perception you are remembering. "At an instant you are seeing the hand where it is at an instant and remembering where it has been for however long you looked." [p.28] This notion creates a problem with respect to the ontological status of what our experiences represent. We can only directly perceive the present as we perceive the past via the memory and we cannot perceive the future at all. It is argued that we should only treat as reality that which we can directly perceive, as any evidence other than that of direct perception could be mistaken and therefore unreliable. If all we experience is past, as Plumer suggests, then we are experiencing the non-existent. However, it is only objectively past and not past to us. But the fact that it is not past to us indicates that Plumer's theory is an incorrect one. This could be remedied by saying that our immediate memory is so immediate to us that we see things as if they were present, but this is the whole claim of the doctrine of the specious present; that some events do appear to us as present whether they are or not in reality. Plumer's argument merely seems to shift all our experiences into the objective past rather than accounting for why these experiences are represented as present which they undoubtedly are. The fact that someone can coherently answer the question "What are you doing now?" would support this.

Plumer goes on to argue that any account like Broad's which gives the sensory present as an interval also supports an account for the sensory present being a significantly variable interval. He looks at Mundle's example of sensing (or remembering) the movement of a piece of paper. [1954] During an interval beginning at t1 and ending at t2 a piece of paper is moved from point p1 to point p2. If the
duration of t2-t1 is sufficiently short and the distance p1 to p2 sufficiently long (i.e. if the paper is moved quickly enough) then at time t2 we will sense the piece of paper occupying position p2 and we will also sense streaks leading back to position p1. This is taken as evidence for the fact that our sensory present is an interval; we see the paper as occupying two spatially distinct positions simultaneously which it cannot do in objective reality. Plumer argues that this is just a convenient example which can be modified to show that the sensory present is of varying lengths. He uses the example of setting off a bright flare from the deck of a ship late at night. The nature of the flare is such that it leaves a 'trail' which is 'there' one minute after being set off. He questions whether you would regard seeing the 'trail' as supporting the idea of the sensory present having a duration of one minute just as you see the paper example supporting the idea of the sensory present having a duration of a fraction of a second. He asks what would happen if you had not seen the setting off of the flare, if you had closed your eyes for example. Then if upon opening your eyes afterwards you saw the trail "would you have been seeing the flare in a place it didn't occupy one minute ago with your eyes shut?" [p.30] This example is obviously an invalid analogy to the paper example. Plumer does not make it clear in what sense he uses the word 'trail'. If this trail is supposedly analogous to the streaks left behind by the piece of paper then seeing the trail requires seeing the flare, and thus coming to the conclusion that the sensory present has a duration of one minute by virtue of the fact that you have sense data of where the flare was one objective minute ago. If by 'trail' Plumer means a trail of smoke or something similar left behind by the flare then the perception of the trail is entirely distinct from the perception of the flare just as perception of a car is entirely distinct from perception of a trail of exhaust fumes which it leaves behind for one minute after its departure.

Plumer's account of the sensory present being durationless also encounters the problem of perception in an instant. The idea of momentary acts of apprehension appears to be a contradiction in terms. The whole basis for the need for a doctrine of the specious or sensory present is the fact that we cannot experience durationless instants which allegedly constitute the objective present. Plumer tries
to answer this by saying that an instant is only no time at all in that "it is not a stretch or interval of time" [p.31] Plumer argues that it is coherent to ask about what one senses qua state of activity at any instant during an interval of experience. (Here he assumes intervals of experience but I will give him the benefit of the doubt by assuming that he means intervals not directly experienced but experienced via the immediate memory.) such as "What were you hearing at seven a.m.? A lawnmower.", "What are you looking at now? A bug on the wall." His first example can be answered in that it is legitimate to afford past events some sort of division into instants the same way we can say that static pictures represent an instant of time even though our visual experience is not as such. The second example seems to be begging the question. "What are you doing now?" seems to indicate that we do indeed experience certain things as present. The fact that, by the time we answer the question, the 'now' referred to in the question is past does not affect the validity of this as the fact still stands that at that time you were experiencing the bug 'now'. Plumer professes to reject the evidence for the sensory present as an interval and then produce arguments for the sensory present being an instant but neither of his strategies are adequate.

All the arguments I have considered so far are inadequate in that they fail to mirror our experience of time faithfully enough or that they fail to answer the question concerning the relation between our experience of presentness and the objective present. I will now consider the legitimacy of premise (1); that of the objective present being a durationless instant.

The idea of the real present being a durationless instant originates from Augustine's *Confessions*. However, the idea has some consequences which we may not be willing to accept. Augustine's argument can be formalised as follows:

1. We measure time (e.g. duration of sounds).
2. We cannot measure what does not exist.
3. We cannot measure what has no duration.
4. Neither the past or the future exist.
5. The present has no duration.

(2) and (4) imply:
(6) We cannot measure the past or future.

(3) and (5) imply:

(7) We cannot measure what is present.

Propositions (1) to (5) seem to imply that time does not actually consist of past, present and future. Augustine overcomes this problem by saying that what we measure is something which remains in our memory (since we can only measure what is receding into the past). Thus (4) could be reformulated as saying "Neither the past nor the future exists independently of our minds." Thus we can afford the past mind-dependent reality and avoid proposition (6). It is also worth noting here that what we in fact measure is the passage of time and not simply 'the past' or 'the present' but the 'speed' of change of A-series relations. In this way we overcome the problem of measuring what is non-existent as we are not contemplating the ontological status of events but the 'rate of change' of this ontological status.

Mundle [1954] suggests an alternative response to Augustine's puzzle: that we give up premise (5) and afford the objective present duration as we do the specious present. The problem still remains, however, that we can still only measure something when it is past. But here again we are not measuring something when it is past, we are measuring how long something has been past with reference to the present moment which does constitute reality. If the attribution of duration to the objective present is legitimate then how long is the objective present? Given that we may not experience the objective present (whether it has duration or not) then we cannot argue from our experience of the present to any conclusions about its objective reality. We can, however, examine the notion of the infinite divisibility of time which is assumed by Augustine in order to posit the objective present as a durationless instant. This idea leads to many paradoxes, too numerous to mention all here, but one of which is the fact that if time can be broken down into durationless instants then how do successions of these instants constitute intervals of any duration? This is a paradox recognised by Hume:

For if in time we could never arrive at an end of division and if each moment, as it succeeds another, were not perfectly single and indivisible, there would be an infinite number of coexistent
moments, or parts of time; which I believe will be allowed to be an amount contradiction. [1896]

Hume posits a theory of time as discrete (having indivisible units) as opposed to continuous which, on the face of it, would remedy my initial paradox. (I will leave this as a suggested solution here as discussing the consequences of this notion would require another article altogether.) We could also deny premise (4) and say that the past has objective reality. This is a move that is quite intelligible although an earlier remark by Augustine seems to counter this move:

If the future and the past do exist, I want to know where they are. I may not yet be capable of such knowledge, but at least I know that wherever they are, they are not there as future or past, but as present...so wherever they are and whatever they are, it is only by being present that they are. [Section 18]

These remarks show that in order for any past or future events to have reality they must exist as present. Perhaps Augustine should have asked whenever the past and the future are and concluded that they are only past and future relative to an egocentric position in time.

In conclusion, I have considered accounts of our perception of time with respect to an objective present being both durationless and of finite duration. I have also considered the possibility of affording the past reality in order to account for our measurement of time. Broad's account of the specious present as being a fraction of a second in duration correlates with our experience but still produces the question with respect to how we experience change at all if we experience change comprised within one specious present. This problem is overcome by Plumer reducing the sensory present to a durationless instant but still produces a problem with respect to the ontological status of the content of our experiences if all we experience is past. The nature of enquiry into our experience of time is such that we only have our experience of time to rely upon. Any propositions which are about the objective reality of time are a priori ones which cannot be refuted by any other kinds of proposition. Our experience of time only allows us a posteriori propositions which can only serve as "a good reason for believing that" as opposed to "conclusive proof for believing that".
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THE QUIDDITAS ESSAY
Why Is There Somethring Rather Than Nothing?
Probability, Possible Worlds and the Ultimate Problem

Robin Le Poidevin

I. The problem

Why does anything exist? Why, to put it in other words, is it not the case that there is simply nothing at all? According to whom you ask, this is a question unworthy of serious reflection, or the deepest problem in philosophy. Why should anyone think that it does not merit serious attention? Because, some will argue, we cannot begin to conceive of an answer to it. The usual forms of explanation just seem inapplicable here. For instance, we often explain a state of affairs by appeal to its causes: there is a pool of water on the kitchen floor because the sink overflowed; the train is late because of engine failure; the solution turned green because acid was added. But there is no causal explanation of why there is something rather than nothing, for any attempt at such an explanation would have to assume the existence of something, namely a cause. So the 'explanation' would assume what it was supposed to explain. No good explanation does this. Perhaps, then, there is some non-causal explanation of why there is something. But this will not be some totally outlandish explanation, of a kind never appealed to in ordinary contexts. For it is unlikely that we would recognise such a thing as an explanation at all, and so it would fail to do what explanations are supposed to do, namely reduce our puzzlement. What we must look for is something which exploits familiar explanatory devices which we encounter in quite ordinary contexts. And perhaps, if no coherent question lacks an answer, only when we
have found that explanation will we know that there was a genuine mystery in the first place.

I am going to explore an answer to our question which has recently been proposed by Peter van Inwagen. van Inwagen's solution to the mystery exploits two devices which play an important role in a number of philosophical debates: one is the notion of possible worlds, the other is probability. Probabilistic reasoning is fairly common: we use it in working out the chances of winning a lottery, or of a bus coming along in the next five minutes. Reasoning with possible worlds, of course, is not at all a familiar activity outside philosophical contexts, but the notion which possible worlds are supposed to explicate, that of possibility, is just as familiar to us as that of probability. Concern with the possible permeates our thinking: I could have caught the train this morning if my alarm clock had gone off; I could have discovered the proof of Fermat's last theorem, if only someone else had not got there first; Schubert's Unfinished Symphony could have been finished.

But, however often we encounter possibility and probability, they are still concepts which require explication. In this essay, I shall consider some philosophical accounts of these two concepts, and ask whether combining them in the way van Inwagen does helps us solve what is perhaps the profoundest mystery of all.

II. A probabilistic solution

'The world is everything that is the case',\(^1\) begins Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Take this as a definition of the *actual* world: the world we happen to be in. Then a merely *possible* world consists of what might have been the case. Imagine the world being different in some respect from the way it is. Imagine, for instance, that, instead of reading this paper, you are walking on the moon. You have thereby imagined a possible world. Such a world may be only trivially different from the actual world. It may differ only in the location of a particular sub-atomic particle. Or it may be radically different. It may, for example, be a world which consists just of a sherry trifle which periodically turns into an aubergine.
Clearly, the chemical and biological laws governing such a world will be very different from the ones that actually obtain, but there is no obvious contradiction in conceiving of this. What is clearly contradictory, such as something's being both cuboid and spherical at the same time, obtains in no possible world. There is no point in introducing talk of *impossible* worlds, in which logically impossible things obtain, for we can express the impossibility of a certain state of affairs simply by saying that it obtains in no world.

The above is very far from a complete characterisation of possible worlds. Still less does it constitute a *theory* of possible worlds. But it is enough, for the time being at any rate, to make sense of van Inwagen's probabilistic solution to the question of why there is something rather than nothing. Before presenting it, we need to define one other term, the *empty* world. The empty world is one in which absolutely nothing whatsoever exists: no objects, no electromagnetic waves, no space and time. (Perhaps, to be on the safe side, we should think of this possible world simply as one in which nothing *concrete* exists, to allow for the Platonist suggestion that, in every world, there exist abstract entities such as numbers and universals.) So we can now rephrase our original question, why is there something rather than nothing, in these terms: why is the empty world not actual? Here now is the probabilistic solution to that question:

*TThe improbability of nothingness argument*

(1) There are infinitely many possible worlds.
(2) There is exactly one possible world which is empty.
(3) There is exactly one world which is actual.
(4) For any two possible worlds, the probability of their being actual is equal.

*Therefore*: The probability that the empty world is actual is $1/\infty$.

The conclusion, that the probability of the empty world's being actual is $1/\infty$, is what provides an answer to our original question, why is the actual world not empty? It is a principle of rational
thought that we should not expect extremely improbable circumstances to obtain. So, given the conclusion of the above argument, it was hardly to be expected that the empty world should be actual. How much more likely that some non-empty world should be actual. Ours is just one of many such worlds.

It may be suggested that this line of argument is undermined by the thought that, if the empty world's being actual is improbable, then this world's being actual is similarly improbable, yet this world is actual. But the fact that this world is actual does not, it seems to me, impugn the assertion that it was extremely improbable that this world should have been actual, anymore than winning the jackpot in some vast lottery impugns the thought that it was extremely improbable that one should have won it.

The argument is a simplified form of the one presented by van Inwagen (1996). The premises of van Inwagen's argument are as follows:

(1) There are some beings.
(2) If there is more than one possible world, there are infinitely many.
(3) There is at most one possible world in which there are no beings.
(4) For any two possible worlds, the probability of their being actual is equal.

Consider the proposition that there is just one possible world. If the proposition is true, then (1) entails that, necessarily (i.e. in all worlds), there are some beings, so the probability of there being nothing is 0. If the proposition is false, then, by (2), there are infinitely many worlds. The argument then proceeds in the same way as the simplified version. Since the differences between van Inwagen's and my presentation are not really significant, I shall confine the discussion to the latter. Our task now is to examine the concepts in play here.

III. Do possible worlds exist?
An issue we can put off no longer is that of the true nature of possible worlds. To say that a possible world is just a way this world could have been tells us little about how we should regard discourse about worlds. Is it just a convenient device? Or are other worlds part of reality? One source of the suspicion possible world-talk often arouses in philosophers is the thought that such talk is the thin edge of the wedge, the other end of which involves treating worlds as entities on a par with the actual world. So let us meet this notion head on, and see what its consequences are.

For David Lewis, other possible worlds are like the parallel universes of science fiction (and nowadays, of serious hypothesising among physicists): they and their inhabitants are every bit as real and concrete as we are (see Lewis (1986)). We cannot see these other worlds, not because they are too far away, but because there is no spatial route to them. They exist in their own space and time, bearing no spatio-temporal relations to us. What would happen to the improbability of nothingness argument if, like Lewis, we treated all possible worlds as being concretely real?

The answer is that the argument would collapse. To begin with, (2) would be false. On the concrete realist conception of worlds, all inhabitants of a world count as co-habitants of that world by virtue of being spatio-temporally related to each other. A world, then, consists of a unified space-time and its contents. There is, in consequence, no empty world, since such a world would be one which did not contain space and time. Perhaps it would be possible for a realist to have some principle of demarcation between worlds other than Lewis's spatio-temporal one, though it is hard to see what, but there is still the consideration that, in an empty world, there is nothing concrete to be a realist about. Realism also undermines (3), not in the sense of falsifying it, but in the sense of undermining its role in the argument. If realism is true, then every world is actual at itself. My utterance of 'the actual world is nice' picks out this world by virtue of the fact that it is the world I am in. But if David Copperfield (a purely possible person) were to utter 'the actual world is nice', he would pick out a different world: the world *he* was in. 'Actual' functions rather like 'here' on this view. So (3) would turn
out at best to be only a world-relative truth. Only one world can be actual for a given individual, confined as she is to a particular possible world, just as only one place can, at any time, be here for her. But then we cannot derive the conclusion, since the probability of a world's being actual can only be assessed with respect to a world, and that probability will either be 1, where the world in question is the same as the world with respect to which the probability is being assessed (only \( w \) could be actual at \( w \)), or 0, where the worlds are different (\( w \) is necessarily non-actual at any world other than itself). If the argument is to make sense, actuality must be an absolute property of a world: something a world has \textit{tout court}, and which every other world lacks. But this is inconsistent with Lewis's realism over worlds.

So, for the sake of giving the improbability of nothingness argument a fair hearing, we must set realism aside (perhaps with a sigh of relief). But what are we to replace it with? A natural way to look at other possible worlds is to treat them as stories we could tell about how things could have been (see, e.g., Plantinga (1974)). Let us make this idea a little more formal. We will define a world as a consistent set of propositions (assertions, if you prefer) which is \textit{maximal}, that is, it is such that, for any proposition \( p \), either \( p \) or \( \neg p \) appears in the set. The addition of one more proposition to the set would result in inconsistency. Clearly, such a set will contain an infinite number of propositions. The \textit{actual} world is the set of all \textit{true} propositions. There can only be one such set, for any other world will differ from the actual world by at least one proposition. That is, it will contain at least one proposition which is the negation of some proposition in the actual world. The latter proposition being, by definition, true, the former must be false. Reality is what is truly described by the actual world. (So, on this view, we are not identifying reality with a world, which, being a set, is a purely abstract notion. Later on, I shall relax this for the sake of stylistic convenience—but you will know what I am really talking about.)

On this conception of possible worlds, the improbability of nothingness argument looks much more promising. Since there is only one maximal set containing only true propositions, (3) is true. What of (2)? Since there is only one complete set of propositions
which would be true if nothing existed, we can say that at most one world is empty. Given that the notion of there being nothing at all does not contain a contradiction, something I leave unquestioned here, then it is also true that at least one world is empty. (2), then, is true. Finally, since any complete set of propositions would have to contain an infinite number of propositions, and worlds need differ only by one proposition to be distinct, there are an infinite number of possible worlds. So (1) is also true.

(4) is rather harder to defend, in that it does not simply come out as a consequence of this way of looking at worlds. It introduces a new notion, that of probability, and we will need, a little later on, to subject it to close scrutiny. The idea behind it is that there is nothing which biases the actualisation of one world at the expense of another. There is no a priori reason to suppose, for any given possible world, that it is actual. One world is not 'more possible' than any other. This assumption may be threatened by the existence of God, but, for the time being, we will let (4) stand.

The improbability of nothingness argument certainly has the appearance of soundness. The premises are plausible—at least if we adopt the theory of possible worlds sketched above—and the inferential steps unexceptionable. And if appearances are not deceptive, we have lost one of the most fundamental problems of metaphysics.

IV. Interlude: God, anthropic principles and multiple universes

But if we have lost one mystery, we have certainly gained another. For by substituting another world for the empty world in the improbability of nothingness argument, we add more weight to a traditional conundrum, why the universe should have produced living beings. Let worlds in which the laws of nature are such as to permit the evolution of life be described as 'life-supporting' worlds. Now consider the following variation on the improbability of nothingness argument:

The improbability of life argument
There are infinitely many possible worlds.
(2) The number of possible life-supporting worlds is $n$.
(3) There is exactly one world which is actual.
(4) For any two possible worlds, the probability of their being actual is equal.

Therefore: The probability that the actual world is life-supporting is $\frac{n}{\infty}$.

There is not a great deal we can do with this conclusion until we get some grasp on what kind of value $n$ has. Suppose, for a moment, that it is finite. Then the probability of the actual world's being life-supporting, like that of its being empty, is vanishingly small. But $n$ is unlikely to be finite. The logically possible variations of the laws of nature, each of which is compatible with conscious life, surely form a continuum: there is no reason to suppose that the variations can only be discrete. However, given the dependence of life on the conjunction of a number of unrelated factors, it is reasonable to suppose that the number of worlds whose laws are not compatible with life is vastly greater than the number of worlds whose laws are so compatible. In which case, the probability of the actual world's being life-supporting will still be very low indeed. Just this is the essence of the 'fine tuning' considerations of modern cosmology. As John Leslie puts it:

Our universe does seem remarkably tuned to Life's needs. Small changes in the strengths of its main forces, in the masses of its particles, in its degree of turbulence, in its early expansion speed, and so forth, would seemingly have rendered it hostile to living beings of any plausible kind. It risked recollapse within a fraction of a second, or becoming a universe of black holes, or a universe of matter much too dilute to form stars and planets, or even one composed of light rays alone. (Leslie (1989), p. 25.)

Our problem, then, is this: why, given that it was extremely improbable that it should be so, is the universe life-supporting? In answer, we might point to a principle first articulated by Brandon Carter, and named by him 'the Anthropic Principle'. Carter distinguishes between two forms of this principle. The weak form
says that 'our location in the universe is necessarily privileged to the extent of being compatible with our existence as observers' (Carter (1974), p. 291). This is a trivial principle, to the effect that we can exist in, and hence can expect to observe, only circumstances which are compatible with life. The strong form is not, or at least not obviously, trivial, and states that 'the universe had to be such as to permit the creation of observers in it at some stage' (Ibid.). It is possible to interpret the strong principle as being just as anodyne as the weak principle, as Leslie does. Or one may see in it an invocation of purpose in the universe. This interpretation makes it rather more interesting, and also appears to give it greater explanatory power. In terms of probability, the weak principle asserts that the conditional probability of the laws of nature being life-supporting, given that we are observing them, is 1. As a hypothesis, the principle tells us nothing about the unconditional probability of the laws of nature being life-supporting. In which case, the weak principle, by itself, does nothing to evaporate the mystery posed by the improbability of life argument. The strong principle, however, under its less harmless interpretation, does appear to affect that unconditional probability. But the more interesting interpretation of the strong anthropic principle, of course, only invites the further question of what grounds this purpose. A theistic answer to this further question is hard to resist. This takes us to our third probabilistic argument, a version of the teleological argument for God:

*The probabilistic teleological argument*

(1) The actual world is life-supporting.

(2) A certain set of data provides reasons for accepting a given hypothesis if the truth of that hypothesis would make the data more probable.

(3) The probability of (1)'s being true, on the hypothesis that God exists, is much greater than that of its being true given that the hypothesis is false.

*Therefore:* There is reason to believe that God exists.
In certain probabilistic presentations of the teleological argument, the emphasis is not on the presence of life in the universe, but the presence of order. Here is how Swinburne understands that concept:

The orderliness of the universe to which I draw attention here is its conformity to formula, to simple, formulable, scientific laws. The orderliness of the universe in this respect is a very striking fact about it. The universe might so naturally have been chaotic, but it is not—it is very orderly. (Swinburne (1979), p. 136)

Since order is a pre-requisite of life, we can regard our version of the argument as just a more restricted form than Swinburne's. A more significant difference, at least on the surface, is that Swinburne makes no explicit reference to possible worlds. He does, however, resort to counterfactuals. 'The universe might so naturally have been chaotic', he says. He also needs to refer to the probability of the universe's being orderly on the, for him, counterfactual supposition that God does not exist. Given the account offered above in section III of possible worlds in terms of sets of propositions, I do not think we would be doing much violence to Swinburne's argument if we were to represent it in terms of possible worlds.

Theism is not the only solution on offer, however. We can construct a formally identical argument for a rival hypothesis: that this is just one of many universes, some of which, like this one, are life-supporting, others (perhaps the majority) not:

The many universes argument

(1) The actual world is life-supporting.
(2) A certain set of data provides reasons for accepting a given hypothesis if the truth of that hypothesis would make the data more probable.
(3) The probability of (1)'s being true, on the hypothesis that world contains many universes, is much greater than that of its being true given that the hypothesis is false.

Therefore: There is reason to believe that the world contains many universes.
Here, however, we need to be sensitive to a distinction not yet respected in this paper: that between world and universe. We are comparing possible worlds which contain just one universe, and those which contain many. Given the existence of very many universes, so the argument goes, the probability that one of them at least will be life-supporting is much higher than the probability that a solitary universe will be so. Now if our interest is not just in solving the mystery of why the actual world should contain a life-supporting universe, but in why this particular universe is life-supporting, then clearly we need to supplement the conclusion of the above argument with something else. At this point, we can appeal to one or other of the anthropic principles. Given that there is, somewhere in the actual world, a life-supporting universe, the further question, why, of all the universes, this universe is life-supporting is then adequately answered by the tautologies Leslie supposes anthropic principles to be: obviously the universe you are in will be life-supporting. (And how could we pick out this universe, among all the actual universes, except by reference to oneself?)

This section was intended only as an interlude. Like all interludes, it does not contribute to the main action of the play. The idea of it was simply to introduce three more arguments with plausible premises and significant conclusions, which, like the improbability of nothingness argument, exploited a connection between possible worlds and probability. The purpose being to show what interesting things can be done if we combine those two notions. What the arguments of this section have in common with the improbability of nothingness argument is that they all contain a premise concerning the probability of the actual world's having a certain character. It is that premise which I wish to examine. First, however, what is probability?

V. Kinds of probability

We can distinguish between three kinds of probability. The first kind is epistemic probability, which is a measure of the extent to which a certain state of affairs provides evidence for the truth of a
given hypothesis. The epistemic probability of a hypothesis thus is relative to the evidence available. So, as the evidence builds up, the epistemic probability of the hypothesis increases. Seeing a dim figure ahead of me in the mist, I form an idea that it is my friend Digby. The probability of that hypothesis may initially be little above 0.5, but as I approach, the features of the figure become clearer, and I hear Digby's characteristic grunt, the probability rises to close to 1. Only propositions of which we are certain that they are true have a probability rating of 1. Propositions which we know cannot be true have a probability rating of 0. Epistemic probability is not a purely subjective matter, however: it is governed by certain rules. For example, a scientist presenting evidence for a certain hypothesis will not simply report that the evidence made her belief in the truth of the hypothesis all the firmer; she will present statistical calculations to show that the data obtained would have been very improbable if the hypothesis had been false. The epistemic probability of a proposition is therefore not the extent to which some random individual is inclined to believe it to be true, but rather the degree to which an entirely rational believer, following certain rules, would believe it.

Statistical probability is concerned with the frequency of items with a certain characteristic within a more-or-less circumscribed population. Suppose, for example, that we wish to talk of the probability of being left-handed if you drive a Mini. This will be defined as the frequency of left-handed people in the population of Mini-drivers. Although one may have evidence that the frequency of As in a population of Bs is such-and-such, the objective statistical probability of a B's being an A is completely independent of evidence. However, statistical and epistemic probability are not unrelated. Thus, the epistemic probability of the very next person I speak to preferring martini to gin will be determined by evidence concerning the statistical probability of such an event.

Finally, physical probability is the degree to which a certain state of affairs is determined by its causal antecedents and the conditions in which they operate. If the world is deterministic, then the physical probability that a certain state of affairs will obtain, given the total state of the universe at a time, is either 1 or 0. If the universe is
indeterministic, then the physical probability of that state of affairs will be something between these values. Physical probability, like statistical probability, is independent of evidence. But again, epistemic probability and physical probability are related. Suppose I am observing a pendulum in motion, and I want to discover the epistemic probability of the pendulum's being in a certain position at a certain time. I know that the position of the pendulum at any moment is determined by a number of factors, such as its length, the period of its swing, etc. That is, the physical probability of the pendulum's being in a certain position will have a certain value which I can calculate with a reasonable degree of accuracy by simply applying some laws of physics. The value for the physical probability that I obtain (assuming that I perform the calculation correctly) will then define the value for the epistemic probability of the pendulum's being in the relevant position at the relevant time. In this case, statistical probability has no application.

What kind of probability we are concerned with will depend on the context, and the kind of question we are asking. Clearly, we can only talk significantly about statistical probability where we are dealing with populations of more than one. But what if we want to talk about the probability of a certain one-off event, for example the probability of this rather hideous statuette breaking if I accidentally brush against it and knock it onto the floor? Here frequency will not help us, because even if there is a sizeable population of brushing-hideous-statuette-onto-the-floor events, what I am interested in is the probability that this particular event will end up with the smashing of the statuette. If we can make sense of such a probability — and some would deny that we can — then it is physical probability we are concerned with. What I want to know, in this case, is the extent to which prior conditions causally determine that the statuette will smash.

Now let us return to the improbability of nothingness argument. Can we use the conceptual tools introduced above to make sense of the crucial premise, namely that the probability of the empty world's being actual is \(1/\infty\)?

We can certainly make sense of the epistemic probability that a given possible world is actual. Given a description of a world, we
can compare it with observations of this, the actual, world, and see if the observations agree with the description. The more observations we make which agree with that description, and as long as we do not encounter anything which fails to do so, the greater the subjective probability that the world described is indeed the actual one. But this is no help to the argument. If epistemic probability is relevant at all, it is the epistemic probability of a given world's being actual given no evidence whatsoever. Any observation will make the epistemic probability of the empty world's being actual fall immediately to zero, but this is no answer to the question why there is something rather than nothing.

What of physical probability? The physical probability of a certain state of affairs, recall, is the extent to which that state is causally determined. I think it is evident that it makes no sense to speak of the physical probability of a given world's being actual, except in one special circumstance. For theism aside (for a moment), there is no process by which a world gets actualised, no property of a system which causally contributes to the actualisation of a world, nothing which explains why one world is actualised rather than another. Theism, of course, can make sense of probability in such a context. Let possible worlds be ideas in God's mind. Then, were his choice of which world to actualise quite random (which would conflict drastically with the doctrines of traditional theism), the probability of any world's being actual would indeed be $1/\infty$. The improbability of nothingness argument, however, cannot make use of a theistic context to ground its assertions about probability, simply because it would then presuppose what it is trying to explain, namely that there is something rather than nothing, the something being God.

It looks, then, as if statistical probability is the one most obviously relevant to the argument. The conclusion is, after all, derived from information concerning the frequency of empty worlds in the whole population of possible worlds. But here we have to distinguish between actual frequencies and counterfactual frequencies. In the case of the left-handed Mini-driver, we are dealing with actual frequencies—that is, the frequency of left-handedness amongst the members of an actual population of Mini-
drivers. Now, where we are concerned with possible worlds, the 
actual population of worlds—that is, the population of actual 
worlds—consists of exactly one member. (We have already ruled out 
realism about possible worlds for the sake of giving the 
improbability of nothingness argument a fair hearing.) But that 
would suggest that the statistical probability of this world’s being the 
actual one is 1. This conflicts with premise (4) of the improbability 
of nothingness argument. The population of worlds is, then, for the 
most part a counterfactual population. How does statistical 
probability apply to such counterfactual populations? Suppose I am 
contemplating the question, ‘If I were to toss this coin ten times, 
what is the probability of its landing tails every time?’ The answer is, 
approximately, 0.000976. But what does this mean in terms of 
frequency? That, were I to toss a coin ten times, and then repeat the 
whole procedure 999,999 times, I should, in 976 of these cases, 
obtain ten tails in a row? Not necessarily. I might obtain it only 960 
times, or 1000 times. Perhaps, then, we should say that, in a 
sufficiently large population, the proportion of cases in which I 
obtain ten tails in a row tends towards 0.000976. But, since this a 
purely counterfactual population, we have to ask in virtue of what 
this figure represents the true proportion. Here we have to appeal to 
physical probability: given the intrinsic properties of the coin, one 
outcome (heads) is no more determined than the other (tails). 
Generalising, talk of statistical probability for counterfactual 
populations presupposes physical probability. But we have already 
said that physical probability does not apply to possible worlds, since 
the actualisation of a world is not something that can be causally 
determined. So, it would appear, statistical probability has no 
application here either.

So far, then, it seems as though probability and possible worlds 
do not mix. We have distinguished between three kinds of 
probability, but none of the three kinds has made sense of the 
improbability of nothingness argument. However, we were perhaps 
too hasty in dismissing epistemic probability as irrelevant to the 
argument. In assessing how a certain range of data affects the 
epistemic probability of a given hypothesis, the scientist will want to 
consider the intrinsic, or prior probability of the hypothesis, i.e. the
probability of the hypothesis's being true before we consider any evidence. What kinds of consideration are relevant here? In the next and final section I shall consider two properties of hypotheses which are often supposed to affect their intrinsic probability: simplicity and scope.

VI. The simplicity of the world

Science is based on the supposition that nature is intelligible. This is an indispensable assumption, for if it were widely believed that nature was intrinsically unintelligible, no-one would invest many resources into trying to understand it. But with this assumption of intelligibility comes another: that of the simplicity of nature. We might put this informally by saying that nature will take the easiest route to bring about a certain effect. Let us suppose that the movement of the planets could be determined either by a few simple laws governing gravitation and motion, or by a much greater number of more complex laws governing not only gravitation and motion but also other factors. Then we would naturally suppose that it is the first of these possibilities that actually obtains. Now perhaps this is simply a pragmatic attitude on our part, rather than reflective of a feature of nature. It is certainly true that an initial assumption of simplicity will make it easier to formulate and test theories. But the manifest success of science when it is guided by this assumption suggests that nature does indeed conform to our expectations in this respect. Of course, we have to view that argument with some caution. Fortune has not invariably favoured the simpler hypothesis. And it might be said that both simplicity and complexity occurs in nature, but that, as beings with only finite powers of understanding, we will naturally have more success in uncovering the simpler parts of nature. Even so, we do well to have a bias towards simpler explanations where these do not conflict with the data. We can put that bias as follows: of two competing hypotheses, the prior epistemic probability—that is, the probability before any evidence is examined—of the simpler hypothesis is greater than that of the more complex hypothesis.
Let us now apply these same considerations to possible worlds. There should be nothing illegitimate about this extension, since we earlier identified worlds with sets of propositions, or, as we might call them, hypotheses. Suppose, then, that we are considering two possible worlds and wondering, prior to considering any evidence whatsoever, which is the more likely to be the actual world. If van Inwagen is right, there is nothing to choose between those worlds: any world is as likely to be actual as any other (see Premise (4)). But the remarks above about simplicity suggest that this is in fact false: if one of the worlds is simpler than the other, then it is more likely to be actual.

So far, I have been talking as if we have an intuitive grasp of what simplicity amounts to. But there is more than one sense in which a world, hypothesis, law or description can be simpler than another. A world may be simpler than another in one respect but more complex in another. And greater simplicity may go together with greater probability when simplicity is characterised in one way, but imply lower probability when characterised in another way. So let us now take a look at some of the varieties of simplicity. A hypothesis may be said to be simpler than another in some respect if one or more of the following obtain:

1) it postulates fewer laws governing the behaviour of the universe;
2) it postulates fewer entities, or fewer relations between those entities;
3) it is of greater generality than another: that is, it contains fewer specifications of particular entities;
4) there are fewer ways in which it can be true: that is, it is more restrictive.

Suppose, for example, we are comparing 'All living things produce Carbon Dioxide' with 'All mammals produce Carbon Dioxide'. The first hypothesis is simpler than the second in the third sense above: it is more general. To take another example: 'One atom of Sodium combines with one atom of chlorine' is simpler, in the fourth sense above, than 'One atom of Sodium combines with either one or three
atoms of Chlorine': there are more ways in which the second
description can be true.

But is it true that a simpler hypothesis is more likely to be true
than a more complex hypothesis? It depends which definition of
simplicity you are looking at. It is a principle that we do not
postulate more items than are necessary to account for the data, so
simplicity in senses 1 and 2 do go together with greater epistemic
probability. But although scientists may prefer hypotheses which
have the virtue of simplicity in senses 3 and 4, it is not because they
are more likely to be true. In fact, a hypothesis which is of greater
generality than another is less likely to be true, since it is less
cautious. But scientists want hypothesis of greater generality because
they cover a wider range of phenomena: their scope is wider, they
say more about the universe. Similarly, if a hypothesis is more
restrictive in the sense that there are fewer ways in which it can be
ture, then it is less likely to be true. So 'All A's are B' is less likely to
be true than 'All A's are B, C or D'. But nevertheless the first
hypothesis may be preferred precisely because it is less cautious: the
predictions it makes are more specific and so easier to test than the
second. Scientists, as one might put it, like to live dangerously: they
take intellectual risks, because the riskier hypotheses may often be
more useful than the safer ones. So two important considerations in
science, namely 'choose the more likely hypothesis', and 'choose the
more useful, more predictive, and therefore more easily testable
hypothesis', may pull in opposite directions.

Now consider the hypothesis 'there is nothing'. In one sense, or
four two senses in fact, this is the simplest hypothesis imaginable.
Apart from the fact that it can be stated in three words, it postulates
no laws, no entities and no relations between those entities. It is also
more general than any other hypothesis, with the sole exception of
'there is something'. So does this mean that its prior epistemic
probability is much higher than that of any other hypothesis? Its
ontological economy certainly counts in its favour. But its generality
and scope tell against it. It is, in fact, the boldest hypothesis that one
could imagine. It answers (that is, it implies an answer to) every
conceivable question one could ask about the world. What caused
the universe to come into being? Nothing. How many kinds of
arthropod are there? None. Is gravitational attraction inversely proportional to the square of the distance, or the cube of the distance, between any two objects? Neither. And so on. Finally, there is, as the improbability of nothingness argument makes explicit, only one way in which there can be absolutely nothing. These considerations rather outweigh the considerations about economy. Because, although there are a number of hypotheses which are only a little less economical than the empty hypothesis, the empty hypothesis has vastly greater scope than any other hypothesis. All this implies a very low prior epistemic probability of the empty world's being actual.

Have we then arrived at a solution to the problem of why there is something rather than nothing? The improbability of nothingness argument offers a solution, but is controversial for a number of reasons: it depends on the legitimacy of discourse about possible worlds, it imports considerations about probability into such discourse, and it assumes that all worlds are equiprobable. In defence of the argument, we showed that, so far from taking possible worlds to be concretely real entities, the argument requires us to reject this picture in favour of one which treats worlds as descriptions, propositions or hypotheses. And we can countenance the idea that a given possible world has a probability attached to it (in the sense that it is \( n\% \) probable that it is the actual world) provided we are talking only of epistemic, as opposed to statistical or physical, probability in this context.

However, not all worlds are equally probable, since not all worlds are equally simple, and just as simplicity affects the likelihood of some hypothesis' being true, so it affects the likelihood of some world's being actual. But although this contradicts a premise of the improbability of nothingness argument, it provides another—and shorter—route to the conclusion. The wider the scope of a hypothesis—i.e. the more it says about the world, and the fewer the ways in which it can be true—the less likely it is to be true. Since the hypothesis that there is nothing is wider in scope than any rival hypothesis, it follows that it is less likely, much less likely, to be true. And this is a result we can reach without the apparatus of possible worlds. This, then, is why there is something rather than
nothing. Does the initial puzzlement still remain? That I leave for you to judge.

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NOTES

[2] Cf Lowe (1996), pp. 113-4. Lowe points out that proponents of the anthropic principle would resist the suggestion that it was just as improbable that the world should be as it is as that it should be empty.
[3] The reader in a hurry may skip this section.
[4] Since I earlier defined worlds as sets of propositions, I should talk here of worlds describing, rather than containing, life-supporting laws. I hope, in the interests of a simpler exposition, this shift from propositions to what they concern will be forgiven.
[5] The terms and characterisation of these kinds is, with some modifications, taken from Swinburne (1973). See also Mellor (1971) for a discussion of theories of probability.

REFERENCES

van Inwagen, P. (1996) 'Why is There Anything At All?', *Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume LXX, pp. 95-110.