# Laying Down Hume’s Law

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**Abstract**: Most interpretations of Hume’s is/ought passage (THN 3.1.1.27) can be broadly divided into two camps: those thinking Hume to rule out logical inferences from is to ought, and those thinking Hume to only raise surmountable difficulties for inferences from is to ought. I undermine the positive support for both these interpretations, and argue, by drawing parallels with Hume’s argument on induction, that Hume’s Law instead rules out *all* forms of inference from is to ought.

## Introduction

I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation, which may, perhaps, be found of some importance. In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ’tis necessary that it shou’d be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention wou’d subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv’d by reason. (THN 3.1.1.27)[[1]](#endnote-1)

In terms of the ratio of secondary literature to primary text, it is certainly difficult to trump Hume’s infamous is-ought passage above (henceforth IO). Robison (2010, p.66) points out that the secondary literature can be broadly divided into two camps: those who think that Hume is ruling out inferences[[2]](#endnote-2) from is to ought, and those who think that Hume is only raising surmountable difficulties for such inferences, difficulties which he himself overcomes. Call the former interpretation ‘Hume’s Law’, and the latter ‘Hume’s Challenge’. Until the mid-twentieth century, Hume’s Law was the standard (and arguably only) reading of IO.[[3]](#endnote-3) This changed with MacIntyre (1959), who argued that Hume’s Law is overly strong, since Hume seems happy to make inferences from is to ought himself. Since then, Hume’s Challenge has become a strong contender in the secondary literature.[[4]](#endnote-4)

I aim to contribute to this debate in two ways. First, I undermine the positive support for Hume’s Challenge. Second, I argue that far from being too strong, typical versions of Hume’s Law are not strong enough – IO justifies a stronger interpretation. Among the exponents of Hume’s Law, IO has overwhelmingly been taken as ruling out only logical deductions from is-premises alone to ought-conclusions. Call this version of Hume’s Law ‘Hume’s Logical Law’.[[5]](#endnote-5) I argue that this is in fact too weak – like Sturgeon (2001), I take IO to rule out *all* legitimate inferences from is-premises alone to ought-conclusions. I will refer to this position as ‘Hume’s General Law’.

Note that I conceive of this paper as a scholarly one: my concern is with what exactly it is that Hume says in IO, rather than the philosophical tenability of the is/ought distinction. Prior (1960) raises an ingenious purported counterexample to Hume’s Law that has spawned a vast literature. Consider the following disjunction of a moral and non-moral claim: ‘either grass is yellow, or Donald is malicious’. If the disjunction is moral, then we can infer a moral claim from non-moral premises, as follows: ‘grass is yellow; therefore, either grass is yellow, or Donald is malicious’. If the disjunction is non-moral, then we can also infer a moral claim from non-moral premises: ‘it is not the case that grass is yellow; either grass is yellow or Donald is malicious; therefore, Donald is malicious’. Although the purported counterexample is deep and troubling, Prior’s problem seems too far removed from any considerations Hume might have contemplated, and so I set it aside here with a clear conscience.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Given that Hume’s Law takes IO to rule out inferences from is-propositions alone to ought-propositions, spelling out the position requires making sense of how Hume conceives (i) is-propositions; (ii) ought-propositions; and (iii) the inferences from (i) to (ii) that he rules out. I will briefly state my readings of (i) and (ii), concentrating the bulk of my efforts in this paper on (iii).

First, I take Hume’s discussion of ‘is’ propositions to refer to ‘matters of fact or relations of ideas’ (EHU 4.1). I take this move to be fairly uncontroversial. Second, I take Hume’s discussion of ‘ought’ propositions to refer to moral evaluations; this is commonly assumed both implicitly (by the majority of commentators on this issue) and explicitly (e.g. Falk [1976, p.360] and Sturgeon [2001, p.9]).[[7]](#endnote-7),[[8]](#endnote-8) What counts as a moral evaluation for Hume? One key property of moral evaluations is that, unlike beliefs about matters of fact or relations of ideas, they are intrinsically motivating:[[9]](#endnote-9)

…the distinction betwixt moral good and evil… has an influence upon our actions, of which reason alone is incapable. (THN 3.1.1.16)

Thus, a sociopath who woodenly repeats that ‘murdering is wrong’ in the same way one might say that ‘the floor is creaky’ would not be making a moral evaluation.[[10]](#endnote-10) Note that this is not to say that any mental state that carries intrinsic motivational force will count as an ought-evaluation (e.g. my distaste for durian is a non-moral attitude that intrinsically motivates me to avoid it), merely that, unlike is-evalutions, any ought-evaluations will carry intrinsic motivational force.

This just leaves the question of what forms of inference Hume rules out between the two. My answer is that he rules out *all* legitimate inferences – that is, all legitimate demonstrative and inductive (i.e. probable) inferences – from is-premises alone to ought-conclusions. What is it for an inference to be illegitimate?

For a demonstrative inference to be illegitimate is for its opposite to be conceivable: consider the fact that Hume dismisses the possibility of there being demonstrative arguments for the Uniformity Principle on the basis of the fact that we can ‘conceive a change in the course of nature’ (THN 1.3.6.5).[[11]](#endnote-11)

Meanwhile, legitimate probable arguments would be ones that respect the rules he sets out in his ‘Rules by which to judge of causes and effects’ in THN 1.3.15. As most of these rules (notably, rules 3 to 8) are clearly founded on the Uniformity Principle—that is, the principle that the unobserved will resemble the observed—if an argument violates this principle, it would consequently fall foul of these rules, and so would not constitute a legitimate inductive inference. Thus, if any probable argument whatsoever from is-premises alone to ought-conclusions would violate the Uniformity Principle, then there can be no legitimate probable arguments from is to ought.[[12]](#endnote-12)

My paper will proceed as follows: first, I undermine the positive support for Hume’s Challenge; then, I undermine the positive support for Hume’s Logical Law. Having done so, I end by giving a positive argument for Hume’s General Law on the basis of constructing an argument from the materials provided in IO; I take this extracted argument to give good reason to reject Hume’s Challenge and Hume’s Logical Law in favour of Hume’s General Law, given the lack of positive support the former two interpretations enjoy.[[13]](#endnote-13)

## Hume’s Challenge

One *prima facie* reason for adopting Hume’s Challenge over Hume’s Law is the hedging language that Hume employs in IO. For instance, he does not explicitly preclude inferences from is to ought, but rather only asks that such inferences ‘shou’d be observ’d and explain’d and ‘that a reason should be given’ for them; similarly, he only states that any such inference ‘seems altogether inconceivable’, which is not to say that it *is* actually altogether inconceivable.

Of course, proponents of Hume’s Law take his hedging language merely to be an instance of Humean understated irony. In saying that any such inference ‘seems altogether inconceivable’, Hume is quite naturally read as saying that such inferences *really are* inconceivable, much in the way that when he says that it ‘seems evident’ to him (THN Intro 8) that the essence of the mind is as unknown to us as external bodies, he is saying that this claim *really is* evident. As for the fact that Hume only asks that the possibility of inferences from is to ought should be explained, this seems to be a paradigmatic Humean challenge, one that he typically takes to have no answer. Compare with a similar challenge in the case of induction:

For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ’tis necessary that it shou’d be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. (THN 3.1.1.27)

Shou’d any one think to elude this argument; and without determining whether our reasoning on this subject be deriv’d from demonstration or probability, pretend that all conclusions from causes and effects are built on solid reasoning: I can only desire, that this reasoning may be produc’d, in order to be expos’d to our examination. (THN 1.3.6.8)

In both passages, Hume challenges his opponents to provide some justification for a certain type of inference.[[14]](#endnote-14) But of course it is clear that Hume holds that there could not be any such reasoning in the inductive case. Insofar as both challenges seem very similar in style and structure, it seems that Hume’s hedging language does not by itself give us significant reason to hold Hume’s Challenge rather than Hume’s Law.

Indeed, the final sentence of IO arguably suggests a stronger reading than Hume’s Challenge. Hume boldly states that ‘this small attention wou’d subvert all the vulgar systems of morality’. Proponents of Hume’s Challenge might attempt to explain this statement by claiming that Hume subverts all the vulgar systems of morality but not his own (non-vulgar) system because only he shows how such transitions are to be made,[[15]](#endnote-15) but this reading seems ill-fitting. The problem is that merely pointing out that the vulgar systems fail to adequately explain their transitions from is to ought does not seem accurately described as ‘subverting’ these vulgar systems. According to Hume’s Challenge, all Hume has shown is that their accounts might need some supplementing: their inferences from is to ought ‘shou’d be observ’d and explain’d; and… a reason should be given’ (THN 3.1.1.27) for them. If I point out that a colleague’s paper could do with an argument for one of its premises, I certainly would not be ‘subverting’ the paper, but merely pointing out a way in which it could be improved. Of course, there might be a special reason that all vulgar systems could not possibly explain inferences from is to ought, explaining why attention to Hume’s point would subvert them, but Hume does not enter into such reasons in this paragraph, and so at the very least, this seems to present some awkwardness for Hume’s Challenge. In short, it seems that a simple examination of IO does not significantly tell in favour of Hume’s Challenge over Hume’s Law.

What about evidence for Hume’s Challenge that sources from beyond IO? Undeniably, the strongest case for this interpretation is the point raised by MacIntyre (1959) that Hume seems to nonchalantly make inferences from is to ought in his philosophy; for instance, Hume rules that the ‘monkish virtues’ are really vices, because they are detrimental and disagreeable to the possessor and to others.[[16]](#endnote-16) Thus, it seems one can only maintain Hume’s Law on pain of reading Hume as flagrantly contradicting himself.

A proponent of Hume’s Law might respond by reading such apparent inferences from is to ought as merely explaining the origin of, or psychology behind, our moral evaluations, as Macbeth (1992, p.45) argues. Capaldi (1966, pp.136-37) and Konrad (1970, p.131) go even further in claiming that not only does Hume abstain from such a project, he rejects even the possibility of a genuinely normative ethics.

This move seems deeply unsatisfying, because there is evidence that Hume’s ethical project is at least sometimes genuinely prescriptive. I argue for this claim in more detail elsewhere,[[17]](#endnote-17) but I will briefly cite two pieces of textual evidence. One is that, as Cohon (2008, p.241) points out, Hume hopes that his ethical project ‘may contribute to the amendment of men’s lives, and their improvement in morality and social virtue’ (EPM 9.14), which indicates a normative project. The other piece of evidence comes from Hume’s rejection of the ‘monkish virtues’ in EPM 9.3. Here, Hume concludes that because the ‘monkish virtues’ such as celibacy, fasting, penance, self-denial, humility and so forth are detrimental and disagreeable to the possessor or to others, these ‘virtues’ are in fact vices. This inference is similar to those highlighted by MacIntyre, and yet the conclusion seems clearly normative. For it seems commonly held at the time (and even today) that traits such as humility and perhaps self-denial are virtues,[[18]](#endnote-18) and so Hume’s rejection of them as vices cannot be a mere description of our normative behaviour; rather, it seems to be aimed at *correcting* this behaviour.

The position I hold is that Hume’s inferences do not contravene Hume’s Law simply because they are not inferences from is-claims *alone* to ought-claims. Rather, they are inferences from a conjunction of is-claims *and ought-claims*, to ought claims, which is clearly consistent with Hume’s Law.[[19]](#endnote-19) Returning to the monkish virtues, the point is that inferences such as:

**P1.** The ‘monkish virtues’ are mental qualities that are detrimental and disagreeable to the possessor and to others;

1. Therefore, the ‘monkish virtues’ are vices.

are, as stated above, incomplete. Notably, in the above case, Hume implicitly appeals to another premise: that mental qualities that are detrimental and disagreeable to the possessor and to others are vices.[[20]](#endnote-20) Hume begins his discussion in EPM 9 by proclaiming: ‘PERSONAL MERIT consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*’ (EPM 9.1). Shortly after, just prior to his discussion of the monkish virtues, he raises the corollary of this principle:

And as every quality, which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or others, is, in common life, allowed to be a part of personal merit; so no other will ever be received, where men judge of things by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion. (EPM 9.3)

Here, Hume claims that those mental qualities that are neither useful nor agreeable to the self or others cannot be virtues. This discussion renders it highly plausible that, in castigating the ‘monkish virtues’ as vices on the basis of their being detrimental and disagreeable to the self and others, Hume is appealing to a moral principle that is the natural extension of the two he has just offered: vices are those mental qualities that are detrimental and disagreeable to the self and others.

Putting this together, the complete inference would be as follows:

**P1.** The ‘monkish virtues’ are mental qualities that are detrimental and disagreeable to the possessor and to others;

**P2.** Whatever mental qualities are detrimental and disagreeable to the possessor and to others are vices;

1. Therefore, the ‘monkish virtues’ are vices.

Importantly, note that both **P2** and **C** are moral in nature.[[21]](#endnote-21) Crucially, they are intrinsically motivating. **C** is moral: evaluating that the ‘monkish virtues’ are vices brings with it a corresponding aversion to developing the ‘monkish virtues’ in oneself, and a distaste for the ‘monkish virtues’ in others. And **P2** is moral in precisely the same way: evaluating that whatever mental qualities are disagreeable to the possessor and to others are vices brings with it a corresponding aversion to developing such traits, and a distaste for such traits in others. Here, we have an inference from moral and non-moral premises, to a moral conclusion. Read thusly, this inference is perfectly consistent with Hume’s Law, and I believe this result to generalise.

MacIntyre (1959, p.457) does consider such a response, but rejects it out of hand on the basis that a premise such as **P2** above ‘could not be a moral principle at all, but at best a kind of compressed definition’; being a ‘compressed definition’ is meant to preclude these moral premises from being moral principles because they would merely state a ‘logically dependent’ relation, rendering them merely an analytic truth, or as MacIntyre puts it, ‘an aphoristic and misleading truism’. Presumably, MacIntyre’s point is that if such principles are tautologies, they could not be moral principles (perhaps because they would not carry intrinsic motivational force), and so any subsequent inferences to moral conclusions would fall foul of Hume’s Law. Or perhaps his point is that we can always drop a tautology from an inference without compromising its validity, and so Hume’s inferences to moral conclusions would be in effect inferences from is to ought. In any case, that such principles are analytic is endorsed by Pigden (2009, p.6), who cites the following passage: ‘It defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary.’ (EPM App. 1.10); indeed, Pigden maintains that Hume ‘needs’ such claims to be analytic.

This is a controversial, and I think mistaken, reading. Scott-Taggart (1961, p.243) argues that the criteria for a term’s correct application are not equivalent to its definition. Similarly, Hudson (1964, p.250) points out that to make ought-claims might be to apply commonly accepted rules, but this does not entail that ought-claims are logically equivalent to claims about these rules. Meanwhile, Garrett (1997, p.201) takes readings of Hume’s definitions as providing logical equivalences to be ‘highly anachronistic’. In line with this, Hume’s usage of the word ‘define’ in EPM App 1.10 is easily accommodated. One of the meanings listed in the OED (definition 6b) which saw usage in the early modern period is ‘To set forth or explain what (a word or expression) means; to declare the signification of (a word)’; this usage does not entail an analytic equivalence stating necessary and sufficient conditions (i.e. a strict definition).

That the principle that ‘whatever mental qualities are detrimental and disagreeable to the possessor and to others are vices’ (i.e. **P2**) is not analytic is clear from the second *Enquiry*, wherein Hume takes pains to emphasise that he is undertaking a distinctly *empirical* project of discovering what virtue and vice consist in. Examine Hume’s description of his project in the opening section:

In order to attain this purpose [of discovering the true origin of morals], we shall endeavour to follow a very simple method: We shall analyze that complication of mental qualities, which form what, in common life, we call Personal Merit…The only object of reasoning is to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these [estimable or blamable] qualities [of men]; to observe that particular in which the estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blameable on the other, and thence to reach the foundation of ethics, and find those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived… *As this is a question of fact, not of abstract science, we can only expect success, by following the experimental method, and deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances*. (EPM 1.10, emphasis added)

This passage explicitly states that Hume’s project consists of an empirical investigation into what qualities imply ‘either praise or blame’: we ‘observe’ (a distinctly empirical task!) what is common to moral qualities in order to arrive at what constitutes virtue, or ‘Personal Merit’. As Hume states, this ‘is a question of fact’, and he ‘can only expect success, by following the experimental method’, which is unambiguously empirical. Thus, Hume’s derivation of the principle that virtue is what is useful or agreeable to the self or others, as well as the converse principle regarding vice (i.e. **P2**), cannot be analytic. These principles are not stipulated; rather, it is only by observing and analysing the ‘particular in which estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blameable on the other’ (EPM 1.10), that Hume comes to discover that vices are disagreeable and detrimental.[[22]](#endnote-22)

This contingency also comes out sharply in EPM 9.13. Here Hume notes that although he is quite certain in his thesis that virtues are useful and agreeable qualities, presumably extending this courtesy to his corollary thesis on vices, he nevertheless expresses a degree of ‘diffidence and scepticism’ in this respect when he considers how controversial such enquiries have proven in the past (EPM 9.13). Again, **P2** cannot be analytic, since if this were the case, it would not admit of any uncertainty.[[23]](#endnote-23) This contingency generalises to other moral principles: in EHU 12.33 Hume emphasises that ethical philosophy in general concerns ‘facts’ such as ‘the general taste of mankind’:

Morals and criticism are not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment... Or if we reason concerning it, and endeavour to fix its standard, we regard a new fact, to wit, the general taste of mankind, or some such fact, which may be the object of reasoning and enquiry. (EHU 12.33)

All in all, MacIntyre’s objection that such principles have to be ‘compressed definitions’ seems unfounded.

Another possible objection is that even if Hume’s inferences to moral conclusions presuppose moral premises like ‘whatever mental qualities are detrimental and disagreeable to the possessor and to others are vices’, these premises might themselves be derived purely from is-claims, that is, non-moral premises about our usage of the term ‘vice’.[[24]](#endnote-24)

However, such inferences themselves plausibly presuppose further moral premises.[[25]](#endnote-25) For example, the above inference would presuppose the premise that in general, people ‘get it right’ about morality, which expresses moral approval of the general ethical standards of society. If we take it that we can discover moral truths by examining our linguistic practices, we implicitly assume that our linguistic practices generally capture moral truths. And that we are generally on the track of moral truth seems to be a quintessentially moral claim.

In sum, where Hume seems to make inferences from is to ought, we should read these inferences as implicitly containing an ought-claim within the premises. Cohon (2008) offers a similar reply to the objection that Hume seems to make inferences from is to ought. Essentially, she reads Hume as claiming that moral claims are a distinct type of fact (corresponding to ought-claims) from non-moral facts (corresponding to is-claims). Cohon (2008, pp.93-94) argues that Hume in IO intends to preclude only the derivation of moral claims from reasoning about abstract or causal relations alone; what is needed is some reference to those distinctly moral sentiments, which Hume provides via ‘fact[s] of feeling’ (p.94). Importantly, these facts about feelings are moral in nature, and cannot be discovered by reason alone. In short, they are ought-propositions rather than is-propositions. Thus, Hume’s inferences to ought claims include ought claims (in the forms of facts about feelings) in the premises, and so do not fall foul of Hume’s Law.[[26]](#endnote-26)

All in all, the positive support for Hume’s Challenge seems unconvincing in light of the textual evidence examined in this section.

## Hume’s Logical Law

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, proponents of Hume’s Law have overwhelmingly adopted Hume’s Logical Law. In this section, I intend to undermine the support for this interpretation; in the next section, I will defend Hume’s General Law.

A crucial issue is what Hume means by ‘deduction’ when he says that ‘[it] seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it’ in IO. Two natural candidates present themselves: either ‘deduction’ refers only to demonstrative arguments, or it refers to inferences of any kind.[[27]](#endnote-27) Hume’s Logical Law relies upon the former interpretation of deduction; indeed, it seems difficult to discern anything else in IO that points to Hume’s Logical Law over Hume’s General Law. In contrast, I believe the latter interpretation of ‘deduction’ to be the right one.

It is important to note that although ‘deduction’ has come to refer to deductively valid arguments in the modern philosophical lexicon, this does not hold true in other contexts. The OED defines deduce (definition 6**a) thusly:** ‘To derive or draw as a conclusion from something already known or assumed; to derive by a process of reasoning or inference; to infer. (The chief current sense.)’. Deduce is listed in its chief use as a synonym for infer; correspondingly, deduction would be equivalent to inference in general, rather than any special deductive subset thereof.[[28]](#endnote-28) And as MacIntyre (1959, p.460) points out, Hume rarely uses the word ‘deduction’ and its cognates; the most similar notion in Hume to our contemporary notion of ‘deductive arguments’ is that of ‘demonstrative arguments’, which Hume does not explicitly mention in IO. Similarly, Owen (1999, p.90) claims: ‘But Hume rarely talks of deduction and its cognates at all. Where he does he is using ‘deduction’ in its standard 18th Century sense of ‘argument’’.

Owen’s claim stands up to examination. For instance, Hume describes his ‘experimental method’ as the process of ‘deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances’ in EPM 1.10, and as pointed out previously, his experimental method is nothing if not empirical (and therefore inductive). Also, MacIntyre (1959, p.460) cites a passage from Hume’s *Theory of Politics*, wherein Hume uses ‘deduced’ in relation to inductive inferences regarding the consequences of particular forms of government:

So great is the force of laws, and of particular forms of government, and so little dependence have they on the humours and tempers of men, that consequences almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced from them as any which the mathematical sciences afford us. (TP III.136)

At least, it seems that the wide sense of ‘deduction’ and its cognates is the dominant one in Hume’s work, and indeed I can find no usage where the term unambiguously carries the narrow sense. Most proponents of Hume’s Logical Law do not substantiate their reading of Hume’s use of ‘deduction’ in much detail, but Pigden (2010b) is a notable exception. Pigden (2010b, p.83) claims that he finds at least two unambiguous usages in the narrow sense, although he only cites one:

I doubt not but these consequences will at first sight be receiv’d without difficulty, as being **evident** **deductions** from principles, which we have already establish’d, and which we have often employ’d in our reasonings. This evidence both in the first principles, and in the **deductions**, may seduce us unwarily into the conclusion, and make us imagine it contains nothing extraordinary, nor worthy of our curiosity. But tho’ such an inadvertence may facilitate the reception of this reasoning, ’twill make it be the more easily forgot; for which reason I think it proper to give warning, that I have just now examin’d one of the most sublime questions in philosophy, *viz. that concerning the power and efficacy of causes*; where all the sciences seem so much interested. Such a warning will naturally rouze up the attention of the reader, and make him desire a more full account of my doctrine, as well as of the arguments, on which it is founded. (THN 1.3.14.2, boldface added)

Pigden gives three reasons for thinking this use to be an instance of the narrow reading. First, Hume’s use of the word ‘evident’, which Pigden claims Hume follows Locke in using to distinguish demonstrative from non-demonstrative deductions; secondly, ‘Hume’s cocksure self-confidence that his argument is “perfectly unanswerable” (T, 1.3.14.19/164)’; thirdly, the fact that Hume’s argument can be recast as a deductively valid argument (p.84).

It should be noted that even if Pigden is correct that the above passage uses ‘deduction’ in a narrow sense, this does not constitute meaningful support for the same being true of IO, given that, as pointed out above, Hume frequently uses the term in a broader sense elsewhere. That said, I do not think that Pigden gives us reason to think that THN 1.3.14.2 uses ‘deduction’ in a narrow sense. I will address his three considerations in turn.

Pigden’s first consideration, far from helping his case, indeed actively compromises it. First, I will note that Hume does not use the phrase ‘evident deduction’ elsewhere in his work, and the claim that he employs this phrase to indicate demonstrative deductions seems unsubstantiated. But more damningly, say that Pigden is right that Hume uses ‘evident’ as a rider to distinguish demonstrative deductions from non-demonstrative ones. Pigden misses the point that this directly undermines his position, for Hume uses no such rider in IO: there Hume speaks of ‘deductions’ and not ‘*evident* deductions’. If Pigden is right about Hume’s use of ‘evident’ to distinguish demonstrative from non-demonstrative deductions, then, on Pigden’s own reading of the terms, Hume is denying the possibility of *all inferences* from is to ought in IO.

As for Pigden’s second claim, it should be noted that inductive arguments can be ‘unanswerable’ in the sense of admitting of no convincing reply:

Such are the arguments which may be urged in favour of divorces: But there seem to be these three unanswerable objections against them. (EMPL 188)

Hume proceeds to give the three ‘unanswerable objections’ of the welfare of the children, the nature of the human heart as submitting to necessity, and the danger of a union between man and wife that is not entire and total. Needless to say, these objections are not demonstrative in nature.

Pigden’s third consideration, that the argument of THN 1.3.14.2 can be recast as deductively valid, is also unconvincing. Of course, that Hume’s argument can be *recast* as a deductively valid argument is not sufficient to establish Pigden’s position, since this is true of *any* ampliative argument, given suitable additional premises. I take it that Pigden’s point is that the argument that Hume refers to in THN 1.3.14.2 is enthymematic insofar as it actually *is* an instance of a deductively valid argument.[[29]](#endnote-29) However, I find this implausible, for a number of reasons.

In THN 1.3.14.2 Hume refers to his argument that is intended to show that our idea of necessary connection derives from a certain impression of reflection. Consider Hume’s argument for this claim. Hume rules out various sources from being the cause of the idea of necessary connection (external single-instanced causation in THN 1.3.14.7-11; internal single-instanced causation in THN 1.3.14.12-13; external repeated-instance causation in THN 1.3.14.16), and concludes that the source must arise from internal repeated-instance causation, specifically, an impression of reflection. This is a paradigmatically probable argument. Take an analogous piece of reasoning. Pam is trying to discern who broke her favourite bowl. She rules out as a cause her spouse (wasn’t home at the time), her dog (can’t open cupboards, and doesn’t use bowls), and concludes that it must have been her teenage daughter. It would be perverse to take Pam to be reasoning deductively. Similarly, Hume’s argument, in ruling out potential causes for our idea of necessary connection and finding the culprit by elimination, seems equally to be an instance of probable rather than demonstrative reasoning.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Indeed, the thesis Hume is establishing here is a *causal* one regarding the genesis of our idea of necessary connection, which is unambiguously in the domain of probable rather than demonstrative reasoning, being a matter of fact. In his argument on induction, Hume rules out the possibility of the Uniformity Principle being founded on demonstrative argument precisely because being a matter of fact, its negation is perfectly conceivable: ‘To form a clear idea of any thing, is an undeniable argument for its possibility, and is alone a refutation of any pretended demonstration against it’ (THN 1.3.6.5). The argument referred to in THN 1.3.14.2 is meant to establish the causal thesis that our idea of necessary connection is caused by an impression of reflection. This causal conclusion is certainly such that we can ‘form a clear idea’ of its negation; correspondingly, this ‘is an undeniable argument for its possibility’. We can only conclude that this constitutes ‘alone a refutation of any pretended argument against’ this negation of the thesis, that is, we cannot have a successful demonstrative argument for the causal conclusion that Hume is trying to establish. Thus, the argument that THN 1.3.14.2 refers to cannot be a demonstrative one, insofar as he takes it to be successful.

In short, it seems quite evident that THN 1.3.14.2 does not provide much positive support for Hume’s Logical Law; given the lack of any other passage substantiating the narrow reading of ‘deduction’, it seems that there is an overwhelming textual case for the wide reading being Hume’s.

So much for THN 1.3.14.2. However, Pigden (2010b, p.86) cites one more argument that he finds ‘quite decisive’ in favour of Hume’s Logical Law. This argument points to Hume’s claim that it ‘seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from them’. Pigden claims that ampliative arguments from is to ought would not seem inconceivable to Hume, and so Hume must be referring to demonstrative arguments in IO.

This objection is problematic. It is true that demonstrative arguments are such that the negations of their conclusions are inconceivable given the truth of their premises. But this inconceivability has little bearing on Hume’s point in IO; here, what Hume is claiming inconceivable is the possibility of the deduction itself, rather than the negation of the conclusion given the truth of the premises. And this inconceivability can apply to ampliative arguments. Take the following example: it is inconceivable how we can *inductively* infer that Jill is a doctor from the premise that 2+2=4. The premises are simply not the right kind of thing from which we can infer that Jill is a doctor: to inductively infer a matter of fact, we require some matters of fact in the premises. Thus, this objections wilts under scrutiny.

Finally, it should be noted that Hume’s Logical Law is insufficient to establish Hume’s intended conclusion in IO. Hume claims that ‘this small attention wou’d subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not… perceiv’d by reason’. Reason operates either through demonstrative or probable arguments (THN 1.3.9.19n; EHU 4.18).[[31]](#endnote-31) Of course, ruling out deductive arguments from is to ought is insufficient to establish that the distinction of vice and virtue is not perceived by reason, since probable reasoning clearly falls under the domain of reason, and according to Hume’s Logical Law, IO has said nothing regarding it. In light of the conclusion Hume draws from IO, Hume’s General Law seems much more plausible than Hume’s Logical Law, in virtue of its ruling out both demonstrative and probable arguments from is-premises alone to ought-conclusions.

## Hume’s General Law

Some terminological substantiation for Hume’s General Law was made in the last section with the explication of the general early modern usage of ‘deduction’ and its cognates, as well as of Hume’s own usage; the reading also garnered support from a quick examination of Hume’s stated conclusion in IO. Having accounted for the terminology, I will now examine the substantive content of IO, reconstructing an argument that clearly rules out any legitimate inference from is to ought. In light of the absence of adequate positive substantiation for Hume’s Challenge and Hume’s Logical Law, I take this to provide good reason to reject these interpretations in favour of Hume’s General Law.

IO being as brief as it is, any argument we find in there must be extrapolated on the basis of what Hume does say within its narrow confines. I will attempt to construct such an argument, looking to the structure of Hume’s famous argument on induction for guidance. In this argument, Hume points out that ‘all our experimental conclusions’ presuppose the Uniformity Principle, that is, the principle that the unobserved will resemble the observed:[[32]](#endnote-32)

*…instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same.* (THN 1.3.6.4)

Hume then proceeds to make the case that there can be no arguments that can establish the Uniformity Principle. Notably, in doing so, he assumes that there are only two legitimate forms of argument, deriving either from ‘knowledge’ (i.e. demonstrative arguments) or ‘probability’ (i.e. probable arguments):

In order therefore to clear up this matter, let us consider all the arguments, upon which such a proposition may be suppos’d to be founded; and as these must be deriv’d either from *knowledge* or *probability*, let us cast our eye on each of these degrees of evidence, and see whether they afford any just conclusion of this nature. (THN 1.3.6.4)

Having argued that there can be no demonstrative or probable arguments that can establish the Uniformity Principle, Hume concludes that our inductive reasoning is not founded on reason.

As stated above, I think that we can extrapolate from IO an argument that shares the general structure highlighted above: Hume assumes that there are two legitimate forms of argument, and because neither can license inferences from is to ought, there are no legitimate arguments that can do so. The crucial premise in IO is that the ought-relation is entirely different from the is-relation:

…a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new [ought-] relation can be a deduction from others [viz. is-relations], which are entirely different from it. (THN 3.1.1.27)

On the basis of this premise and the structure of Hume’s argument on induction, we can explicate the argument that IO is intended to express:

1. There are only two legitimate forms of argument: probable arguments and demonstrative arguments.
2. Is-relations are entirely different from ought-relations.
3. No legitimate argument from is-claims alone to ought-claims can be demonstrative, since demonstrative arguments cannot run from premises that express a relation to a conclusion that expresses an entirely different relation.
4. No legitimate argument from is-claims alone to ought-claims can be probable, since probable arguments cannot run from premises that express a relation to a conclusion that expresses an entirely different relation.
5. Therefore, there are no legitimate arguments from is-claims alone to ought-claims.

(1) is clearly assumed in Hume’s argument on induction in THN 1.3.6.4, and can be taken for granted. (2) is stated in IO, and Hume clearly endorses it in describing the ought-relation as ‘entirely different’ from the is-relation.[[33]](#endnote-33) This leaves (3) and (4) to be justified in more detail.

With regard to (3), Pigden (2010a, pp.13-14) argues that the difference between the ‘is’ and ‘ought’ relations rules out deductive arguments from is to ought, due to the then widely held ‘conservativeness of logic’, i.e. the claim that you cannot deductively derive anything new in the conclusion that is not already contained within the premises.[[34]](#endnote-34) Putting Pigden’s point in terms of the terminology above, since ought-premises express a relation that is entirely different to the relation expressed by is-premises, ought-conclusions cannot be contained within is-premises, and so we cannot deductively infer ought-claims from is-claims.[[35]](#endnote-35)

We can frame the issue in a different way. A demonstrative argument is illegitimate when its opposite is conceivable (THN 1.3.6.5). Consider the case of a purported demonstrative argument from is-claims to an ought-conclusion. Plausibly, the negation of any moral claim is perfectly conceivable in itself: while one might believe that, say, maximising utility is the right thing to do, it is non-contradictory to consider the falsity of this claim.[[36]](#endnote-36) So the negation of the conclusion of this purported demonstrative argument cannot be in itself contradictory. Neither can it be contradictory given the truth of the premises. For the conclusion concerns a relation not found in the premises, and nothing about the truth of the premises can by itself directly contradict any moral claim. Given any is-claim, we can always at least conceive of any ought-claim obtaining. Thus, there can be no legitimate demonstrative arguments from is to ought.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, commentators who have endorsed Hume’s Law have not typically taken it to extend to probable arguments from is to ought.[[37]](#endnote-37) The argument I envision for (4) turns on Hume’s claim that all probable reasoning presupposes the Uniformity Principle:

…probability is founded on the presumption of a resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those, of which we have had none; and therefore ’tis impossible this presumption can arise from probability. (THN 1.3.6.6)

Of course, as Hume states it in THN 1.3.6.6, the Uniformity Principle holds between the unobserved and observed. There is not an immediately clear sense in which ought claims might be taken to be ‘unobserved’, but in order to be as fair as possible to those who would seek to provide probable arguments from is to ought, we might generalise the Uniformity Principle as follows. Given that the unobserved is always the conclusion of a probable argument, and the observed is always the premise, we might take the Uniformity Principle to express the more general claim that probable arguments must presume a uniformity between the conclusion and the premises of the argument. Note that the Uniformity Principle as Hume states it concerns uniformity between states of affairs, whereas the more general claim I propose above concerns uniformity between propositions. However, it seems plausible that a uniformity between states of affairs entails a uniformity between the propositions that regard these states of affairs.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Having stated the case thusly, it should be obvious why probable arguments from is to ought could not be legitimate. Since the is-relation is ‘entirely different’ from the ought-relation, it is impossible that a conclusion expressing an ought-relation could be uniform with premises expressing is-relations; that is, it is impossible that the two ‘resemble’ one another (THN 1.3.6.6), due to the entirely different relations they express.[[39]](#endnote-39) Since it is impossible that the Uniformity Principle should apply to arguments from is to ought, it is thus impossible that there should be a legitimate probable argument from is to ought.

In contrast, examine some probable arguments that *are* legitimate. Some probable arguments have premises and conclusions that express identical relations, for instance ‘All observed ravens are black, therefore all ravens are black’. However, some will have different relations, such as ‘Jill has been donating money, therefore Jill will donate money’. Although the relation expressed by the premise (i.e. ‘has been’) is not exactly identical to the relation expressed by the conclusion (‘will be’), the two relations are not *entirely different*; indeed they share a great deal of similarity, both concerning matters of fact, both purporting to be representational, and both being about time periods. On the other hand, Hume claims that the is-relation *is* entirely different to the ought-relation, which precludes the Uniformity Principle from applying. The fact that all probable arguments presuppose the Uniformity Principle is why a probable argument cannot proceed from premises expressing a certain relation to a conclusion that expresses an entirely different relation. Thus, (4) holds: no probable argument from is-premises alone to an ought-conclusion could respect the Uniformity Principle, and thus there can be no legitimate probable argument from is to ought. Having established (1) to (4), the conclusion (5) follows: there can be no legitimate arguments from is-claims alone to ought-claims.

The structural similarities between Hume’s argument on induction and that contained in IO would explain the similar challenges he poses to his opponents at the end of both arguments (THN 1.3.6.8 and THN 3.1.1.27), as noted in Section 2. It is not implausible to think that in providing such a structurally similar argument in IO, Hume either consciously or unconsciously mirrors his concluding remarks in THN 1.3.6.

Indeed, Hume’s argument in IO might be thought to hold sway even among those who deny Hume’s claim that the only legitimate arguments are demonstrative and probable. For it seems very plausible that any form of legitimate argument whatsoever would have to rely on some measure of uniformity between the premises and conclusion; without this uniformity, it is unclear how there could be any hope of meaningfully establishing the conclusion on the basis of the premises. If indeed any legitimate argument at all requires this uniformity, Hume’s claim that the is-relation is entirely different from the ought-relation would rule out any legitimate argument from is to ought.

One might perhaps object that we have no reason to think that the ‘is’ and ‘ought’ relations are entirely different. Hume does not substantiate this claim in IO, but he makes certain claims earlier in THN 3.1.1 that might support it. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Hume maintains in THN 3.1.1.16 that ought-propositions are expressed by mental states that are intrinsically motivational in some way (i.e. moral evaluations), while is-propositions are expressed by mental states that are not intrinsically motivational (i.e. beliefs about matters of fact and relations of ideas). Stated thusly, Hume’s point in IO is continuous with his arguments in THN 3.1.1: his point is that moral evaluations involve an intrinsic motivational element that cannot be found in the products of reason, and so the two are entirely different. Another substantial difference between reason and morals is that while ‘[r]eason is the discovery of truth or falshood’, our moral sentiments ‘are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement’ to ‘the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact’ (THN 3.1.1.9). While is-relations are representational, ought-relations are not. Of course, these substantive differences do not suffice to establish that the two are *entirely* different, but they are certainly suggestive of such a claim.

Sturgeon (2001) raises another explanation for the possibility of this ‘entire difference’ between is and ought, pointing to Hume’s analogy between moral qualities and secondary qualities in THN 3.1.1.26 (p.28). He argues that this is meant to parallel Locke’s claim that we cannot infer what secondary qualities an object has merely from observing its primary qualities, even with full knowledge of the body’s microstructure (p.30). Thus, one possible reason that is and ought are ‘entirely different’ might boil down to the phenomenal gap between the two.

In any case, my interpretation makes perfect sense of what Hume says in IO; whether or not his claim that the ‘is’ and ‘ought’ relations are ‘entirely different’ is one he is entitled to make, the fact is that he does make it, and my interpretation makes sense of how he would draw the conclusion of Hume’s General Law on the basis of this premise.

At this juncture, the following question might be raised. Hume’s targets with respect to demonstrative arguments from is to ought seem obvious enough, comprising prominent figures such as Locke and Clarke. But who would Hume’s putative targets be in respect of probable arguments from is to ought? One candidate is Wollaston, who Hume takes pains to address earlier in THN 3.1.1. Wollaston maintains that moral truths can be inferred from probable reasoning under some circumstances. He notes that in recognising ‘right reason to be the law’ in determining ‘lawful or unlawful, good or bad… we are not only to respect those truths, which we discover by reasoning, but even such *matters of fact*, as are fairly discovered to us by our senses’ (Wollaston 1746, p.37). The moral deliverances of probable reasoning via the senses can be relied upon if reason does not oppose them:

*The reports of sense may be taken for true, when there is no reason against it*. Because when there is *no* reason *not* to believe, that alone is a reason for believing them… Thus it appears that there are *two* ways, by which we may assure our selves of the truth of many things; or at least may attain such a degree of certainty, as will be sufficient to determine our *practice*: by *reason*, and by *sense under the government of reason*; *that is*, when reason supports it, or at least doth not oppose it. By the former we discover speculative truths; by the latter, or both together, matters of fact. (Wollaston 1746, pp.97-8)

Another philosopher who might be thought to allow the discovery of moral truths from probable reasoning is Hobbes, who claims that ‘the true Doctrine of the Lawes of Nature is the true Morall Philosophie’ (Hobbes 1996, p.111), and also ‘the Science of [the Laws of Nature], is the true and onely Morall Philosophy’ (Hobbes 1996, p.110). Insofar as the science of the laws of nature in Hobbes’ sense are derived from contingent facts regarding the state of nature, this suggests that moral truths can be uncovered by probable reasoning.[[40]](#endnote-40)

## Hume’s Law and ‘Ought Implies Can’

Let me end by drawing out a consequence of this paper. My analysis above casts doubt on whether Hume subscribes to ‘Ought implies Can’, a thesis which commentators such as Wilson (1997, p.202), Morris (2000, p.105), and Ridge (2003, p.172) attribute to Hume.[[41]](#endnote-41) Although this principle is an inference from ought to is rather than from is to ought, Hume’s considerations in IO nevertheless seem to apply to it. IO states that the is-relation is ‘entirely different’ from the ought-relation, which precludes legitimate inferences from is to ought. Since ‘being entirely different from’ is a symmetrical relation, this consideration seems to preclude inferences that run the other way (from ought to is) as well. No demonstrative argument can license an inference from ought to is, since is-claims cannot be contained in ought-premises, as they express entirely different relations. And no probable argument can license an inference from ought to is, since is-claims are not ‘conformable’ to ought-premises, as they express entirely different relations. Therefore, there are no legitimate arguments from ought to is. In virtue of what then is ‘Ought implies Can’ supposed to hold?[[42]](#endnote-42),[[43]](#endnote-43)

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1. In the references to Hume’s texts throughout, ‘THN’ refers to the *Treatise of Human Nature*, ‘EHU’ to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ‘EPM’ to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ‘EMPL’ to *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary,* ‘DNR’ to the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*’, ‘DP’ refers to the *Dissertation on the Passions*, and TP to the *Theory of Politics*. Arabic numerals refer to section and paragraph numbers (EHU, EPM, and DP); or book, part, section, and paragraph numbers (THN). EMPL numbers refer to pages in the Miller revised edition of the *Essays* (Liberty Fund Inc., 1985), DNR numbers refer to the section and paragraph numbers of the *Dialogues* (Bobbs-Merill Educational Publishing, 1947), and TP numbers refer to essay (Roman) and page numbers (Arabic) from the Watkins editions (Edinburgh and London, 1951). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For the purposes of this paper, I take ‘inference’ and its cognates to be success terms, that is to say, I read Hume’s Law as ruling out *legitimate* inferences from is to ought (and not merely dismissing as impossible any psychological process of ratiocination that proceeds from is to ought). Correspondingly, I take ‘inference’ to refer not to a psychological process, but rather to the successful establishment of a conclusion on the basis of premises. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Some defenders include Laing (1932, p.188), Laird (1932, p.215), Hare (1952, p.28-29), and Nowell-Smith (1957, pp.36-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Besides MacIntyre himself, Hunter (1962), Baier (2010), and Robison (2010), also endorse this position, among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Besides those mentioned earlier, others who have subsequently endorsed Hume’s Logical Law include Atkinson (1961, p.235), Flew (1963), Konrad (1970, pp.126-7), Stove (1978, pp.64-66), Mackie (1980, p.69), Wilson (1997, p.204), Pigden (2009, 2010a, 2010b), Restall and Russell (2010), Schurz (2010a), and Mares (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Briefly, a few contemporary accounts that seek to address Prior’s worry are as follows. Pigden (1989) restricts Hume’s Law to apply only to inferences involving non-vacuous ethical propositions. Similarly, Singer (2015) offers a semantic, model-theoretic approach based on a notion of ‘norm invariance’, the idea being that Prior’s purported counterexamples are unproblematic because their premises and conclusions are equally insensitive to ethical facts. Brown (2015) circumvents Prior’s counterexample by reading Hume’s Law collectively rather than distributively: we cannot derive a moral claim from premises such that they are collectively non-moral. Meanwhile, Maguire (2015) offers a metaphysical rather than logical treatment of Hume’s Law, taking it to claim that no ethical fact is fully grounded only by non-ethical facts. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Indeed, one might take ‘ought’ propositions to refer to all evaluative propositions. As IO is situated in a distinctly moral discussion, I adopt the weaker reading of ‘ought’ propositions, although I am open to the stronger reading. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Baier (2010, p.54) is an uncommon exception, thinking ought-propositions only to apply to voluntary actions. This reading seems to be primarily motivated by the assumption that Hume maintains ‘Ought implies Voluntary-Can’, which I reject in my Qu (2017). Indeed, maintaining that Hume holds this principle might be thought to beg the question: I argue in the final section of this paper that IO in fact rules out ‘Ought implies Can’. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Cohon (2008, pp.50-51) appeals to DP 5.1 and EPM 1.7 in arguing that some beliefs, namely beliefs about prospective pleasure and pain, can produce motivating passions in themselves, without the aid of any antecedent passion. This is consistent with my account above. According to Cohon, these beliefs are not *intrinsically* motivating, although they can by themselves produce states that are indeed intrinsically motivating. In contrast, moral evaluations are intrinsically motivating. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This also allows us to accommodate any derivations of tautologies such as ‘either we ought to lie or it is not the case we ought to lie’ from is-claims: since such tautologies do not carry motivational force, they are not genuine ought-claims, and can thus be unproblematically derived from is-claims without violating Hume’s Law. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Note that demonstrative inferences include not only logical inferences, but also inferences such as ‘today is Tuesday, so tomorrow is Wednesday’, as the opposite of such an inference is inconceivable. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I take it that the class of legitimate probable arguments that Hume rules out from is to ought would correspond to the class of legitimate probable arguments that he rules out as putative justification for the Uniformity Principle in his argument on induction. In taking Hume to rule out legitimate arguments from is to ought in IO, I rely on a normative reading of Hume on induction whereby he rules out legitimate arguments for the Uniformity Principle. I lack the space to defend this conception here, although I argue in detail for a version of the normative interpretation in the *Enquiry* in my Qu (2014a). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Of course, there is a sense in which Hume’s General Law entails Hume’s Logical Law, since it rules out both demonstrative and probable arguments from is to ought. I mean that I reject interpretations that read IO as *only* ruling out demonstrative arguments from is to ought. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Again, I assume a normative reading of Hume’s treatment of induction. A similar but slightly weaker parallel could be drawn on a descriptive reading. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Thanks to Don Garrett for pressing me on this issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This example is from the second *Enquiry*, but I take it to be representative of Hume’s various seeming inferences from is to ought. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. C.f. my Qu (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hume does say that the monkish virtues are ‘every where rejected by men of sense’ (EPM 9.3), but of course such men may be rare. Hume notes that we ‘justly… transfer’ the monkish virtues ‘to the opposite column, and place them in the category of vices’ (EPM 9.3); the fact that a *transfer* is needed clearly indicates that he thinks that the monkish virtues are pre-philosophically viewed as virtues. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This reply to MacIntyre’s objection was raised by Hudson (1964, p.250), but has not found much traction in the secondary literature. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to elaborate on this. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to argue more for this claim. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. It is arguably more plausible that a principle such as ‘the qualities that we approve of are virtues’ might be analytic. But, even so, it is certainly not analytic that we approve of what is useful or agreeable; this is a substantive empirical thesis that might have been false. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Here I am setting aside the worries regarding knowledge diminishing to probability that Hume sets out in THN 1.4.1, which no longer seem to bother him after THN 1.4.7. For more on this argument and THN 1.4.7, see my Qu (2014b). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Thanks to Don Garrett for pressing me on this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Of course, this process will have to bottom out somewhere, and some moral claims might have to be taken as bedrock (perhaps such as ‘this feeling is morally relevant’), and thus not inferable from anything else. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Although our positions on this particular point of interpretation are broadly similar, Cohon and I differ on the nature of the moral premises that Hume appeals to: Cohon takes the relevant moral premises to be ‘facts of feelings’, while I take them to be propositions such as ‘whatever mental quality is useful or agreeable to the self or to others is a virtue’. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. I take it that reading ‘deduction’ as ‘tracing back’ or ‘explaining’ in IO is implausible, as it seems unproblematic to trace back ought-claims on the basis of is-premises. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Hence the much maligned (at least, in philosophical circles) Sherlock Holmes is quite innocent: far from misusing the term ‘deduction’, his usage was entirely appropriate. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Moreover, it should be noted that the Copy Principle on which the argument is founded is itself established by probable arguments, such as appeals to introspection (THN 1.1.1.8-9) [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. On Garrett’s (1998) reading, ‘reason’ encompasses all forms of reasoning but excludes intuition, while ‘understanding’ encompasses reason as well as intuition. However we read ‘reason’, I take it that in IO Hume is not particularly worried about intuition; indeed, he seems to have addressed it in arguing that all four ‘infallible relations’ of ‘resemblance, proportions in quantity and number, degrees of any quality, and contrariety’ (THN 1.3.3.2) cannot be what virtue and vice consist in (THN 3.1.1.19). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Of course, this presupposition need not be an explicit one. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. One should not make too much of Hume’s use of the word ‘relation’; he likely just takes it to mean that ‘is’ and ‘ought’ are copulas, which relate subjects and predicates. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Note that for Pigden, demonstrative arguments are purely logical deductions. Here I ignore the corner case of deductive inferences founded on contradictions (e.g. ‘P˄¬P, therefore the moon is made of blue cheese’), which arguably establish conclusions not contained in the premises, depending on one’s conception of containment. While such inferences are technically deductively valid, Hume would not have endorsed such arguments legitimately demonstrative. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. A worry about Pigden’s position is that it seems to overgeneralise, insofar as his reading does not seem to capture anything particularly interesting or unique about ethics, as Maguire (2015, p.192) points out: *any* property is such that we cannot deductively derive a conclusion with it, from premises without it. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Recall that tautologies involving moral terms do not count as moral, insofar as mental states expressing them are not intrinsically motivating. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. In contemporary discussion, Singer (2015, p. 205) shies away from offering an account of the is/ought gap that applies to ampliative logics, although he concedes that with regard to enumerative induction, the existence of such a gap is a plausible possibility. Woods and Maguire (Forthcoming) criticise purely logical characterisations of the is/ought gap, and Maguire (2015) offers a metaphysical ‘grounding’ account of the autonomy of ethics that extends to ampliative arguments as well. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. In taking the Uniformity Principle to have a more general form, I am giving every chance to my opponents who endorse Hume’s Logical Law. On a stricter reading of the Uniformity Principle that only presumes uniformity between observed and unobserved states of affairs, it would be even easier to show that there are no legitimate inductive inferences from is to ought, since surely is-claims and ought-claims do not pick out resembling states of affairs (ought-claims arguably do not pick out states of affairs at all). One might object that states of affairs may be identical, while propositions describing them may be different (e.g. ‘there is H2O there’ and ‘there is water there’). I will not discuss this issue here, but I wish to point out that if the Uniformity Principle cannot be generalised to encompass propositions, then my opponents are in even worse shape, since it would then be very easy to obtain the result that there are no legitimate inductive inferences from is to ought, as noted above. So any objection along these lines would only help establish my position. Thanks to Jonathan Cottrell for helpful discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. It is important to keep clear on what must be uniform here. Certainly, anything can cause anything (THN 1.3.15.1), and so within the causal is-proposition, there need not be any uniformity between cause and effect. But once a causal relation has been established, we require uniformity between the observed and unobserved instances of the causal relation that we are extrapolating in order for a probable argument to go through, even if the cause and effect within this causal relation are not uniform. And for this we require some uniformity between the is-premises and the conclusion of the probable argument, which is not possible if the conclusion is an ought-proposition. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. I owe the Wollaston and Hobbes quotations to Dejan Simkovic’s talk entitled ‘Hume’s Approach to Wollaston’, presented at the *43rd International* *Hume Society Conference* in Sydney. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. In my Qu (2017), I argue that Hume does not subscribe to ‘Ought implies Voluntary-Can’ on the basis of other considerations. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Of course, this is not to rule out that we can infer ought claims from premises including is-claims *and* ought-claims, as mentioned earlier. But the is/ought distinction does seem to rule out there being a logical relation between is-claims and ought-claims of the sort ‘Ought implies Can’ is usually intended to express. In similar vein, Schurz (2010b) and Woods and Maguire (Forthcoming) have argued that logical characterisations of the is/ought distinction such as those defended by Russell and Restall (2010) rule out related principles such as ‘Must implies Ought’ from being analytic truths. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. For invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I am deeply grateful to Don Garrett, Jonathan Cottrell, Maité Cruz Tleugabulova, Michael Gill, Dejan Simkovic, Ian Grubb, a reading group at the National University of Singapore, and two anonymous referees for this journal.

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