

David Hume's Essay 'Of Miracles' Revisited¹

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So far can be put into propositions... but (this topic) cannot by any ingenuity be imprisoned in a formula and packed into a nutshell. One can agree or disagree but... it must be no smart antithesis which may look well on paper, but the living action of the mind on a great problem of fact.

John Henry Newman²

Introduction

A recently discovered letter in the National Library of Scotland prompts my renewed interest in David Hume. (1711-76). Researching a Scottish ancestor in the William and Robert Chambers' archive three years ago, I came across a paragraph referring to Hume, which reads as follows:

I hear on good authority that David Hume's housekeeper's daughter was asked by him to recite the Lord's Prayer to him, morning and evening, as he lay mortally ill in St Andrew's Square (Edinburgh).³

Given his childhood, and his housekeeper's known report of his private state of mind at this time, (please see below), I find nothing very remarkable about this, but perhaps it may contribute to the understanding that he was a 'Philosophical Sceptic' (his own words), but no dogmatic non-theist.⁴

David Hume's childhood was idyllic and secure, in the stunning Berwickshire countryside, with the one exception of his father passing away when he was two years old. Thus at least one of his father figures would have been his uncle, the Presbyterian Minister at the local kirk. His mother was a dutiful Church goer, with her three children, and the entire Sunday in her household would be taken up with prayers, Bible readings, and church attendance. This was Hume's regimen to the age of eleven. This ethos is very relevant to Hume's vitriol in the above titled essay. It is heavily biased against Roman Catholic dogma and tradition. For example, in the first paragraph, he mentions and dismisses, the 'Real Presence' (of Christ in the Eucharist) – a core dogma of Catholicism, (but not of the Scottish Presbyterianism of Hume's day).

To understand Hume on religion, I am certain, with others, that the early eighteenth-century context of religious controversy is essential; in particular, the Roman Catholic (and Anglican Catholic)/Presbyterian divide in Christian theology.⁵

The two Church bodies endorsed largely different versions of Christian theology. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) was Calvinist – including the dogma of Predestination. It became the official creed of the Scottish Kirk in 1688. Anything 'Popish' was beyond the pale.

1. Hume 'Of Miracles'

In summary, Hume's arguments are as follows. They are clear, and plausible, but the tone is polemical. The Kirk of Scotland would have found little to disagree with as regards his examples. (My apologies to those who are already well acquainted with these arguments).

Experience is not infallible. A wise man 'proportions his belief to the evidence.' Where there is counter evidence, one should balance one against the other. It is completely necessary for social existence, that we trust the testimony of others, in countless ways. But we frequently hesitate concerning the reports of others, for example, if witnesses contradict one another, if there are few witnesses, if they are of doubtful character, have a vested interest in the testimony, or, as Hume never tires of repeating, are just not intellectually capable of discerning truth from falsehood, (most of mankind, past and present, in his view). The more remarkable or unusual the testimony, the more the above factors become relevant. 'The incredibility of a fact' may invalidate the most respectable authority.

Miracles he defines as a violation (hardly a neutral word) of 'laws of nature.' For example, 'fire consumes wood, and is extinguished by water ...but that a dead man should come to life' would be a miracle, defying all our experience and understanding of the processes of the dissolution of physical bodies. Therefore, 'no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous.' 'Never have we found a sufficient number of men of such unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning as to secure us against all delusion...with the events sufficiently publicly accredited.'

Also, the more surprising and absurd the alleged event, the more readily do most people accept it as believable, because human nature longs to believe the incredible and unusual. (Hume had a very low

opinion of human nature.) 'If the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder there is an end of common sense.' There is ample evidence of forgery and bogus miracles.

There is also the familiar argument that miraculous events are reported in all religions, past and present. (Hume classes Roman Catholicism as a religion in itself, alongside Chinese and Greek religions, thus betraying his Presbyterian bias.) This, Hume argues, is because each religion attempts to establish its credibility with incredible events, and thus they all cancel each other out.⁶

He gives an example of a healing, recorded by Tacitus, by the Roman Emperor Vespasian. Hume dismisses this as a gross and palpable falsehood. No specific reason is given.⁷ Other examples of miraculous events are dismissed likewise. The miraculous can never be the foundation of any religion, because never provable beyond reasonable doubt. 'No human testimony can prove a miracle.' 'When the order of nature and human testimony are contrary, we subtract one from the other.'

How precisely we do this is far from clear.

But what is reliable or unreliable testimony? Faith, in the face of objective uncertainty, is essential, if one is dealing with decisions which affect one's very existence.

Testimony can be given at great personal cost, (and) if one lives in a perpetual state of indecision, (as regards faith, and the unknown) others, and events, will make up one's mind for one! (Keith Ward)⁸

At the conclusion of this short essay, Hume turns to the Christian religion explicitly. 'Let us examine those miracles, related in Scripture...'

But there are various types of extraordinary events recorded in the Jewish and Christian texts, and Hume makes no clear distinctions.

If one considers the Gospel events, there are healing events, also events which seem dramatically contrary to all accepted science – for example, Christ stilling a storm, or walking on the water. But most recorded events are clearly to instruct, or heal, specific individuals, or groups.⁹

The problem is that such events, by their very nature unusual, and usually unrepeatable, tend to be *targeted*, i.e. apparently arbitrary, and

affecting, or witnessed by, a specific set of individuals. The Gospel examples above illustrate this problem. There is just no escaping the personal character of these reported miracles. But

it is a mistake to suppose that as a matter of strict evidence the Christian Church has ever rested its claims upon its miracles. A confirmatory factor indeed, in a complication of converging arguments, they have been, and still are, to many minds. But to others...it is not so easy to believe Christianity on account of miracles, as miracles on account of Christianity. (*Lux Mundi*)¹⁰

Hume, similarly, insists that faith itself is the only reason to believe the otherwise incredible stories of the Gospels. He re-iterates this, in terms of Revelation, in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

2. The Final (Additional) Pages of the 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.'

Studying a photographic copy of the original manuscript of the *Dialogues*, the last two pages have been added, after the conclusion of the main text, in the altered hand of an elderly, ill man (65 was elderly in Hume's day, and he was very unwell).

I will quote these pages at some length, because they are of relevance to this discussion, and I believe the elderly Hume truly meant what he said, and that these pages, at least, are not part of any literary or dramatic device, as some argue for the *Dialogues* as a whole. He revised this work desperately in his last year of life, as is well known, and wished to guarantee its posthumous publication. These last two pages have no fictitious name attached to them, just Note AA and Note BB (to be added to the main text).¹¹

All men of sound Reason are disgusted with verbal disputes, which abound so much in philosophical and theological enquiries; and...the only remedy for this abuse must arise from clear Definitions...and from the strict and uniform use of those terms which are employed...That the dispute concerning Theism is...merely verbal...and incurably ambiguous, will appear upon the slightest enquiry.

I ask the Theist, if he does not allow, that there is a great ...incomprehensible, and immeasurable difference between the human and the Divine mind. I next turn to the Atheist, who, I assert, is only nominally so, and I ask him, whether, **from the coherence and apparent sympathy in all the parts of this world...** there be

not a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature, in every situation and in every age...whether the generation of an animal...and the structure of human thought, be not energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other...It is impossible he can deny it... I push him still further in his retreat, and I ask him. If it be not probable, that **the principle which first arranged and still maintains order in this universe, bears not some remote...analogy...to the economy of human mind and thought.** (*Dialogues*, additional pages 87-88. My emphasis.)

Hume insists this is as far as reason can take us. We have no analogy to guide us as regards the nature of this Original Principle. Some of the best Christian theologians would not disagree.

In the first place, the Origin of all things is mysterious; the origin of matter, the origin of energy, the origin of life, the origin of thought. And present experience is no criterion of any of these things...The logical impossibility of proving a negative is proverbial. And on a subject whose conditions are unknown to us, the very attempt becomes ridiculous.¹²

There is no escaping the a-priori assumptions that underpin this discussion. 'The existence of God is not a-priori less likely than the existence of the laws of physics' (Ward).¹³ Thus is it possible for events to happen which appear to us to be contrary to all known 'laws of physics'? If one believes in a Designer of the Cosmos – even in the unknown sense here argued for by Hume, responsible for the order itself – the answer must surely be in the affirmative.

A strict Calvinist (determinist) answer would be that God does not need to intervene. The cosmos progresses in perfect order towards its Divinely preordained goal. The elect are predestined, through no merit of their own, and the non-elect can do little about it. Understandably this view has been revised, and reinterpreted, over the centuries, but a paradox remains. If all is predestined, and in perfect order, not only is there no need for the miraculous any longer (Christ's life and work the once-for-all miracle) but man's free will becomes very problematic. Here we reach a Catholic versus Calvinist divide, still seriously controversial in Hume's day. Hume follows the Scottish Presbyterianism of his day. There is no place for 'libertarian free-will.'¹⁴

This is controversial, to say the least.

Hume's ontological thesis that there cannot exist anything intermediate between chance and determinism seems to me not only

highly dogmatic...but clearly absurd. (Karl Raimund Popper).¹⁵

But determinism does give support for Hume's bias in his essay. Presbyterianism was very suspicious, if not downright dismissive, of 'Popish' stories of miracles (most of Hume's examples). His liberal friends in the Edinburgh Kirk would have found little to offend them. (He remained good friends with many Scottish ministers of the Kirk – the moderate party – as is well known).¹⁶

But an alternative view is the Roman, and Anglo-Catholic one, that disorder inevitably develops, especially in the man-made arena, and God intervenes with extra-ordinary events to correct the disorder. The world is God's adventure, and, although the final outcome is certain, individual events and conflagrations are not, but grimly dependent on man's free-will. The question of freedom is critical to the problem of the miraculous.

'if man is really free, there is a real element of creativeness and spontaneity and contingency in the heart of nature...The time process, the true meaning of which becomes first apparent in man, is then shown to have real meaning...This is what we may reverently call the enterprise or adventure on the part of God. (But) this element of freedom, may prove lawless...' And this 'supplies...the rationale for God's miraculous actions – that is – God's occasional innovations upon normal method.' The alternative? 'The whole time series becomes inevitable, and more than inevitable, illusory. Whatever is, could not have been otherwise.'¹⁷ (Charles Gore).

Analogies from our own designs (if one is allowed analogy) make this perfectly credible. Things go wrong. Order is the exception, disorder the rule.

3. Bridging the gulf between scepticism and reality... 'Habit, Caprice or Inclination.'

No sceptic denies, we live under an absolute necessity, notwithstanding ...difficulties, of thinking and behaving, and reasoning, with regard to all kinds of subjects, with confidence and security. No philosophical dogmatist denies, that there are difficulties both with regard to the senses and to all science, and that these difficulties are in a regular, logical method, absolutely insolvable...

...The only difference, then between these sects, if they merit the

name, is, that the sceptic, from **habit, caprice or inclination**, insists more on the difficulties; the dogmatist, for like reasons, on the necessity. (Hume).¹⁸

Restated in contemporary terms:

Personal opinion is ineradicable. That it is ineradicable is the corollary of Hume's sceptical arguments that nobody has yet been able to refute. And there is a very good reason to suppose nobody ever will, since these arguments...rest on a clear logical fact, the under-determination of theory by observation...You can put figures on the uncertainty if you wish, but, as Hume noted, these too will be uncertain...An honest theory of uncertain inference will display the uncertainty explicitly. (Colin Howson).¹⁹

But Hume is also stating that 'no one ever will' be able to give a definitive denial to the 'probability of a Principle of Order' bearing some analogy to the 'economy of human mind and thought' – which we do not, and cannot, understand. But If the *nature* of the Original Cause or Principle of Order is unknown, and unknowable, one cannot rule out this unknown Something or Someone intervening in ways which seem to us incredible, and/or arbitrary. The question of the miraculous cannot be decided dogmatically on Hume's own reasoning. (The Westminster Confession of Faith was much more specific as regards God's Nature, and had more justification in dismissing (Popish) miracles, as inconsistent, and unnecessary, to the Pre-ordained Plan.)

My brother has explained to me how Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, 'writes using at least two voices, who argue with each other throughout the work. His "interlocutor" – as one of the voices is usually called – appears to represent a conventional philosopher engaged in an intense dialogue, offering extremely plausible arguments. Anyone reading his work gets a very strong sense that Wittgenstein is recording his painful struggle **with himself**.' (Philip H. Thonemann, a private note. Further details on his web pages.)

Is there any reason to doubt that Hume encounters the same dilemma, not least given his explicit, and well known views – restated in his last days – of the gulf between scepticism and everyday reality?

The Woman in Black ... Edinburgh, 1776.

About the end of 1776, a respectable looking woman, dressed in black, came into a coach at Haddington, in passing through Edinburgh. The passengers were talking of the tranquillity of mind on the near

approach of death...David Hume's death was given as proof of this (by one passenger).

He had...even spoke of his dissolution with a degree of gaiety and humour. The lady turned round and said 'This, sir, is all you know about it: I could tell you another tale.' She then proceeded as follows.

'I, sir, was Mr. Hume's housekeeper for many years, and was with him in his last moments. And the mourning I now wear is a present from his relatives for my attention to him on his death-bed, and happy would I have been if I could have born my testimony to the mistaken opinion that has gone abroad of his peaceful and composed end.

I have, sir, never until this hour, opened my mouth upon the subject...It is true, sir, that when Mr. Hume's friends were with him, he was cheerful, and seemed quite unconcerned about his approaching fate, nay, frequently spoke of it to them, in a jocular and playful way. But when he was alone, the scene was very different. He was anything but composed. His mental agitation was so great at times as to occasion his whole bed to shake. He would not allow the candles to be put out at night, nor could he be left alone for a minute. I had always to ring the bell for one of the servants to be in the room, before he would allow me to leave it. ...for one who attended his bedside for so many days and nights, and witnessed his disturbed sleep, and even more disturbed wakings – ...it was not difficult to determine that all was not right within...' (To the Editor of the Record. I am sir, yours etc. L.A.B. October 15th, 1834.)

The housekeeper alluded to above was Mrs Margaret Irvine, of whom particular mention is made in Mr. Hume's will.

Mr Haldane makes an additional interesting statement...that Hume exclaimed to the same person (Mrs Irvine), that 'he had been in search of light all his life, but he was now in greater darkness than ever.'²⁰

There is surely no reason to doubt the substantial truth of the above account, (even if second hand). Thus it is at least possible that the anecdote cited at the beginning of this article is also substantially true.

But I leave the last words to Hume himself, a distinguished thinker, following the light of reason, as far as it could lead him.

it seems evident that the dispute between the Sceptics and the Dogmatists is entirely verbal, or at least regards only the degrees of doubt and assurance which we ought to indulge in, with regard to

all reasoning... (*Dialogues*, Note AA, p.87).

...Consider then, where the real point of controversy lies, and, if you cannot lay aside your disputes, endeavour, at least, to cure yourselves of your animosity. (The last words of the original manuscript of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Note BB, p.88).

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father – Peter Clive Thonemann

- 1 I am very grateful to my brother, Philip.H.Thonemann, for our discussions on this topic. I apologize to him, and to others, – many more scholarly than I – where their views differ from mine. The writings by Hume, and on Hume, are copious and much debated, but this essay is clear, unambiguous, and biased. I am also grateful to Professor Keith Ward of Oxford, for taking the time to read this in advance, with helpful, and engaging comments. ‘Of Miracles’ is section X of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), (*The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, Editor, E.Burt, Random House, N.Y. 1967).
- 2 J.H Newman, *An Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent*, (Notre Dame Press, 1979), p.244.
- 3 W and R. Chambers’ archive: Deposit 341 (Special Collections: bills and receipts. C.1820-30). A receipt to W. Chambers, c.1820, with added note. (The letters are in loose folders, not individually catalogued.) National Library of Scotland (NLS).
- 4 For example, ‘Hobbes’ politics are fitted only to promote tyranny, and his ethics to encourage licentiousness. Though an enemy of religion, he partakes nothing of the spirit of scepticism; but is as positive and dogmatic as if human reason, and his reason in particular, could attain a thorough conviction in these subjects.’ David Hume, *History of England*, ed.1802, vii., p.346. Also: ‘David Hume, the leading Scots philosopher of the 18th century, could describe W. Leechman’s *Sermon on Prayer* as the work of a “rank atheist”’, [Leechman was a Glasgow professor and theologian, known to him personally.] A.D.G. Steers, ‘New Light Thinking and Non-Subscription amongst Protestant Dissenters in England and Ireland in the early 18th century’, unpublished Ph.D thesis, Glasgow University, 2006, p.22.
- 5 Anders Kraal: ‘The immediate theological target of Hume’s Treatise (for example) may well have been an 18th century Anglican version of Christian theology, rather than...the Calvinist theology of the Kirk of Scotland.’ *Anglicanism, Scottish Presbyterianism, and the irreligious aim of Hume’s Treatise....* (*Hume Studies*: Volume 39, 2013), pp. 169-196.
- 6 ‘From time to time people make the discovery that the doctrine of the Trinity is older than Christianity...If an opponent of Christianity (the discoverer) triumphantly claims to have unmasked the doctrine and tracked it down to a purely natural origin...Why not? Revelation never advances for itself the claim which its apologists sometimes make for it, the claim to be something absolutely new. A

truth revealed by God is never a truth out of relation with previous thought.’ Aubrey Moore, ‘The Christian Doctrine of God’, (*Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, Charles Gore, ed., London, Murray, 1889. Republished C.U.P., 2009), p.66.

- 7 Charles Gore mentions this alleged healing in more detail: ‘A blind man and a man with a dislocated hand (possibly foot?) were cured apparently, by the Emperor’s spittle on the former, and by him treading on the latter’s foot.’ [This could certainly be a cure for solipsism.] This event was watched by many people, and Vespasian himself was surprised, and initially reluctant to cooperate. Tacitus insists that by his day, there was no reason for the surviving witnesses to lie. Charles Gore, *The Reconstruction of Belief*, (London, Murray, 1926), p.258-9.
- 8 Keith Ward, *Pascal’s Fire; One World*, (Oxford, 2006), p.223.
- 9 Gore, *Reconstruction*, op.cit: ‘it is notable that the Greek word for ‘wonder’ or ‘miracle’ is never used in the Gospels, except for miracles of evil origin. (Mark 13.22; Matthew 24.24). ‘Powers’ is the characteristic word in the Synoptists (cf Mark 6.5), and ‘signs’ or ‘works’ in St. John. These words carry moral and spiritual associations, as distinct from the mere marvel.’ p..258.
- 10 J.R. Illingworth, Essay V, *Lux Mundi*, op.cit., p.153-4.
- 11 David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, (published 1779). The last pages of the original manuscript. (The David Hume Archive, NLS. Accession number: 9434- [Note AA and BB]), pp. 87-8.
- 12 J.R. Illingworth, *Lux Mundi*, op.cit., p.152.
- 13 Keith Ward, *God, Chance and Necessity*, (One World, Oxford.1996), pp.108-110.
- 14 Kraal, *Hume Studies*, op.cit., p.172.
- 15 Karl Raimund Popper, *Of Clouds and Clocks*, (The Compton Memorial lecture, Washington University, 1965), p.14.
- 16 ‘The “new” theology was a theology of silence and reserve (it had to be, because) one after another of its leaders...were called to account for alleged heresy. The good-humoured face of David Hume appears fitfully among these liberal divines, with many of whom he was on intimate terms.’ H.M.B.Reid, *The Divinity Professors in the University of Glasgow (1640-1903)* (Maclehose, Glasgow 1923), p.244. (My thanks to David Steers’ thesis for this reference).
- 17 Gore, op.cit., pp.291-2.
- 18 *Dialogues*, op.cit., original MSS, p.87, Note AA.
- 19 C. Howson, *A Logic of Induction*, (*Philosophy of Science*; Volume 64, 2. Chicago, 1997), p.281-2.
- 20 Photographic copy of the account of the death of David Hume as told by his housekeeper, 1834, (Bristol archives; 28048/C49/5).