

Hume on Miracles  
*Enquiry X*

The essay on miracles is a specific application of Hume's theory of causal inference to an issue familiar from Locke's *Essay IV.xiv-xix*: the attempt to provide a rational foundation for faith by appeal to eyewitness reports of miracles performed in conjunction with the delivery of a revelation. As Locke saw these matters, the eyewitness report could provide us with reasonable assurance of the occurrence of the miracle, the miracle could in turn serve as a sign that the revelation is being delivered by God, and that would warrant faith, considered as belief in testimony delivered by God. In opposition to this attempt, Hume argued, first, that no eyewitness report could ever be adequate to convince us that a miracle has occurred, and, second, that none has ever even come close. This was an incendiary argument, but Hume did his best not to present it as an attack on the foundations of religious belief. He stressed that his conclusion was not that there is no basis for revealed religion. It was rather just that revealed religion has no basis in reason or in the natural belief forming mechanisms that, as he had previously argued, account for how we reason about matters of probability. If revelation is accepted by particular individuals, it can only be because God has graciously compelled them to believe in it despite its lack of any sound basis, and irrespective of any miracles that were purportedly performed in connection with it.

#### QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. What was the purpose of the miracles performed by the Saviour?
2. Why did Tillotson say that our evidence for the truth of Christianity is less than our evidence for the truth of our senses?
3. Why, according to Tillotson, would it be contrary to the rules of just reasoning to believe in a scriptural doctrine that contradicts sensory experience?
4. What is the one condition under which a scriptural doctrine could be accepted even though it contradicts sensory experience?
5. What is the difference between a proof and a probability?
6. How is reasoning from human testimony (i.e. supposing that something is the case because someone has told us that it is the case) like reasoning from effect to cause?
7. How do we proceed when we find from past experience that a certain kind of report is not entirely reliable?
8. List some circumstances that might incline us to repose greater trust in human testimony and some that might lead us to give it less trust.
9. Why is testimony to an unusual event regarded as less credible the more unusual the event is?
10. Why does the testimony of credible witnesses to an unusual event produce a "mutual destruction of belief [in what most likely happened in that case] and authority [i.e. trust in the report of the witnesses]?"
11. Why is it that from the very nature of the fact there is always a direct and full proof against the occurrence of any miracle?
12. What would it take to counterbalance this proof and establish that a miracle has occurred?
13. Why are we more readily tempted to accept stories that are utterly absurd and miraculous, even though we readily reject any fact that is unusual or incredible in an ordinary degree?
14. Why do miracles not happen these days?



15. Why is it the case that, even if we could demonstrate that an almighty God exists, this would not make it any more likely that miracles occur?
16. Whose position on the foundation of religious belief did Hume endorse at the close of *Enquiry X*, Locke's or Bayle's?

#### NOTES ON THE READING

In order to strengthen his case against any possible charge of atheism, Hume opened his essay on miracles by claiming to be offering merely a version of an argument that had previously been formulated by John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury. Hume's rendition of Tillotson's argument foreshadows his own, and merits careful scrutiny.

Tillotson's argument only concerns miracles indirectly. It is rather concerned with the specific content of the Christian revelation, and with deciding a controversial issue of Hume's day: the issue of whether it should be accepted on faith that the sacramental bread and wine of the Catholic mass is mysteriously converted into the body and blood of Christ during the ceremony of the Eucharist (so that Christ's body and blood end up being "really present" in the bread and wine). The Protestants had rejected this mystery and denounced it as a mere superstition, whereas the Catholics had argued that the revealed word of God, as recorded in scripture, proves that it must be true.

Tillotson took the Protestant side in the debate, but rather than specifically engage the Catholics on questions of whether they were interpreting the scriptures correctly, he took the high road of saying that even were the scriptures to say what the Catholics claimed, the scriptures could not be believed on this score.

Tillotson's justification for this bold claim is reminiscent of a point Locke had made. Locke had claimed that no revelation, and hence no doctrine contained in scripture, could contradict reason. Since the voice of reason must be listened to in order to determine whether a revelation in fact came from God, any revelation that contradicts reason says that we should not listen to what reason tells us. But if we should not listen to what reason tells us, then we should not listen to it when it tells us that the revelation is authentic and came from God. Thus, a revelation that contradicts reason undermines its own foundation.

Tillotson made a similar claim, though concerning sense experience rather than reason. Like Locke, Tillotson accepted that the way one authenticates a revelation is by looking for some sign that shows that it could only have come from God. Such a sign would have to be something that only God could reasonably be supposed to have performed: a miracle. But to know that a miracle has occurred we need to rely on more than just reason, which examines the reports of witnesses to the miracle to ascertain whether they are credible or not. We must also consider that those witnesses themselves must have had sensory experience of the occurrence of the miracle. (Otherwise, they would of course be lying.)

So Tillotson made the following claims: Revelation, as recorded in scripture, gains its authority from the eyewitness testimony to miracles that were performed by Christ. It therefore ultimately gets its authority from the sensory experience of the Apostles, who first witnessed the miracles and reported them to others who transmitted them to the first authors of the Christian scriptures.

Now Tillotson proceeded to his argument: Our own sensory experiences, he observed, must always be more evident and certain for us than any sensory experiences had by other people, particularly when those other sensory experiences are not reported at first hand, but have been handed down through a tradition. The doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ



in the Eucharist, however, contradicts our own sensory experience, since what we continue to see, both before the ceremony and after, is just bread and wine, not flesh and blood. But a claim that is backed up by stronger evidence can never reasonably be rejected in favour of a claim that is backed up by lesser evidence. Thus, the claim that the sacramental bread and wine remain what they are throughout the ceremony, which is backed up by the evidence of our own immediate sensory experience, cannot reasonably be rejected in favour of the claim that they are converted into flesh and blood, which is based only on scripture. However unambiguous scripture may be on the point, the doctrines reported in scripture are only as good as the evidence that they really came from God, and since that evidence is ultimately grounded in the testimony of witnesses to miracles, and that testimony rests on the sensory experiences of other people, reported via a tradition, it can never be more evident than our own sensory experience.

Hume advised that his argument against miracles would be like Tillotson's argument against the real presence. It, too, would turn on the claim that stronger evidence cannot be destroyed by weaker.

However, in discussing Tillotson's argument, Hume also offered an aside that should not be ignored. He wrote,

both the Scripture and tradition, on which it is supposed to be built, do not carry such evidence with them as sense, when they are considered merely as external evidences and are not brought home to everyone's breast by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit.

There is another basis for belief in revelation, Hume suggested. That basis is "the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit," that is, God's supposed act of graciously compelling certain people to believe against all reasonable evidence. In the absence of that grace, Scripture can only be considered as an "external evidence," that is, as a report of what God has said, supported by the reported testimony of witnesses to miraculous events performed to authenticate that revelation. While that external evidence of the authenticity of the revelation may be inadequate to overcome the evidence of our own senses, Hume hinted that in those special cases where the evidence is lacking (like the case of the Eucharist), a direct illumination from God that the words of scripture are true, received while reading those words, might still compel belief.

Of course, direct illumination would only supply the lack in those elected to receive this grace. The rest of us are left having to go by the "external evidence."

*Hume's Part i Argument.* Hume's argument against miracles is delivered in two parts. In the first part he argued that, in principle, no testimony could ever be strong enough to lead us to be confident that a miracle occurred. At best, the testimony could lead us to suppose there are even chances that the did or did not occur. In the second part he argued that no testimony that has ever historically been given has been adequate to lead us to suppose that the odds are even as good that a miracle occurred as that it did not.

The Part i argument turns on the claim that the more extraordinary and unusual a witness's testimony is, the more difficult it becomes for us to accept it.

This is a fact of our nature that Locke had acknowledged in Essay IV.xvi, but had dismissed on the grounds that, if we can demonstrate that God exists, then miracles are to be expected, and we therefore ought to be assured of extraordinary and unusual events if they can be supposed to be part of God's plan to prove his presence or his endorsement of a particular prophet, and if they are reported by good witnesses.



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However, Hume was not impressed with this excuse.

Though the Being to whom the miracle is ascribed is in this case Almighty, it does not, upon that account, become a whit more probable, since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being otherwise than from the experience [that] we have of his productions in the usual course of nature. This still reduces us to past observation ... [*Enquiry* X.ii ¶38]

In other words, even if we could demonstrate that God exists in the way that Locke supposed, by means of an argument back from our own existence as effect to God as cause, all we could infer from that proof is that God exists and is intelligent, not that God is disposed to offer up revelations to us or to attest to those revelations by performing miracles. The only way we can ascertain whether such things happen is by experience, and that throws us back on either our own senses and memory or an inference from the testimony of others.

Hume based the claim that we are more inclined to doubt the testimony of others the more extraordinary and unusual their story is on his theory of probability. According to that theory, laid out in *Enquiry* VI, when causes are not always observed to be followed by the same effects, we consider the type of effect that has most often been observed to follow from the cause to be the most probable, and the other types of effects that have occasionally been observed to follow from it to be merely possible. The greater the number of occurrences of the probable effect in the total number of trials, the more likely we consider it to be that the probable effect will occur on any subsequent occasion. The fewer the number of occurrences of the merely possible effects in the total number of trials the less likely we consider it to be that they will occur on any future occasion. The closer that the number of occurrences of the probable effect approaches to the number of occurrences of any of the alternative effects, the closer we come to suspending both belief and disbelief altogether and considering the one outcome to be as possible as (or no more probable than) the other. As Hume liked to put it, we subtract the number of contrary instances from the number of confirming instances and believe in whichever side preponderates with a degree of conviction proportioned to the number that remains after the subtraction over the total number of trials. Probability (or better, strength of belief) =  $m-n/m+n$ , where  $m$  is the number of confirming experiments and  $n$  the number of disconfirming experiments.

Applying these points to the case at hand, we can infer that where an event is extraordinary or unusual we should have an inclination to suppose that it did not occur, and the more extraordinary and unusual it is, the more remote we should consider the possibility of its occurrence to be. For, an extraordinary or unusual event is by definition something that happens in circumstances where we expect something else to happen instead.

Of course, if we actually observe the extraordinary or unusual event for ourselves, then there is no question. We consider it to be certain, as verified by our own experience. But when we have not observed it for ourselves, but are merely judging the likelihood of its having occurred in our absence, then the more extraordinary or unusual the event is, the less we are inclined to suppose that it actually occurred on any given occasion.

This is not to say that we could never be convinced of the occurrence of extraordinary or unusual events unless we actually saw them happen for ourselves. As a matter of fact, we will often take other people's word for it that a certain event occurred and believe it on their authority.

But when we trust the testimony of others it is only to the extent that we have ourselves discovered that people tend not to say things unless something like the events they are reporting actually occurred. That is, it is only because we have experienced that other people's testimony has



generally been reliable in the past that we allow that testimony to countermand our own assessments of what is most likely to have occurred.

What happens here is exactly what happens in other cases where we weigh probabilities. We consider the proportion of cases where that witness told us the truth in the past. That produces a degree of conviction in the truth of the witness's testimony. We consider the proportion of cases where events were observed to turn out differently from the way the witness describes them. That produces a degree of doubt about the truth of the witness's testimony. We weigh the one degree of conviction against the other and incline to that side that is the heaviest. But we incline only by the amount by which the heavier side exceeds the lighter. If the witness has proven very reliable in the past and the event has only failed to occur slightly more than 50% of the time, then we repose great trust the witness. If the witness has lied to us more often than not in the past, and the event has only been observed to happen on one occasion in a thousand, then we almost entirely disbelieve the witness. But if we find the witness only slightly more credible than the event is incredible, or the event only slightly more incredible than the witness is credible, then we only give a slight and hesitating assent to that side that is more credible. In general, the more extraordinary the event, the more credible the witness must be to command our assent, and the more credible the witness, the more extraordinary the event must be to induce us to doubt that testimony.

There are a couple of complicating factors influencing these calculations. One has to do with the credibility of witnesses. Experience shows that there are certain circumstances in which eyewitness reports are most likely true. When numerous, independent witnesses all tell the same story, when these witness are people with nothing to gain by giving the testimony they give, when they are expert in the field and known to be suspicious and not easily deceived, when they were properly positioned to make accurate observations, when they are noted for their honesty and would have a great deal to lose were they caught in a lie, when they deliver their testimony coherently and without any signs of nervousness or uncertainty, then in these and other such circumstances our trust in the testimony is increased. When, on the contrary the witnesses are few in number, when they contradict one another or were in communication with one another in advance and influenced one another's testimony, when they are ignorant and credulous by nature and so easily tricked by more sophisticated people, when they have something to gain by delivering that particular testimony, when they were not in a position to make accurate observations or got their information at second or third hand, when they are known for malevolence or dishonesty or inaccuracy or tricksterism and have nothing to lose by being caught in a lie, when they betray signs of uncertainty or nervousness — in these and other such circumstances our confidence is diminished.

The other complicating factor influencing our calculations is the analogy of cases we have ourselves observed to those we have not. We tend to think that events that we have found to be probable or improbable in certain circumstances will be similarly probable or improbable in other circumstances as well, as long as those circumstances are analogous. We do this even though we may never have had any actual experience of what happens in those analogous circumstances. Hume, echoing Locke's story of the King of Siam in *Essay IV.xv.5*, illustrated this point by telling the story of an Indian prince who would not believe that a man had walked on water in Moscow in mid-January. Never having experienced such cold, the Indian prince did not have even one observation to back up his incredulity. Instead, he simply transferred his observations of what happens to people who fall off ships in the tropics to the analogous circumstance of people falling onto ponds when the temperature has been below minus twenty degrees Celsius for more than a



month. Though in this instance the reasoning by analogy led the Prince into an error, Hume noted that in general we engage in such reasoning all the time and that it can sometimes require very strong testimony to countermand it, especially if the event is one that we have never observed to happen in our circumstances even once, and the analogous circumstances are very similar.

In light of these details of how Hume's theory of probable inference applies to the case of testimony to unusual or extraordinary events, let us turn to the case of miracles. The kind of miracle Hume was concerned with is not merely an unusual or extraordinary event. That is, it is not something that has only rarely and infrequently been observed to happen in those circumstances in the past. Neither is it something that happens under special circumstances that we have never actually had an opportunity to experience before, though they are analogous to circumstances we have experienced. As Hume defined it, a miracle is something that is contrary to uniform experience of the course of nature.

We have always observed that wood is consumed in fire, that when pure water is poured into an empty cask and then drawn out a few minutes later it is still water, that when a man falls off the side of a ship during a tropical storm he sinks into the water, and that when a man has to all appearances died and been left to lie in his bed until his corpse became offensive by the rotting smell that he will not sit up and start talking. We can readily imagine that in special circumstances some magician's trick might make it look like a bush is burning when it is not really on fire, that someone might have managed to conceal the fact that wine was substituted for the water in the cask, that a man could appear to walk on water if he were standing on a barely submerged submarine, or that some work with concealed electrical currents and tape recorders might make it look like a rotting corpse has been reanimated. But if we are assured that none of these things are the case and that the circumstances of the burning bush, the water poured into the cask, the man walking on the sea, and the rising from the dead are exactly the same as the ordinary circumstances in which we have always observed wood to be consumed, a man to sink, water to be drawn off, and death to be permanent, then a miracle has truly occurred.

But can we believe testimony to the occurrence of a miracle? To answer this question we need only perform a calculation in accord with Hume's theory of probability.

Let us first calculate the strength of our conviction that a burning bush would be consumed in the fire, that water would be drawn out of a previously empty vessel a few minutes after nothing but pure water had been poured into it, that a sailor would sink upon falling out of the ship into the sea, and that a rotting and stinking corpse would lie still and silent in its place. Since we have always observed these events to occur in those circumstances in the past, our conviction should be the greatest possible. All of the vivacity that can possibly be transmitted from the impression or memory of the cause should be transmitted to that one effect, so that no other alternative would even be entertained as a possibility.

Let us now calculate the strength of our trust in the testimony of a witness who testifies that a bush was burned without being consumed, that the water was converted into wine, that Christ walked on water, or that Lazarus was raised from the dead. Right away we realize that people have on occasion lied to us in the past. When we remember the past occasions on which testimony has proven false, then however rare those occasions might have been in proportion to the number of cases where testimony has proven to be true, the degree of our conviction must be diminished. Not all of the vivacity that can be transmitted from the impression or memory of the witness giving testimony to the associated idea of the events described by the witness will be transmitted. Some (say, 40%, just to pick a figure) will be diverted to the idea that the testimony will be false. Of the



remaining 60%, 40% will have to be diverted to cancel out the influence of the doubt, leaving us with a belief that is only 20% of full conviction.

When this 20% conviction in the truth of the witness's testimony is then weighed in the balance against our 100% conviction that such events cannot occur, 20% of the 100% conviction will be diverted to cancel the influence of the witnesses's testimony, and we will still be left believing that chances are 80% or four to one that the witness is either lying or deceived.

Of course, we can increase our confidence in testimony of a witness if the testimony or the witness has characteristics that indicate their reliability. We might imagine that we have not just one or a few witnesses but a multitude, that all these witnesses agree even though they did not collude and were not coached in advance, that they have no particular interest in promoting the holy cause by testifying to a miracle they did not actually see, that they are people of sound education and sophisticated experience who would not easily be deceived, and so on.

But Hume's point is that even if we suppose that we have witnesses whose testimony is so strong that it could not possibly be false, we cannot get more than a full conviction in the quality of their testimony. Yet, according to the theory of probability, we can only abandon one belief in favour of its opposite if our conviction of the truth of the opposite is greater. If the one belief is already one that we are completely convinced must be true, then the most that even a complete conviction of the opposite belief could do is produce a mutual annihilation of belief in both alternatives, and a perfect suspension of all belief on the question. Thus, if we had a case where all our experience goes to tell us that a bush burning under those circumstances would be consumed, but all our experience also goes to tell us that witnesses of that number and character could not be wrong when they tell us that the bush really was on fire and was not consumed, then neither conviction could be stronger than the other (since both are based on an exceptionless sample of experiments) and since they are equal, they must both annihilate one another with neither one having anything left over to induce belief.

This, then, is why Hume claimed that no testimony, however strong, could ever be adequate to lead us to believe that a miracle occurred. The most even the strongest testimony could do is lead us to suspend our disbelief, and consider it to be as likely that the miracle occurred as that it did not.

*Two Objections.* There are many objections that have been raised to Hume's Part i argument against the possibility of basing a belief in miracles on testimony. Two of them merit particular attention. One is that the argument is far too strong, and would not only deny belief in miracles, but also belief in any new piece of evidence that contradicts our previously established, but perhaps mistaken views of the laws of nature. Were Hume right, this objection goes, scientific progress would be impossible, because no one would accept the reports of researchers who had made discoveries that contradict established beliefs about natural laws.

The answer to this objection is that Hume's argument is not an argument against belief in miracles per se, but an argument against belief in testimony to the occurrence of miracles. Advances in science, on the other hand, are not based on testimony, but on results replicable in the laboratory. If some new piece of evidence has been discovered, other scientists are not expected to simply accept its existence on faith. We demand that they be able to replicate those same results in their own laboratories and see it for themselves. Thus, Hume need have no difficulty in allowing for the possibility of scientific progress through the discovery of new evidence that contradicts previous views of the laws of nature. This new evidence can be accepted because we do not merely



hear tell of it, but because we can see it for ourselves, and can do so repeatedly. Were that the case with miracles, we could believe them, too. But as long as we do not witness them for ourselves, but are left having to accept that they occurred merely on the basis of testimony, Hume's claim holds: no testimony could be strong enough to convince us that a miracle has occurred. We would be similarly justified in doubting extraordinary evidence for any new scientific theory that was based on the results of experiments that had only been performed once, under secret operational procedures, and that rest of the scientific community was expected to accept merely on the word of the scientists in that laboratory.

The emphasis that scientists place on replicability of results brings up a second point. Insofar as scientific results are replicable they are not one-time occurrences in history. They are rather taken to be something that will always or at least often happen in certain special circumstances — circumstances that scientists seek to replicate in the laboratory when they test one another's claims.

As a result, extraordinary and unusual scientific results are nothing like miracles. They are not even really extraordinary or unusual. Rather than be something that has never before been observed to happen in those exact circumstances, they are something that can be expected to occur under the circumstances specified in the test procedure. The events only at first appear unusual or extraordinary because the special circumstances are analogous to other, more familiar circumstances in which the events are never observed to occur. We originally reasoned by analogy from the more familiar circumstances to conclude that the events would be impossible in the special circumstances as well, after the manner of the Indian prince mentioned above. But, as Hume pointed out, such analogous reasoning is not strictly legitimate. If excellent witnesses make a claim about some extraordinary event, but that event occurs in circumstances we have ourselves never encountered before, so that the event only appears extraordinary because of an inference from analogy with more familiar circumstances, then even though we might not be able to suspend our disbelief, we ought to attempt to replicate the novel circumstances for ourselves, and ascertain by the experience of our own senses, which cannot be doubted (since nothing is more vivacious than an impression), whether the report deserves our credence.

But it is of the very essence of miracle stories that they do not report on events that always or regularly happen in special circumstances. The scientist who makes a novel discovery claims that other scientists will be able to replicate that same result whenever they reproduce the appropriate conditions in the laboratory. But the person who is testifying to a miracle wants to claim that it was a one-time event in history brought about by a special act of God and that it would *not* recur, even were those same circumstances repeated. It would be no miracle if the reason the bush burned without being consumed was that it had been coated with a fire retardant material to which an alcohol-based paste had been applied. It would just be a magician's trick. Those who take the burning bush to be a miracle hold that there was every reason why the bush should have burned. Had those same circumstances been exactly replicated at any other place and time (a place and time when God was not giving a sign to Moses), then the bush would have been consumed. They hold that only Christ could have walked on water and had anyone else made that attempt at any other place or time, even though all the other circumstances were exactly the same, they would have sunk. Thus, where miracles are concerned, it is of the very essence of the case that there is no way we can replicate the circumstances to see for ourselves whether the event follows. Unless we were there at the time, we are left with no recourse but to believe in the event on the basis of testimony — which is tantamount, Hume argued, to not believing in the event at all.



It is sometimes thought to be a defect of Hume's argument that it is not directed against the belief in miracles, but only against a belief in miracles that is based on testimony. The short answer to this objection is that the essay still proves that even if you have yourself been chosen to witness a miracle you should not expect anyone who was not there to see it with you to believe you. It was also a feature of the Protestant thought of Hume's day to claim that the age of miracles had passed. Since Christ has already descended and given his word to us, and authenticated that word by performing miracles, nothing more is now necessary to guide us to salvation but to accept that word. To take any other position would be to insult Christ's sacrifice and atonement on the cross, by suggesting that it was not sufficient of itself to save "all" humanity, but that further divine action is still necessary. The only miracles that happen today should be the internally observable miracle of a gift of grace compelling one to believe against all the evidence rather than the externally observable miracle of an incredible occurrence. Thus, in focusing his attack just on testimony to miracle stories Hume was only conforming to the accepted doctrine concerning miracles of his day.

There is a second standard objection to Hume's essay on miracles that deserves to be mentioned. This is the objection that the essay only succeeds in making its point by adopting an excessively strict definition of miracles as events that happen contrary to what all our past experiences in those same circumstances would indicate.

However, those who raise this objection have tended to be oblivious to the historical circumstances and purposes of Hume's essay. Hume's purpose in writing the essay on miracles was to attack the attempts of philosophers such as Locke and Clarke to provide a rational foundation for religious belief. It was Locke, not Hume, who claimed that miracles function as signs to convince our reason that God is the one who is speaking to us, either directly or through a prophet. But if reason is to be satisfied that it is God who is speaking, then the sign that signifies his presence must be something that only he could do. It could not be something that would have happened anyway in those circumstances, regardless of who was there and who was speaking. Nor could it be something that may have just occurred by a lucky chance, because that sort of event has been known to happen, albeit infrequently, on those sorts of occasions in the past. In either of these cases, reason would consider the authenticity of the revelation delivered in conjunction with the miracle to be open to doubt. The miracle would therefore have to be something that no other known cause could produce and that means that it would have to be either a violation of all our past experience or, if it had been known to happen from time to time in the past, its now occurring would have to be in significant violation of the laws of probability, as gleaned from our past experience. (Hume gave an example of the latter kind of case in a footnote when referring to tales of a prophet who is repeatedly able to command the course of the weather.) Thus, it is the use that Locke put miracles to that led him (not Hume) to define them as events that are "beyond, or contrary to ordinary Observation" (Essay IV.xvi.13), and in seeking to undermine Locke's attempt to base religion on reasoning, Hume naturally addressed that definition.

*Hume's Part ii Argument.* Hume opened Part ii of the essay on miracles by observing that he had probably made too liberal a concession in allowing that any testimony to a miracle could be strong enough to produce a suspension of disbelief. It is certainly the case, he thought, that no testimony that has historically ever been given for the occurrence of miracles has even come close to leading us to suspend our disbelief. There are four main reasons why this is so, which he proceeded to examine over the course of Part ii.

1. *The witnesses to miracle stories have not, as a matter of historical fact, been credible.*



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Historically, witnesses to miracles have tended to be few in number (many pass on the report at second and third hand, but few turn out to have actually been there at the time), poorly educated, and either gullible or unscrupulous. They have also tended to come from impoverished and rural regions. Their poverty means they have little formal education, and their rural lives give them few opportunities to encounter charlatans, confidence artists, tricksters and magicians. Consequently, they are more credulous and more easily tricked.

2. *There is something intrinsic to the nature of miracle stories that gives people a vested interest in repeating them, and no witness can be fully trusted who has an interest in what they report.*

Stories of highly unusual and extraordinary events excite agreeable passions of surprise and wonder. We delight in hearing and repeating such stories for that reason, and Hume noted that our own pleasure is increased if, upon repeating them, we can actually get others to believe them. Even if we cannot believe them ourselves, our natural sympathy with the sentiments of others leads us to feel their belief, and that enhances the agreeable sentiments of surprise and wonder that we experience. Moreover, it is of the nature of strong sentiments to excite belief. Just as vivacity is transmitted from impressions and ideas to the objects with which they have been associated, so vivacity is transmitted from passions to the ideas of objects that excite them, and can give us a tendency to believe those objects exist. (In another work, Hume remarked that this is why fearful people believe in danger more readily than others. Their propensity to feel fear transmits a vivacity that leads them to believe in the existence of the danger when others consider it to be merely a remote possibility.)

This observation also helps to resolve a puzzle that is posed by Hume's Part i argument: If Hume is right in what he says in Part i, then how is it that anyone has ever come to believe in a miracle story? It would seem that our natural propensities ought to always lead us to doubt such stories, or at best never consider them to be more than equally possible.

The answer is given here. Certain people, the originators of miracle stories, are either mad and believe they see what does not exist, or unscrupulous, and willing to perpetrate a hoax in the service of their holy cause. They tell miracle stories. Their audience greedily accepts them, not because they find the evidence compelling, which they never could, but because they feel an influx of vivacity from the associated passions of surprise and wonder. Wise people, who have learned from experience that beliefs formed on such a basis are more likely to be false than true, will be able to correct this propensity by a due reflection on their past experience. But average people are not likely to follow them in this practice. They will believe because it feels good to do so rather than because experience shows it is likely to be true.

3. *Miracle stories have typically not been subjected to serious scrutiny by people capable of detecting a fraud.*

Usually, the story is reported by credulous, ignorant people in some backward, rural region. The story gets spread abroad, typically being inflated in the process. By the time it reaches the ears of scientifically minded people, it has been so widely dispersed that its popularity is taken as a sign of its truth, and too much time has passed for anyone to be able to go back to the original location and find any clues that would allow them to ascertain whether the story is true or false. In the few circumstances where there has been an opportunity for scrutiny by experts, a fraud has always been detected. This leads the experts and other sophisticated, educated people who are made aware of the circumstances of these cases, to form a general rule that whenever such legends grow up, they are sure to be exploded upon scrutiny. However, uneducated people continue to be duped.



4. *The testimony in favour of miracle stories is conflicting.*

Hume ingeniously based this claim, not on the assertion that different witnesses to the same event give different testimony, but on the claim that different witnesses testifying to the occurrence of different miracles contradict one another. It has long been characteristic of Christianity to make claims of exclusivity. This is because, as noted in connection with Bayle's remarks on Pyrrho, were there any other way to be saved than through belief in the crucified Christ, then Christ's sacrifice would have been in vain and the whole of orthodox, Chalcedonian theology would be called into question. Seen in this context, the miracles Christ is taken to have performed in the Gospels must be understood, not just as proofs of his status as God, but also as refutations of all other religions. Accordingly, anyone who testifies to a miracle performed in the service of another religion is, in a sense, giving conflicting testimony, that challenges the authenticity of the Gospel testimony to Christ's miracles as the foundation for the one, true religion. If this testimony is just as good as the testimony to the Christian miracles, then we ought to be just as inclined to believe it. But then, according to Hume's theory of probability, the two opposite inclinations ought to cancel one another out, and we ought to be left with no inclination to believe the one testimony to be any more likely than the other — and this is before any consideration of any further doubt we may be induced to have by the extraordinary character of the miraculous events.

Having made this point, Hume twisted the knife in the wound by proceeding to observe that some miracles performed in connection with Roman paganism (a religion no one any longer even believes in) and Roman Catholicism (a religion that Hume's Scots Presbyterian and English Protestant readers would have regarded as a degraded form of superstition and no true religion) have been far better attested to than any of the miracles attributed to Christ in the Gospels. The Jansenist Catholic miracles (the Jansenists were a minority Catholic sect of the generation before Hume) performed upon the tomb of the Abbé de Paris, for example, were testified to by numerous, sophisticated, educated, people in the pre-eminent cultural and intellectual centre of Europe; the claims these people made were scrutinized by experts; and despite the fact that these experts were Jesuits who were deeply antagonistic to the Jansenists, they themselves had to admit that they were unable to uncover any evidence of fraud. If we reject the latter miracles (as Hume trusted his Protestant readers all would) — indeed, if we go so far as to approve of the policy of men like the Cardinal de Retz, who peremptorily dismissed such a story without even a due examination — then how can we consistently accept the testimony of the former?

In general, the more miracle stories there are in the more different, conflicting and even obviously false religions, the more the credibility of all miracle stories must be cast into doubt. All the stories cannot be true, and since the greater proportion of them must in fact be false (if only one religion is the true one) despite their apparent plausibility, that can only diminish our tendency to want to believe any of them. A survey of the cases cannot but lead us to think such stories are in general false more often than true, however well attested to they may at first appear to be.

*Hume's Conclusion.* In Hume's day one could not attack the foundations of Christianity without risking reprisal, and Hume was careful at the close of his essay on miracles to deflect such attacks as much as possible. To this end he declared that his purpose in the essay had not been to attack religion, but merely to attack those, such as Locke, who attempted to base religion on reason. By treating the Gospels as historical documents written by human witnesses, reporting the hearsay evidence of other witnesses to miracles that supposedly proved the revelation, Locke had actually exposed religion "to such a trial as it is by no means fitted to endure" (namely, an inquiry into the



reliability of the testimony to the Biblical miracles). This made him a mere “pretended Christian,” a “dangerous friend or disguised enemy.” A true Christian, Hume claimed, would not suppose that the revealed word of God can be justified by reason but would maintain that the grace released by Christ’s sacrifice will compel the elect to believe against all reason and quite independently of any evidence. Those not elected for this graciously compelled belief are predestined to eternal damnation and it would be an insult to Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross to suppose that they could, by the mere aid of their unassisted reason, discover the truth of the Bible message. Of course, this is exactly what believers in the more extreme Calvinist Christian sects maintained, and, as they formed a strong voice in the Churches of Hume’s day, Hume found himself in a position to invoke the dominant views on Grace and predestination to justify his attack on miracles, and present his essay as if it were merely an attack on the attempt to base religion on reason, rather than an attack on religion in general.

Consistently with views in the more radical Protestant churches, Hume concluded that the only miracle that does occur is the miracle of grace. This is a miracle that is not accepted on testimony, but is rather experienced by the elect. They, like the rest of us, are determined to believe what they do by the mental associative mechanisms responsible for transmitting vivacity from impressions and memories to ideas. And if, in violation of the laws of natural belief, they acquire a faith in the truth of the Christian revelation without any adequate infusion of vivacity from an associated impression or idea, but simply by grace, then that is a true miracle that is contrary to all of our other experience of the workings of the mind.

It is most likely, however, that in making these claims Hume was merely exploiting fideist theology as a cover for what is purely and simply an attack on one of the foundations of Christianity. It is unlikely that he actually believed that God would deliver any revelation to us, much less compel only certain among us to believe in it while predestining the rest to eternal damnation. Those of us who do not sense the grace in ourselves are sensible of the occurrence of no such miracles, and before we accept them on the testimony of others we would need to have reason to reject alternative, more plausible explanations for religious enthusiasm: the force of education, unreflective credulity, the influence of a sense that one’s own interests can be advanced by feigning a degree of sanctity one does not actually feel, or a degree of mental instability and delusion.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. In *Enquiry* V Hume claimed that belief has natural causes that are outside of anyone’s control. As he put it, “belief is the necessary result of placing the mind in [certain] circumstances. It is an operation of the soul, when we are so situated, as unavoidable as to feel the passion of love, when we receive benefits; or hatred, when we meet with injuries. All these operations are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able, either to produce, or to prevent” (*Enquiry* 5.8) But if belief cannot be produced by reasoning, how can Hume claim that certain beliefs are unreasonable, as he appears to do in the essay on miracles, when he condemns those who believe in miracles? And how can he justly condemn these people for their beliefs if no one has any control over what they believe, and all of us are irresistibly compelled by our circumstances to believe what we do?
2. In *Enquiry* 10.36-37: Steinberg p.88-89, Hume described two cases, one of a supposed darkness over the earth for eight days, the other of the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth. He



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claimed that the former could be believed, but the latter could not. What is the difference between these cases that would justify treating them differently? What, exactly, was Hume's point in even discussing them?

3. It has frequently been objected that Hume's argument against miracles unfairly "double counts" the evidence against testimony. According to this objection, the likelihood of the occurrence of the event being reported is just one factor involved in the assessment of the reliability of testimony. We also consider the number of witnesses, their interest in the case, the likelihood they could have been deceived, and so on. But rather than weigh the intrinsic likelihood of the event being reported along with all of these other factors, Hume made it a distinct factor, of equal weight on its own with all the other considerations combined. In effect, he considered 50% of the credibility of testimony to come from the intrinsic likelihood of the event, and the remaining 50% to be due to the credibility of the witnesses. (This is what is implied by his claim that the most credible witness could not do any more than counterbalance our intrinsic disbelief in the occurrence of an event that violates a law of nature, and so lead us to a suspension of belief on either side.) But it just does not follow that the intrinsic likelihood of the event ought to be ascribed so much weight. Review and assess the recent literature discussing this objection.

