

# Hume's Fork



*a novel*

RON COOPER



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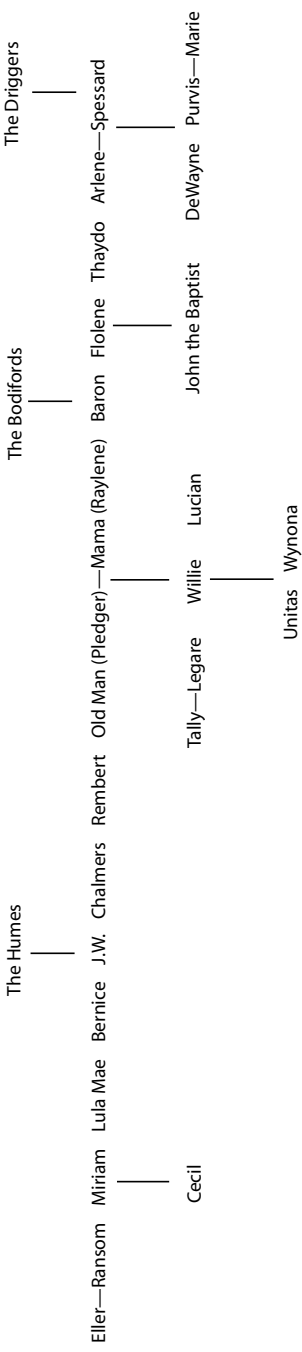
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*For Sandra*



# Hume Family Tree



Unspecified Humes: Pudge (cousin); Booger (Strom Thurman) (cousin); Markley (Anchorhead) (cousin); Uncle Lum (Christopher Columbus) (cousin); Stetson, Levi, and Grace (cousins, Uncle Lum's children)





ONE

# The Ontological Argument



The dinner plate, which arced towards me in parabolic elegance, spun just slowly enough that I could make out two blue birds circling above what I supposed to be a pagoda. I was sitting on the mauve futon which Tally, against my objections, bought to replace the vinyl sleeper couch—it was ugly, sure, but I had been relegated to it enough nights for a fondness to develop. Though she had whipped the disc in a shoulder-forward, girl-throwing way that a grown woman should have been embarrassed about years ago, Tally’s overhead release and extended follow-through managed a jai alai hurler’s manipulation of centrifugal motion.

My previous underestimation of an argument for the existence of God was now replaced by a more serious underestimation of Tally’s arm, and I had to laugh. For her to think she could actually hit me a good fifteen feet across our low-ceilinged “family” room (as she, childless, called it) with a Blue Willow plate, and me only on my third beer, was ridiculous enough. More absurd was her apparent expectation that the plate would hook right at my forehead, so I refused to dodge.

The episode had been caused by an even more fundamental underestimation: her reaction to my announcement that I had decided to go without her to the philosophy conference that week. Slapping her eighty-nine-cent Walgreen’s flip-flops across the terrazzo floor to the bedroom, cussing me through gritted teeth for an hour, even yanking open the chifforobe Mama gave her and feigning to pack her “I’ve-had-it” suitcase—all this I would have called typical, creating in me that usual sense of trapped despair to which I have become so accustomed that I sometimes mistake it for comfort.

But winging a piece of her prized china collection at me, due to

my admittedly last-minute decision to go on a four-day trip, was so unexpected that it overwhelmed my ordinary fear of her. I actually felt the urge to chuckle, and leaned into the plate like a pitch. Another man might have ducked, then beamed his wife with his half-empty bottle of Coors. Or he might have set it on a coaster and inquired into what was really bothering her. Me? I sat smiling like an other-forehead-turning Jesus, realizing I had finally taken all she could fork out, and had lived.

I remembered having the same feeling once before. A hurricane hit Charleston when I was an undergraduate. I didn't answer the phone when my worried folks called, hid when they showed up to take me inland, and ended up riding the sucker out. I had just read a Walker Percy novel for a Southern Lit course in which the protagonist has an epiphany during a hurricane, and I thought I could use a storming. Granted, I was drinking a steady stream of cocktails at the time, but in the midst of the wind and broken window and rain gushing in, I really did feel as if I had nothing to lose.

Tally's plate found its mark just above my left eye before landing on the coffee table. It wobbled a few seconds, then settled to face me as if ready to present a meal. I stared at its two flying lovebirds and noticed a yellowed chip on the rim just above them, which explained why she had examined three or four other plates immediately following my announcement before calmly selecting this one. That decision made me laugh even more. What would she have done had I ducked, not giggled, took the hit despite evasive maneuvers, and crumpled to the floor in a most unmanly way? Gasp, run to help me up, and fetch ice? And what would I do? Apologize, bemoan doing so much to cause her such distress? I could not fully unpack the implications of this moment, but I was sure I had met some sort of horizon, some boundary experience that might redirect my life. Or else I was drunker than I thought and could not have evaded the plate had I tried. Either way, I had called five years of her bluffing, and I had won by just sitting still.

I promptly phoned Grossman. I would explain later, I told him, but he should swing by and pick me up in the morning on his way to the conference.



Two philosophers in a ten-year-old Volvo station wagon with bald tires and no rear-view mirror crossing Tampa Bay is hardly noteworthy, unless you know they are heading south on the Interstate towards Sarasota to go north to South Carolina.

“Where are you going?” I said. “You need 275 North—turn right.”

“This is the way I know,” Grossman said.

“But we need the Howard Franklin Bridge.”

“Unsound. The Skyway’s state-of-the-art.” He stuck a pinkie with a too-long nail into his right ear and shook his arm as if trying to widen the hole.

“Didn’t it collapse a few years ago?” I asked.

“Rebuilt. That’s why it’s so strong.”

“OK. Then what about the causeway through Clearwater?”

“Too long.”

“And going south through Bradenton isn’t?”

“I know this way. It’s how I came.” He removed his finger from his ear and inspected something on the nail.

I realized he meant he would drive east through Manatee County, then north to I-4 through Orlando to I-95. It was the reverse of the route he had taken when he first drove from New York to St. Petersburg two weeks after getting his driver’s license and buying the used Volvo. In his four years at AmWorld U., Grossman had strayed from his campus/apartment/grocery store axis only once, when I dragged him snook fishing. He waded out twenty feet into the water, only to scare up a sting ray and shit in his bathing suit.

Even among philosophers, Grossman was a nut. Two years earlier, when I mentioned I was thinking of driving to the Keys to try to hook a bonefish, he showed me his list of 600 or so North American bridges, of which he had probably seen five, along with their specifications. So I had no right to complain about his route to South Carolina, but in

my defense, I had decided just the day before to go to the conference, which made it too late to book a flight. I could not leave Tally carless (even though I imagined she was still too mad to drive), and Grossman was going anyway. Further, his leaving the county needed my witnessing, and that itself was worth his route amendment and phlegmatic driving style, and the fifteen-hour trip.

Grossman and I both started teaching at AmWorld U. when America World Enterprises of Orlando theme park fame bought a bankrupt Cordle College. The Cordle president had been caught in a sex scandal involving several male students and a missing couple of million dollars. Even with pictures, the old boy somehow got away clean and rich, but enrollment at Cordle plummeted. Sinecured faculty, whose only previous worry had been white St. Pete Beach sand in their drawers, now found little to fill their scrambled-over résumés. AmWorld freed some noosed necks by giving an endowment to Cordle, changing the name to America World University West Campus, and issuing early retirement tickets to three-quarters of the Cordle faculty.

The AmWorld U. main campus in Orlando, which used to be the University of Central Florida, now churned out almost entirely School of Entertainment Studies graduates, most of whom were on a work-study plan that had them don furry animal costumes at the theme park when not in class. After receiving their degrees, most went to work full-time at the very same jobs, and for the very same minimum wage, at the very same theme park, the only careers for which their degrees seemed suited. In its first three years, AmWorld U. began to make money, and thus caught criticism from the rest of higher ed, so it wolfed up Cordle College to establish academic credibility by having a second campus that demanded the high standards of a traditional liberal arts college. Announcements went out calling for the best and brightest of academe to apply, but somehow they got me.

We crested the Skyway. A few hundred yards west, officially outside Tampa Bay, a few snowbirds sat on upended paint buckets, probably baited up with fiddler crabs and trying to feel the pianissimo of a sheepshead alongside the pilings of the old bridge. The local joke is

that the sheepsheads are so nervous that you have to set the hook *before* the pulse comes through the line.

It was a long way up, down, however we were getting there, and I needed something to kill the silence, so I asked Grossman something I'd always wondered about—how a seriously talented philosopher like him wound up stuck at a rinky-dink college like AmWorld U.

“I already told you,” he said. “Right when we started teaching together, when I couldn't fit my key into my office door lock, and you helped me—”

“Just remind me, all right?”

“They interviewed me at the APA in New York.”

That much I knew. Grossman was only in his mid-twenties then, but already he'd managed a Ph.D. from Columbia and a string of articles in the toughest journals in the country, which pretty much outshines my entire career. I was never sure if he knew it (ending up here, he couldn't have), but Grossman could have had his pick of nearly any school he wanted.

I'd already been able to piece together the fact that Grossman had bummed around Columbia and taught as an adjunct after finishing his Ph.D., because, being a savant geek, in addition to a lapsed Hasidic Jew disinherited by his jeweler family when his interests turned from God to Gödel, he had no idea what else to do nor even that something else should be done.

Me, I was desperate for any offer and applied to AmWorld U., as I had to forty other colleges, fudging on my training and specialties to meet their descriptions and hoping to bluff my way through the interviews. Tally was pulling for me to get this job, because her parents had retired and moved from Atlanta to Lakeland, about an hour or so from St. Pete. The AmWorld reps at the American Philosophical Association conference that year were looking to fill four openings with specialties in logic, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of religion. Since I had just completed my Ph.D. at Rutgers, which had recently wooed three big names in philosophy of mind to its department, the reps assumed that I did philosophy of mind, which I did not,

but as I talked about my training in phenomenology, using phrases like “contents of consciousness” and “noetic intentionality,” it all sounded like the same stuff to them. One interrupted with, “Then you do philosophy of religion, too, right?” I was not sure what they had misheard—maybe I mentioned the philosopher Gadamer and he thought I said “God”—or whether they threw existentialism in with religion, but I said, “Of course.”

“What I mean,” I said to Grossman, “is why didn’t you get snagged by some good school?”

“I didn’t want to leave the city, but my professors at Columbia negotiated with the people here. They said they had talked to my uncle in Ithaca, and I would live with him.” He was smoking a Chesterfield that I did not know could still be found, pinching it between the tips of his thumb and ring finger as if the little cylinders had never become familiar in his hand, blowing the smoke out the window, and squinting to read the mileage signs. My sense of smell seemed especially acute, and the smoke was strong and stiff.

“Wait, I’m confused. Ithaca?”

“I was confused, too. The Cordell representatives could not recall anything about my uncle, and they were talking about St. Petersburg.” He picked something from the tip of his tongue, probably a bit of tobacco, and examined it before wiping it on his sweater. “They asked me a couple of questions. One of the men said he’d heard about me. Then they offered me the job.”

“Hold on a minute—did you say *Cordell*?”

“Yes. That was the former name of AmWorld.”

“No, Saul. It was *Cordle*. Listen, you said you have an uncle who lives in upstate New York?”

“Uncle Morris—my only relative who doesn’t live in the city. Why?”

“You dumbass. They were talking about Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. *Cornell*. You could be teaching half your load now for double the salary.” Something finally made sense. The AmWorld reps had landed Grossman on their first cast, and they got a twofer

in him (logic and philosophy of language) and were still celebrating their efficiency when they interviewed me, who specialized in none of those fields (and was good in no others) but was mistaken for another double talent. Only a half hour into the trip, and I had made a major discovery.

“You never told me that, Saul, because I sure as hell would have remembered it.”

“I did tell you, Greazy, and you labeled me a dumbass that time as well. Then I asked about your background, and you just said, ‘Hard to say.’” He looked out the window with a jerk. “Is this it?”

Grossman always expected his interlocutors to know just what he was talking about, even when he revived a conversation from exactly the point it had broken off years before. Usually, he did the breaking off—something suddenly occurred to him, and off he would go. Tally hated that about him almost as much as his incessant teeth-picking, followed by intense scrutiny of the extracted morsel.

“Is this *what*?”

“Is this the South?”

“Don’t start that shit.” I figured this query was related to his remark to me years earlier that living in the South did not seem so bad, and I corrected him, saying that St. Pete and much of Florida, for that matter, were not the South. He had looked confused and jotted something down in the little notebook he kept in his breast pocket. One side of his office desk was stacked with the little notebooks he had filled over the years. I had always assumed he was making notes for some logic proof emerging in his head. Once, when he had left a notebook in a classroom, I picked it up to return to him, but thumbed through and found this sort of thing: “Quantified Logic seminar each Tuesday at 1 o’clock pm. Many television channels. Juanita the cleaning lady speaks Spanish. After 10 o’clock pm is late. Music next door is very loud. Wittgenstein’s deontic logic—?”

“I want to know when we’re there,” he said. “You’re the only Southern person I know, I think, and Charleston is the real South, right?” He knew me more than a year before I revealed to him that I

was Southern. My accent (resilient despite my post-college attempts to dispel it) and tastes for bluegrass and snuff were no clues to him. He knew only that I had gone to Rutgers for my Ph.D. and assumed I was a New Jerseyan.

I was the only Southerner in the Letters Collegium, except for one historian from El Paso who claimed Southernness when convenient, but I called him western. Not that my roots ever made much difference to me; I had just grown sick of being drilled on all things Southern as if I were W. J. Cash. The literary types were the worst. They expected me to wear white suits and have mint julep breakfasts and say, “Yes Suh, we shall rahz again,” and offer a speech on the nobility of the mule and the proper preparation of the hoecake. They could not pass me in the hall without informing me how much they adored Flannery O’Connor and how proud I must be of my rich heritage. I would explain that I had indeed grown up an hour from Fort Sumter—in a trailer. And they would laugh and laugh.

The knot on my forehead from Tally’s aerial attack the day before started to ache.

“Charleston, for all its beauty,” I said, “is just another tourist trap that has somehow convinced the world that it is not. I could stand on the corner of King and Broad, and New Yorkers like you would gladly pay five bucks a pop to hear me say, ‘Shut my mouth.’ Now who’s the carpetbagger?”

“I don’t know.”

I immediately felt bad. Grossman might be the most brilliant person I have ever known, but he never knows when someone is making fun of him. Besides, I needed to remember how terrified he must have felt, not only driving his car for maybe the dozenth time since he had gotten it, but actually driving it hundreds of miles. Worse, he was surely mortified about having to read a paper at the American Philosophical Association conference. Despite penning an article every couple of months in a top philosophical journal, writing two books since coming to AmWorld U., and receiving good enough student evaluations—they were charmed by a self-absorption they took to be shyness—he had

never presented a paper at, nor even submitted one to, a refereed conference. This presentation was now a requirement for tenure—the personnel office had mistakenly used “and” instead of “or” in the list of tenure requirements. He and I were both up for tenure, and the APA conference at Charleston happened to be the nearest one for Saul, a non-flyer. He had submitted a paper to the APA that I knew would be placed on the program, and he had elicited a half-promise from me to accompany him.

My yearly submissions to the APA since grad school had all been rejected. I had published two articles harvested from my dissertation, which I was still hawking to university presses. And I had read several papers (well, several versions of the same paper) at second-rate conferences. Students liked me, and I had not actually slept with any, and while the administration and everyone else probably knew I would never have an idea that would light any philosophical fires, they still thought I would do. So, tenure was within reach, but I needed something to seal it up. A paper presented at the APA would do it, and I sent in one in which I attacked another philosopher’s attack on a famous philosopher’s version of the ontological argument for the existence of God. Lo and behold, I got a letter saying my paper had been accepted and placed on the conference program for presentation.

It was the saddest day of my life.



The ontological argument comes from the 11th-century monk Anselm, who said that if we define God as that which nothing greater can be conceived, and if we agree that existence is greater than nonexistence, then QED, you got your God argued into existence as pretty as pi.

For centuries, philosophers have roundly rejected the argument for various logical technicalities. Chauncey Hartley, now a hundred years old and retired from the University of Chicago, built a grand career defending it. Hartley claimed that Anselm’s second version, which

the old monk probably did not distinguish from the first, restated the second premise—*necessary* existence is greater than nonexistence (and also a whole lot better than plain old existence). It was thus immune to the attacks. To claim that God or anything else exists is to assert a contingent fact that is settled only by empirical verification. But to say that God exists necessarily is not to state a *contingent* fact, and that changes the metaphysical ballgame.

I had not really cared about Hartley's argument until I read an article in *Philosophical Review* by a guy named Bishop from Duke, who claimed to find once and for all the chink in Hartley's logical breastplate. I thought the chink was too slight to expose Hartley's argument to any real danger, and my paper argued that the Duke guy was making too much of it. My paper addressed only the one point made by that one critic, not whether the base argument really worked or not. The last paragraph of my paper stated that, despite my defense of Hartley on that particular point, I still thought the argument was weak for other reasons. Sitting on the futon in the moments before Tally's flying plate, I wondered if I should leave that part out when I read the paper at the APA conference, because the damn argument was beginning to sound pretty good to me.

Four months earlier, when the congratulatory letter arrived saying that the paper had been accepted, I felt only existential dread that would have choked Kierkegaard. Presenting the paper at the APA would pretty well guarantee my tenure. I had friends from grad school who were still flitting from one temporary teaching position to another and would give a gonad to be in my brogans (which I actually wear sometimes for the sake of durability and cost, but which my ethnicity-crazed colleagues think make me "authentic," whatever that could mean). Did I really not want tenure? Did I think my failure to secure a permanent teaching position would lead to the dissolution of my desolate marriage? Did I want my marriage to end? Should not I, of all people, know the answers, with a Ph. goddamn D.?

I was not even sure why I decided at the last minute to go. This was my sorry state: If I did not go, tenure was somehow out of my spine-

less hands, and I would just play the cards dealt me by fate. Grossman had long ago reserved a hotel room at the Charles Towne Convention Center I could share if I changed my mind. I had seen him earlier in the week sniffing three-dollar mangoes at the grocery store, and told him I was still not going. When I called to say that now I was, he *cooed*.



“You haven’t told me why you changed your mind.” Through his thick glasses, Grossman squinted at the exit sign and arched his upper lip to reveal incisors that looked especially white in contrast to his dark beard.

“This is it,” I said, “I-4 East. I’ll tell you what. Don’t ask me to explain why I decided to go, and I’ll let you know when we hit the South.”

“Am I going to meet your family?”

I thought my plate would, my new annoyance indicator, would explode. “Goddammit, Grossman, between college, grad school, and St. Pete, I’ve been home, what, four times in sixteen years—”

“Five.”

“—and only the last two were *almost* tolerable, because everyone’s attention was on Tally, whom they all just love to death. Me, they seem to share a basic distrust of. Without her there to run interference, somebody’s liable to end up getting shot. And it might be you.”

I told him about my most recent visit. My sister Willie (from Willa Jean) threw herself a divorce party, which she planned far more carefully than her elopement seven years earlier. She asked me to sing “Free Bird” for her, and I did not know how to play any Lynyrd Skynyrd songs, especially not an acoustic version of one famous for its extended electric guitar duet. But I practiced it, and from my makeshift stage—the back of somebody’s ’72 El Camino—I played the guitar and sang as two dozen of her drunken friends cheered her on. Willie never looked more beautiful, twirling a dance with her two-year-old on her hip. On the bookshelf in my office sits a picture of her in newly

divorced glory, her head thrown back, winking at the camera, looking like a weary but joyous Tuesday Weld, and offering the whole world a long neck Budweiser toast and an invitation to kiss her ass.

"I've seen that picture, Greazy," Grossman said. "Your sister is very beautiful. I'd like to meet her."

"Jesus, Grossman. Stick to logic—don't try to be funny." I felt like a jerk again. He was obtuse, but his feelings could get hurt on occasion. I once told him he needed to bathe before his date—a colleague, also single, was escorting him to the Founders' Day banquet—and he started crying. I apologized, and he shook my hand, which was as intimate as I had ever seen him with anyone, and, for the first time, called me "Greazy" (the nickname I prefer to my given name Legare, pronounced in South Carolina Huguenot style *Legree*), although he had to practice pronouncing it with the "z" instead of the Yankee "Greasy."

"Stop up here at a station, and I'll buy you a Co-Cola and peanuts to put in it," I said. "That'll be your culinary introduction to the South."

He grinned his childlike grin and put on his blinker a quarter mile too soon.



Inside the Long Haul truck stop was a diner/souvenir shop combo where you could have French fries with gravy—whether sausage, chicken, or unspecified—and then buy naked woman silver silhouettes to stick to your mud flaps and wonder why you never actually had a naked woman in the vehicle with you. The bathroom smelled a little like Irish Spring and piss, and some other odor that struck me as lonely and reminded me of a tobacco barn. It had three showers for truckers and, in addition to the machine that dispensed hotel-sized bars of soap and squirts of Old Spice for 50 cents, four machines sporting all manner of technicolored, ribbed "for HER pleasure" rubbers, French ticklers (I cannot imagine purchased by anyone but high school sophomores to wave in front of freshmen in the gym locker room and ask,

“Hey, numbnuts, know what this is?”), and Stay Hard ointments for 75 cents. I have always believed that a portion of truckers’ union dues went to pay for the installation of these machines just to announce to the gullible rest of us that truckers might have the world’s most boring jobs, but they sure as hell get laid a lot.

Grossman and I leaned against the outside of the Long Haul and watched the big rigs pull in and out. The air was laced with diesel fuel and burnt rubber. We could see a huge sign saying “America World Theme Park and University—Exit Now” out on the highway. I popped a couple of Goody’s powders while showing Grossman the proper way of building-leaning: one foot on the wall so that the knee sticks out in front. In his brown cardigan sweater and deep-welled, gray corduroys, he was not quite ready for squatting.

“Should one eat the peanuts as they pour out with the soda?” Grossman asked.

I suppressed a “Jesus.” “Yeah, but some’ll stay on the bottom. You’ll have to shake them out.”

We walked around to the back and saw two picnic tables. The nicer, fiberglass one, chained to the fence around the propane tank, was occupied by Spanish-booted and Stetsoned truckers. The other was wooden, grayed by rain, and missing a slat, and was sat and leaned upon by drivers with lace-up work boots and ball caps. Grossman watched my slow nods to the cowboy wannabees and listened to my “Wha ya say, bo?”s to whites and “A’ight, a’ight”s to blacks in work boots who walked by.

“Is this a special language?” Grossman asked. He scribbled in his little notebook.

“You bet it is. You’re witnessing a complex social dynamic here.”

“Should I try to speak it?”

“No way in hell.”

A truck left the highway, circled around the station past the fuel tanks, and pulled onto the grass just behind the picnic tables. On the pentimento sides of the tractor-trailer, I could just see the outlines of palm trees beneath a new coat of white and the clumsily hand-painted

“‘Hume Shipping’” with quotation marks. The lace-up work boot truckers moved from their table as if they were used to the routine. Two white men in guayaberra shirts and military-style fatigue pants climbed down from the cab and walked around to the back of the tractor-trailer. The back of one man's square-cut shirttail bulged with what had to be a pistol stuck into his belt at the small of his back. They opened the back doors, and eight black men walked out of the trailer very slowly in single file and to the picnic table, where they scrunched together in silence.

“Who are they, Greazy?” Grossman asked.

“It looks almost like a prison work crew, but I don't think it is. I've got no idea what it means.”

“Meaning is a property of propositions, not objects or events,” Grossman said, exactly as someone trained in Anglo-American analytic philosophy is supposed to. “Is your family in the shipping business?” He was referring to “Hume,” my last name, on the side of the truck.

“My family has never been *in* any business, and surely not shipping people across Florida.” A guayaberra'ed man placed sandwiches in front of the black men at the table. One of the pseudo chain-gangers looked over in my direction, expressionless, with half-closed eyes.

“Let's get back on the road, Saul.” I threw my empty Coke bottle into the trashcan a few feet away. Grossman tried the same, but missed by a yard. “Way you drive, it'll be midnight before we reach Charleston. You did put a hold on your room with a credit card, right?”

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I just hope it's not a problem.”

We got on the road to South Carolina—the road I thought would bring us back to Florida.