

Of Hume's "Of Miracles"

"A wise man," declared Hume, "proportions his Belief to the Evidence" (893).¹ Hume proceeds from this rule to argue that a wise man will reject miracles. Proving this conclusion, he hopes to "at least *silence* the most arrogant Bigotry and Superstition, and [be] free from [its] impertinent Solicitations," having demonstrated that "Reason is insufficient to convince [one] of [Christianity's] veracity: And whoever is mov'd by *Faith* to assent to it... [must] subvert[] all the Principles of his Understanding" (903).

Hume begins by stating that "Experience [must] be our only guide in reasoning concerning Matters of Fact" (893). The wise, "[i]n such conclusions as are founded on an infallible Experience, [expect] [an] Event with the last Degree of Assurance, and regard[] past Experience as a full *Proof* of the future Existence of that Event" (893). This is experimental proof; repeated tests, yielding a uniform result, are assumed to represent the complete situation. Such a demonstration holds only within designated boundaries; the statement "a pen will drop to the floor the thousandth time in the same fashion it has the other nine hundred and ninety-nine" contains a hidden condition, for extra-experimental conditions must remain the same. The pen would not drop, for example, in a space station that spun to simulate gravity once the rotation stopped. This contrasts with a mathematical proof, which utilizes comprehensive assumptions, escaping the limitations of experimental demonstration within the confined limits of its definitions; the rotation of a space station does not influence the legitimacy of $1+1=2$. Hume provides examples (893-894) of the failure of human experience, which demonstrate the

¹David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, "Of Miracles," pg. 893 in *Eighteenth Century English Literature*, Edited by G. Tillotson, P. Fusell Jr., and M. Waingrow. All following citations of this type refer to pages in this volume, just as (893) means page 893.

impossibility of an infallible experiential test— the world is too complex and we know too little to claim we have a comprehensive set of assumptions.

Only rare miracles impress. Cells are so complex that their spontaneous formation, within the span of paltry billions of years, is less than 1×10^{50} , or effectively nothing. Although their original formation is inexplicable within the confines of current natural laws, the fact that they function in innumerable numbers every day deprives them of that miraculous pizzazz. A better supernatural occurrence, such as the instantaneous disappearance of the Golden Gate Bridge at the command of an old robed tramp with a long white beard, happens far more infrequently. In Lake Tahoe, unable to see the void where the Golden Gate had been in person, one would have to accept the testimony of revolutionary homeless activists, followers of the tramp, or the statements of Dan Rather, to admit the miracle; most supernatural events confront us second hand. Hume, recognizing this, sets boundaries upon the acceptability of human testimony: “Evidence, deriv’d from Witnesses and human Testimony, is founded on past Experience... and is regarded either as a *Proof* or a *Probability*, according as the Conjunction between any particular Kind of Report and any Kind of Object has been found to be constant or variable” (894). Experience dictates that “the Character or Number of the Witnesses; [] the Manner of their delivering their Testimony... Interest in what they affirm” (894) and so forth alters the credibility of human testimony.

Hume proceeds to posit that “A MIRACLE is a Violation of the Laws of Nature; and as a firm and unalterable Experience has establish’d these Laws, the Proof against a Miracle, from the very Nature of the Fact, is as entire as any Argument from Experience can possibly be imagin’d” (895). He defines a miracle as “a Transgression of a Law of Nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible Agent” (895). He concludes that no amount of testimony should convince a wise man to recognize a miracle, because “firm and unalterable Experience has establish’d [inviolable

laws of Nature].” Miracles, since they defy common experience, are declared infinitely improbable. Essentially, Hume states that miracles are impossible by definition.

Although the inhabitants of Sumatra had never seen rivers freeze, Hume would have them believe they do in Moscow on the basis of human testimony. Since they had never traveled far North to see “water in Muscovy during the winter[,] therefore they cannot reasonably be positive what would there be the consequence” (895). He does not give God the leeway of frozen rivers. Presumably the Creator, if He knew what He was doing, would not need to frequently intervene to fix weaknesses in His creation— an interposition of the Deity would be an extraordinary occurrence. People might complain that “prodigious Events never happen in our Days” (897), but unless a specific revelation or a new truth was revealed, they could hardly expect random unnatural occurrences— a majestic God of order who formed the details of the world would not break His laws for a capricious purpose. The inhabitants of Sumatra have no “uniform experience” of liquid rivers in cold conditions, so they cannot reasonably rule out ice. Mankind similarly has no uniform experience of Divine intervention, so it cannot be ruled out by definition. Indeed, it testifies to God’s existence, for atheists have always been a tiny fraction of the population. Furthermore, the order and design of the world, in light of the natural law of entropy, testifies to a extra-natural Power who put it all together. A law of nature cannot preclude the supernatural; it lies outside of its assumptions. No more can a child in the womb refute the existence of the moon because it does not normally affect him.

Hume states further that no evidence of divine intervention has ever amounted to proof, even if the laws of nature allow the supernatural:

In the foregoing Reasoning we have suppos’d, that the Testimony, upon which a Miracle is founded, may possibly amount to an entire Proof, and that the Falshood of that Testimony would be a real Prodigy. But it is easy to shew, that we have been a great deal too liberal in our Concession, and that there never was a miraculous Event establish’d on so full an Evidence.

FOR first, there is not to be found, in all History, any Miracle attested by a sufficient Number of Men, of such unquestion'd Good-sense, Education, and Learning as to secure us against all Delusion in themselves; of such undoubted Integrity, as to place them beyond all Suspicion of any Design to deceive others; of such Credit and Reputation in the Eyes of Mankind as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any Falshood; and at the same time attesting Facts perform'd in such a public Manner, and in so celebrated a Part of the World, as to render the Detection unavoidable[.] (896)

God's inspiration of the Bible, however, clearly passes Hume's test for a miracle. "What [he] has said of Miracles may be apply'd without any Variation, to Prophecies; and indeed, all Prophecies are real Miracles, and as such only, can be admitted as Proofs of any Revelation" (903). Hundreds of years before Christ's birth, his ancestry (Ge 49:10), birthplace (Mi 5:2), crucifixion (Ps 22) area of ministry and Divine nature (Is 9:1-6), substitutionary atonement and resurrection (Is 52:13-53:12), and name (Ze 6:11) were predicted in the Old Testament. Even the exact year of his death and the following destruction of the city of Jerusalem (Da 9:24-26) were declared hundreds of years earlier. Remarkable details about the rise and fall of the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman empires (Da 2,7,8), the fall of Tyre (Ez 26), judgment on Nineveh (Na 1-3), Ammon, and Moab (Je 48,49), Babylon (Is 13,14), and Edom (Ez 25,35) were foretold. Many other things, including the modern restoration of the nation of Israel (Is 11:12), have been prophesied as well,² but these suffice to demonstrate that the "Falshood of [this] Testimony would be a real Prodigy."

Jesus' miracles were "perform'd in such a public Manner... as to render the Detection unavoidable." He multiplied loaves and fishes to feed thousands (Mt 14:15-21), raised the dead with many witnesses (Lu 8:41-42, 49-56; 7:11-15, Jn 11:1-44), and healed the sick, lame, blind, mute, leprous, and paralyzed before large crowds. More than five hundred people saw him at one time after his resurrection (1 Co 15:6). One

²Cf. the apologetic works at <http://faithalonesaves.googlepages.com/salvation>.

might as easily fabricate these miracles as provoke the earthquake (Mt 27:54) and the three hours of darkness over the land (Mt 27:45) upon His death on the cross. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote the gospels in the generation of the people who witnessed these events— people could easily discover, or speak to those who could remember any invention in their writings. They had more than “a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any Falshood”— they had to risk their lives to proclaim the message at all, forsaking family, home, and friends— certainly they had no worldly reason to “Design to deceive others.” Thousands from slaves to members of the highest Jewish council (Jn 3:1, 7:50, 19:39), men of “Good-sense, Education, and Learning,” attested to the accuracy of their proclamation and their miracles.

Hume’s descriptions of the invention of false miracles reinforces the veracity of the Biblical narrative all the more. People hear with “Greediness [] the miraculous Accounts of Travellers receiv’d, their descriptions of Sea and Land-Monsters” (896), because of “[t]he Pleasure of telling a Piece of News” (897). Checking out the truthfulness of a sailor’s tall tale was nigh impossible, but one could easily check the accuracy of an apostle’s preaching— it simply required going to Jerusalem and asking the inhabitants if there was darkness and an earthquake on the Passover of Christ’s death, or interviewing eyewitnesses of the risen Lord. Christians certainly felt no gossipy pleasure spreading the gospel; when not stoned or beaten, they were harangued and thought ridiculous for declaring that a man whom the Romans killed and humiliated was the King of all the Earth.

Hume’s argument that many different religions and gods claim the ability to do miracles (898) does not protect the secularist from facing the impossibility of naturalistic rationalizations for Biblical testimony. Important things usually have leeches and deceptive imitations disguised as angels of light. Abandonment of all pride and self-righteousness to cry “God have mercy on me, a sinner,” a willingness to put God above

all else, is alien to man's spiritually dead state (Ro 1:21-32). Furthermore, Hume's arguments concerning the gullibility of many have definite ground, as some will seize upon and spread the news of the latest visions of Elvis to invent their own religions.

Hume final argument against miracles is, however, unanswerable: “[T]he absolute Impossibility o[f] miraculous... Events... [is] surely, in the Eyes of all reasonable People, [] alone... a sufficient Refutation” (900). While it had its expositors even in antedeluvian times, in modern days this proof has been known as the argument from Harrumph, for its expositors, knowing that their income and intelligence is too high to fall for any sort of enthusiasm, roll their eyes, make guttural noises, laugh haughtily, and pass on, heads held high. Their demonstration, “tho’ always sufficient with the Judicious and Knowing, [is] commonly too fine to fall under the Comprehension of the Vulgar” (901). We can believe that revelation is impossible by the power of Hume’s argument, namely that “it is impossible for us to know the Attributes and Actions of [the Almighty], otherwise than from the Experience, which we have, of his Productions, in the usual Course of Nature” (902). Free from warnings to get right with God and other impertinent Solicitations, we can “form a general Resolution never to lend any attention to [Him], with whatever specious pretense it may be cover’d” (902). Amen.

Indeed, taking our place with the Sadducees, it is evident that “the *Christian Religion*, not only was at first attended with Miracles, but even at this Day cannot be believ’d by any reasonable Person without one” (903). For what could be more ridiculous than following the advice of a country bumpkin, clothed with camel’s hair, eating locusts and wild honey, proclaiming “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Abandoning natural desires and comforts, claiming that the Creator became a crucified Jew who “for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God”

certainly “subverts all the Principles of [the] Understanding,” and is “most contrary to Custom and Experience” (903).