

# A few paper pointers

1. The topic concerns the *objective* meaning or value of an individual human life. This can't be grounded merely in how life *seems* to that person or in whether that person or any group of persons *deems* their life to be meaningful. I'm not asking for conditions under which a person would *think* their life is meaningful, but for conditions under which it would *be* meaningful, even if they and everyone else thought otherwise.
2. It is better to offer 2 or 3 *well-argued for* conditions than 7 or 8 poorly argued ones.
3. A good argumentative strategy is to use *thought experiments*. If you can make a good case that in a certain type of scenario an individual's life would *fail* to be objectively meaningful, then you can conclude that the *opposite* type of scenario is necessary for an individual's life to be objectively meaningful.

# Aquinas vs. Hume and Feldman

Aquinas gives three reasons why suicide is “unlawful” (i.e., morally wrong) in the *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae, Q. 64, a.5.

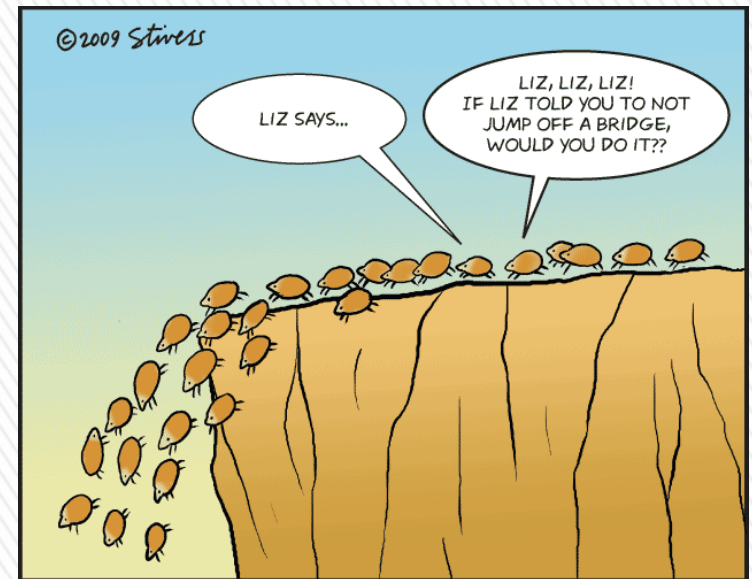
1. *It is contrary to the natural law* because “everything naturally loves itself” and so naturally tries to “[keep] itself in being” and “[resist] corruptions so far as it can.”
  - By “natural law” Aquinas means that every natural kind has an essence or *nature* that defines its *telos*, the set of goals or end toward which its activities are naturally directed.
  - By virtue of our *human* nature, we have a built-in drive to strive for our own well-being, the full actualization of our physical, emotional, rational, and spiritual capacities.
  - Not everything reaches its *telos* due to defects in body (physical handicap), mind (ignorance), will (sin or vice), or circumstantial interference. Importantly, these are *not* defects in the *nature* of the thing.

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1. *It is contrary to the natural law* because “everything naturally loves itself” and so naturally tries to “[keep] itself in being” and “[resist] corruptions so far as it can.”

- Feldman: What about lemmings?
- Easy fix: Restrict the argument to *humans*.
- Feldman: What about very depressed persons who are “naturally” inclined to kill themselves.
- Reply: “natural” for Aquinas means *following from our essence or nature*. Depression is not “natural” in this sense.



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2. *It is harmful to the community* because “every man ... belongs to the community” and “by killing himself he injures the community.”
  - Feldman: What about an old person who is “so incapacitated that he is no longer able to make a worthwhile contribution to the welfare of others.?” (p. 212)
  - Hume: It is sometimes *beneficial* to the community that a person takes his own life. In such cases it is “not only lawful but praiseworthy” to do so.

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3. *It usurps the divine prerogative to give and take life.*

- Hume: God has given us the power to end our own life, and nothing happens that God has not ordained.
- Hence, whatever happens is something God wanted to happen.
- Hence, “everyone is free to end his own life when he wishes.”
- If it usurps God’s rights to take our own life, then acting to preserve our life also usurps God’s rights.
- Reply: This argument only works on the assumption of *theological determinism*. While, as Feldman puts it, “ultimately, God is responsible for absolutely everything,” (p. 213), most theists would insist that God is not ultimately responsible for everything *in the same way*. More specifically, God does not *ordain* everything that happens. Some things he *merely permits*.

# Feldman on suicide

Feldman's position contrasts with both Aquinas' and Hume's

- Aquinas: suicide is *always* wrong; indeed, it is a mortal sin.
- Hume: suicide is *often* permissible. It is a matter in which humans are entitled "to use their own judgment and discretion."
  - Interestingly, Hume denies that "anyone ever threw his life away while it was worth keeping" and maintains that all apparent cases to the contrary are ones in which the person suffers from "an incurable depravity or depression."
- Feldman: suicide is *sometimes* (though seldom) permissible.

# Feldman on suicide

Feldman appeals to a moral theory that he calls *justicized act utilitarianism*.

- *Justicized act utilitarianism*: An act is morally permissible if it maximizes the quality of fit between the amounts of primary intrinsic goods people deserve and the amounts of such goods they get. (p. 214)
- In short, act so as to maximize the extent to which everyone gets what they deserve.
  - But what exactly do people “deserve”?
  - Do we *deserve* to live for 25, 50, 75, or 100 years? If so, why?
- At any rate, Feldman believes that if the “expected utility” of a person’s continuing to live is less than the expected utility of that person’s committing suicide, then that person is morally *obligated* to commit suicide (and others may be obligated to assist).
  - He cautions that for most younger people and people suffering from depression, the expected utility of continuing to live is *greater* than it is for committing suicide. For them, suicide is immoral and irrational.