

## On Part 2 of “Of Miracles”

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Known distinctively by some as the *a posteriori* section or the “in fact” argument,<sup>1</sup> Part 2 of David Hume’s “Of Miracles” is, *prima facie*, a rather complex presentation of the various reasons for the assertion that “there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence.”<sup>2</sup> Understood in a certain way, Hume’s presentation presents a challenge to the believer of miracles, especially the believer of biblical miracles. Being such a believer, I am therefore faced with a challenge that may ultimately undermine the very foundation of my faith—that is, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What I attempt to do in the following, then, is to appraise Part 2 and show that one need not embrace it as part of “an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion”<sup>3</sup> (if one may call biblical miracles that). I do this by drawing heavily from Alvin Plantinga’s works, in which he shows that the underlying assumption of Part 2—indeed, of much of the philosophy of the West—is self-referentially incoherent (i.e., it fails to fulfill its own criterion).

<sup>1</sup> Craig 131.

<sup>2</sup> Hume, *Enquiry* 174.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

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### Hume's Case

I begin with Hume's assertion that, "upon the whole, ... it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof..."<sup>4</sup> By "probability," Hume means "that evidence, which is still attended with uncertainty."<sup>5</sup> Probability "supposes an opposition of experiments and observations; where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence, proportioned to the superiority."<sup>6</sup> By "proof," Hume means "[that] [argument], which [is] deriv'd from the relation of cause and effect, and which [is] entirely free from doubt and uncertainty."<sup>7</sup> Now, of Hume's assertion, we may ask, "Why is it that 'no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability' (or to being probably true)?" Hume holds that

the probabilities of causes ... are ... deriv'd from ... *the association of ideas to a present impression*. As the habit, which produces the association, arises from the frequent conjunction of objects, it must arrive at its perfection by degrees, and must acquire new force from each instance, that falls under our observation. The first instance has little or no force: The second makes some addition to it: The third becomes still more sensible; and 'tis by these slow steps, that our judgment arrives at a full assurance. But before it attains this pitch of perfection, it passes thro' several inferior degrees, and in all of them is only to be esteem'd a presumption or probability.<sup>8</sup>

Our problem is that we lack experience of the conjunction of testimonies to the miraculous and the miraculous itself. Indeed, we lack experience of even the *first* instance of such a conjunction (call it C). What this means is that "our judgment" cannot even begin to pass

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>5</sup> Blanshard, *Reason and Belief* 401, as cited in Plantinga, "Is Belief . . . ?" 42.

<sup>6</sup> *Enquiry* 170; Cf. *Enquiry* §6 (131–33); *Treatise* 86.

<sup>7</sup> *Treatise* 86; Cf. *Enquiry* 131n.

<sup>8</sup> *Treatise* 90.

through any inferior degree and, accordingly, be "esteem'd a presumption or probability." If we assume that there will be Cs that do not hold, it also means that we cannot even begin to weigh the opposite experiments and observations (the number of Cs that hold and the number of Cs that do not hold); in which case, we cannot incline with doubt and hesitation to the side supported by the greater number of experiments and observations, for we lack experience of the opposite experiments and observations requisite for the weighing that needs to be done beforehand.

Our lack of experience of Cs—indeed, of even the first C—is what Hume calls our "firm and unalterable experience"—our "uniform experience"—against Cs. (Such a uniform experience is comprised, of course, not only of the said lack of experience of even the *first* instance of a C, but also of our experience of causal regularities in the world and of the trustworthiness of individuals, as well as of our lack of experience of miracles *per se* and of events that are analogous to such miracles.) Because of this uniform experience, our judgment cannot even get off the ground, as it were, to reach the point of passing through the several inferior degrees (esteemed presumptions or probabilities). Consequently, no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability.

We see, then, from the uniformity of our own experience—in particular, from the lack of experience of Cs—that no testimony to the miraculous ever amounts to a probability. And since a "species of probability ... naturally takes place before any entire proof can exist,"<sup>9</sup> no testimony to the miraculous ever amounts to a proof.

But suppose that a testimony for any kind of miracle "amount[s] to an entire proof, and that the falsehood of that testimony would be a real prodigy."<sup>10</sup> What then? Then, we are told, it is opposed by another proof, namely, our uniform experience, which "assures us of the laws of nature." Our uniform experience opposes the proof to which the testimony for any kind of miracle amounts. "When, therefore, these two kinds of expe-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Enquiry* 174.

rience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other, and embrace an opinion, either on one side or the other, with that assurance which arises from the remainder.”<sup>11</sup> (Presumably, the remainder is not high enough for our assurance to amount to much. But perhaps the subtraction of these two kinds of experience amounts to an “entire annihilation,” in which case there is no remainder and thus nothing to command our belief or opinion.)

### Begging the Limitations

Hume begs the limitations he puts on accepting human testimony to the miraculous. He “own[s]” that there may possibly be a miracle, or violation of the usual course of nature, “of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony....”<sup>12</sup> He invites us to consider such a miracle:

... suppose that all authors, in all languages, agree, that, from the first of January 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days: ... that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: [and] that all travelers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction....<sup>13</sup>

“Present philosophers,” Hume avers,

instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived. The decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature, is an event rendered probable by so many analogies, that any phænomenon, which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Enquiry* 184.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

I think it is fairly clear what Hume is saying. He is saying that an event  $e$  that is a violation of our laws of nature is rendered probable if (and only if) it resembles "so many" of those events of which we have already had experience; and  $e$  "comes within the reach of human testimony" as long as that testimony is "very extensive and uniform." I do not think that what Hume is saying when he says that "the fact" is a miracle "of such a kind as to admit of *proof* from human testimony"<sup>15</sup> is clear, however. For what does it mean to say that something admits of proof *from* human testimony? What is the function of the preposition 'from'?

Whatever the answer(s), it is at least clear that if an event is not akin to "so many analogies," it is not rendered probable. It is thus clear in the miracle of the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth in 1600,<sup>16</sup> for example, that, because we lack "so many analogies" of the dead being revived, the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth is not rendered probable. It is thus also clear in the case of "the fact" that, because we have "so many analogies" of total darkness over the whole earth for eight days, "the fact" is rendered probable.

I think it is important for one to bear in mind what Hume says about the analogies or analogous experiences rendering a violation of a law of nature probable. For if one does not, then one may very well make the mistake of thinking that Hume's principles of reasoning are so stringent that the philosophers ( $P$ s, for short) of which Hume speaks cannot believe in *any* report of a violation of a law of nature, let alone "the fact." (Thus, if a clock or watch should happen to stop, and  $P$ s learn via human testimony for the first time that the clock or watch stopped, then they should never believe in the testimony.) Of course, one *should* bear in mind what Hume says about the analogies; but if one does not, then one may very well make such a mistake. (If one does take into account what is said about the analogies, then one will understand that, in the case of the

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., my emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*

stopped clock or watch, *Ps should* believe in the testimony to the stopped clock or watch because they know by their analogous experiences that devices, gadgets, and the like stop, and that devices, gadgets, and the like stop because “almost in every part of nature there is contain’d a vast variety of springs and principles,” which, though “hid, by reason of their minuteness or remoteness,”<sup>17</sup> operate on them as contrary causes.)

### Fundamental Problems

Time and again, Hume asserts that we should always incline to the side supported by the greater number of experiments and observations. Indeed, Hume claims that if we are “wise and learned,” then we *will* incline to the side supported by the greater number of experiments and observations—that is, we *will* proportion our belief to the evidence<sup>18</sup> or “reason justly.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of testimonies to miracles, then, where, on the one hand, the testimonies do not even amount to a probability (for us), and, on the other, our experience of the common or usual course of nature is uniform, we should not—indeed, if we are “wise and learned,” will not—do what is “directly contrary to the rules of just reasoning”<sup>20</sup> by giving our assent to the evidence of the testimonies (which is incredibly weak); rather, we should (or will) proportion our belief to the evidence of our “firm and unalterable” experience (which is incredibly strong). Whoever of us is moved by *faith* and assents to, say, the testimony of the “Christian religion” therefore reasons unjustly, and “is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.”<sup>21</sup>

Hume, it seems, is not alone in his views on proportioning beliefs to the evidence. Brand Blanshard is cited by Plantinga as one who believes

<sup>17</sup> *Treatise* 90.

<sup>18</sup> *Enquiry* 169, 170.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

that "The main principle of [the] ethic [of the intellect is] ... the same inside and outside religion. This principle is simple and sweeping: Equate your assent to the evidence."<sup>22</sup> John Locke and Bertrand Russell are also cited as ones echoing similar sentiments. Locke is said to have believed that a "firm assent of the mind ... cannot be afforded to anything but upon good reason."<sup>23</sup> As for Russell, he is quoted as having said that we are to "Give to any hypothesis which is worth [our] while to consider just that degree of credence which the evidence warrants."<sup>24</sup> And so it is the same with George Berkeley, W. K. Clifford, Anthony Flew, J. C. A. Gaskin, John L. Mackie, Anthony O'Hear, H. H. Price, Wesley Salmon, and Michael Scriven:<sup>25</sup> each has been cited by Plantinga as one who has proclaimed (or at the very least assumed) that our intellectual duty "is that of believing only on the basis of evidence"<sup>26</sup> (and, not only that, that *our being rational* is by "believing only on the basis of evidence").

Here, in the case of testimonies to miracles, of course, our intellectual duty is to proportion, and our being rational is by proportioning, our belief to the evidence that is *Humeanly* greater than any other competing evidence. Evidence  $e_1$  is Humeanly greater than any other competing evidence  $e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n$  if (and only if)

(a)  $e_1$  is a demonstration and  $e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n$  is a proof or a probability,

(b)  $e_1$  is a proof and  $e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n$  is a lesser proof or a probability,

and

(c)  $e_1$  is a probability and  $e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n$  is a lesser probability.

$e_1$  is also Humeanly greater than  $e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n$  if (and only if)

(d)  $e_1$  is a demonstration, a proof, or a probability and  $e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n$  is not a demonstration, a proof, or a probability.

The underlying principle of this thought might best be summed up as the Acceptable Belief Standard:

<sup>22</sup> Blanshard, *Reason and Belief* 401, as cited in Plantinga, "Is Belief . . . ?" 42.

<sup>23</sup> See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* 86.

<sup>24</sup> Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* 816, as cited in Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* 26.

<sup>25</sup> See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 103; *Warranted Christian Belief* 89-90; *Warrant: The Current Debate* 26.

<sup>26</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* 26.

(ABS) For any human agent  $S$ ,  $S$  has fulfilled his/her intellectual duty, and is rational, in believing evidence  $e_1$  if and only if  $e_1$  is Humeanly greater than any other competing evidence  $e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n$ ,

where  $e_1$  and  $e_2, e_3, \dots, e_n$  are relevant to each other in some significant way. (The evidence being significantly relevant to each other, I should add, matters. For if it does not matter, then one can speak of, say, a testimony of Jesus' calming a tempest being Humeanly greater than the testimony of a biker that, at time  $t$ , Jones was in the process of murdering his neighbor, or the testimony of James Boswell that, on 7 July 1776, he visited a dying, ghastly, and lean looking Hume. But, surely, it is hardly sensible to speak thus. [It makes more sense, I think, to speak of, say, the testimony of Wilson that, at time  $t$ , Jones was speaking at an academic symposium on the tenseless theory of time being Humeanly greater than the aforesaid testimony of the biker.] Surely, then, it *does* matter that the evidence is significantly relevant to each other.)

So in the case of testimonies to miracles, our intellectual duty is to proportion, and our being rational is by proportioning, our belief to the evidence that is Humeanly greater than any other competing evidence. Or so Hume says. This means, as I said at the beginning of this section, that, if

$e_1$  = our uniform experience

and

$e_2$  = a testimony to the miraculous,

we will be rational and fulfilling our intellectual duty if we believe  $e_1$ , since  $e_1$  is *indubitably* Humeanly greater than  $e_2$ . ( $e_1$ , it will be remembered, "amounts to a proof,...a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact."<sup>27</sup>  $e_2$ , however, is not a demonstration, a proof, or a probability.)

One wonders, of course, whether or not we will be rational or fulfilling our intellectual duty (i.e., "justified") in believing  $e_2$  if  $e_2$  is strength-

<sup>27</sup> *Enquiry* 173.



ened by other evidences. We might suppose, for example, that the miraculous in  $e_2$  is Jesus' resurrection. We might suppose, furthermore, that  $e_2$  is strengthened by the evidences known collectively as the indirect testimony to Jesus' resurrection—e.g., the existence of the Christian church, the existence of the New Testament (which includes a rich Pauline corpus), the historical accounts of such historians as Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus, Thallus, and Pliny the Younger (just to name a few), and the martyrdom of all of Jesus' disciples (save Judas Iscariot, Jesus' betrayer who committed suicide, and the apostle John)—which we judge to be such that they would be nonexistent *unless* Jesus' resurrection actually took place. But with such strengthening by indirect testimony, is  $e_2$  such that we will be justified in believing it? I am not too sure. I suppose Hume would say that  $e_2$  is *not* such that we will be justified in believing it, for though it is strengthened by other evidences, what it amounts to is still paltry in comparison to what  $e_1$  amounts to. Thus, if we do in fact believe  $e_2$ , then we will be subverting all the principles of our understanding and hardly doing any justice to ourselves.

Now, what I think ABS is rooted in is some proposition of the following sort:

- (1) For any human agent  $S$ ,  $S$  is justified in believing that  $p$  if and only if  $S$  has sufficient reason for believing that  $p$ .

Indeed, I think that ABS can be traced farther past this *evidentialist*-like (1) to what Plantinga calls *classical foundationalism*—“an extraordinarily influential picture dominating Western epistemological thought for nearly three centuries”<sup>28</sup>—according to which

a correct or healthy human system of beliefs ... [includes, *properly* or *rightly*] basic beliefs, and every nonbasic belief will be accepted on the basis of other beliefs that offer evidential support for it, in such a way that every belief is supported, finally, by [properly or rightly] basic

<sup>28</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* 84.

beliefs, beliefs in the foundations. These beliefs, of course, are not accepted on the basis of others; the basis relation is finite and terminates in the foundations.<sup>29</sup>

À la Plantinga,<sup>30</sup> we can express this view more fully as the following:

(CF) *S* is justified in believing that *p* if and only if *p* is either (a) properly basic for *S*, i.e., self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses for *S*, or (b) believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are either properly basic or properly based and that support it abductively, deductively, or inductively.<sup>31</sup>

I would venture to say that if Hume believes that ABS, then he also believes that CF (or at least something like it).<sup>32</sup> If I am right, then this means that what Hume believes is that a person is justified in believing that *p* if and only if *p* is either properly basic, or accepted on the basis of other beliefs that are either properly basic or properly based. What, according to Hume, is properly basic for a person? Well, Hume does not really say, but I gather from what he has written that what he would say is properly basic for a person includes at least the following: propositions of *demonstrations*, the objects of demonstrations being quantity and number<sup>33</sup> (e.g.,  $1 + 2 = 3$ ); propositions of the person's *impressions*—i.e., propositions of the person's more lively perceptions ("items in experience that appear directly to the [person's] mind"<sup>34</sup>), like what the person hears, sees, feels, loves, hates, desires, or wills;<sup>35</sup> and propositions of the person's *ideas*—i.e., propositions of the person's "less lively perceptions," of which the person is conscious when s/he reflects on any of his/her

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>30</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* 93–94.

<sup>31</sup> Plantinga makes it clear that one cannot properly believe just any proposition on the basis of just any other. See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* 84.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* 82.

<sup>33</sup> *Enquiry* 209.

<sup>34</sup> Beauchamp, "Editor's Introduction," *Enquiry* 16–17.

<sup>35</sup> *Enquiry* 97.

impressions.<sup>36</sup> And what, according to Hume, is believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are either properly basic or properly based? Well, again, Hume does not really say, but I gather from what he has written that what he would say is that what is believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are either properly basic or properly based is any proposition that is properly based. Take, for example,

(2) All tundra swans in the Arctic are white.

Here is a proposition that is properly based. It is properly based because it has as its evidential basis propositions that support it inductively, propositions that include a proposition of the demonstration that  $1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 7$ , a proposition of one's own impression of a tundra swan, and a proposition of one's own idea that s/he had, on each of his/her seven visits to the Arctic, seen a tundra swan.

Or take ABS. ABS, I think, is a proposition that is properly based. (It is not, as far as I can tell, properly basic, that is, not evident to the senses, incorrigible, or self-evident) Why is it properly based? Because it has as its evidential basis certain propositions that support it in a certain way. These propositions are too numerous to enumerate here; suffice it to say, however, that they are (in my mind, likely to be) the premises Hume uses in his "*reasonings concerning matter of fact*,"<sup>37</sup> which reasonings are "founded on the relation of cause and effect," the "*foundation of all our reasonings and conclusions concerning [this] relation*" being experience.<sup>38</sup>

Now why, I must ask, should Hume believe that CF? CF claims that a person is justified in believing that  $p$  iff  $p$  is either (a) or (b). But CF itself might as well be  $p$ ; it must therefore be properly basic or have as its evidential basis propositions that are either properly basic or properly based and that support it abductively, deductively, or inductively in order for a person to be justified in believing it. It must, in short, fulfill its own criterion in order for a person to be justified in believing it.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Beauchamp 24–30.

<sup>38</sup> *Enquiry* 113.

But does CF fulfill its own criterion? In answer to this, Plantinga gives a resounding *no*. The problem with CF, he says, is that it fails to fulfill itself (much like the Verifiability Criterion of Logical Positivism). (Notice that the same is true of (1).) If we let

$p$  (the  $p$  of CF) = CF,

we discover that  $p$  is not properly basic: we discover that  $p$  is not self-evident (like the propositions

(3) If this purple hippo (PH), is bigger than this orange donkey (OD), and OD is bigger than this green chihuahua (GC), then PH is bigger than GC.

(4) No man is both a father *and* a son at the same time and in the same relationship),

incorrigible (“it isn’t about anyone’s mental states”<sup>39</sup>), or evident to any of our senses.<sup>40</sup> We also discover that  $p$  is not supported by any good abductive, deductive, or inductive arguments from propositions that are either properly basic or properly based.<sup>41</sup> At the very least, we find it “hard to see that [CF] is appropriately supported....”<sup>42</sup>

So why should Hume believe that CF? Well, the fact of the matter is that he shouldn’t, for CF does not meet any of its own conditions, which means that no one can be justified in believing it. The problem, of course, is that Hume *does* believe that CF. This means that he cannot be justified in believing that CF. But if *that* is the case, then he has neither warrant for employing CF in his reasoning, warrant for believing that ABS, nor, finally, warrant for employing ABS in his reasoning concerning testimonies to the miraculous in particular and matters of fact in general.

<sup>39</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* 94.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* 84, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Plantinga, “Is Belief ... ?” 44, 49; Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” 137; *Warranted Christian Belief* 95. For Plantinga’s response to the submission that one who accepts CF can find some sort of inductive argument for it, see *Warranted Christian Belief* 95–97.

<sup>42</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* 85.

The upshot of CF's self-referential incoherence is not only that CF "appears to be just an arbitrary definition—and not a very plausible one at that!"<sup>43</sup>—but also, as Nicholas Wolterstorff says, that CF "*is in bad shape....* [There] is nothing to do but give it up for mortally ill and learn to live in its absence."<sup>44</sup> This, as I have tried to point out, is bad news for Hume. But it is good news for us believers of miracles, especially us believers of biblical miracles. For if we are not bound to CF, a thesis "about how a system of beliefs *ought* to be structured, a thesis about the properties of a correct, or acceptable, or rightly structured system of beliefs,"<sup>45</sup> then we are not bound to ABS; in which case, we need not incline to our uniform experience over testimonies to, say, Jesus changing water into wine, multiplying fish, walking on water, or resurrecting himself from the dead.

So much, then, for equating our assent to the evidence, inclining to the superior side, or proportioning our beliefs to the evidence in order to be justified. Given the self-referential problems of CF, it is hardly clear "that 'it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,'"<sup>46</sup> that ABS is an acceptable principle, that we are being irrational and flouting our epistemic responsibilities or intellectual duties and are therefore worthy of blame, censure, or stern castigation if we violate ABS, and that, conversely, it is healthy, rational, reasonable, the right or *wise* thing to do, our moral duty or obligation, or what have you, to "reason justly"<sup>47</sup> in the spirit of ABS.

It should be noted briefly in passing that the believer of biblical miracles who rejects CF can still have properly basic beliefs. These beliefs do not have to be self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses in order to be properly basic, however. They can simply be found in certain conditions and therefore be properly basic. ("[T]hese conditions are, [one] might say, the ground of [their] justification and, by extension, the

<sup>43</sup> Craig 29.

<sup>44</sup> Wolterstorff 56.

<sup>45</sup> Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 129.

<sup>46</sup> Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," 186, as cited in Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" 110.

<sup>47</sup> *Enquiry* 172.

ground of the belief[s] [themselves].”<sup>48</sup>) In his trilogy on warrant, Plantinga considers this idea at great length, and in the third book of the trilogy, *Warranted Christian Belief*, he proposes an Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model of belief in which it is said that certain beliefs about God *are* properly basic because they are acquired by way of the IIHS (“internal instigation of the Holy Spirit”) and the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>49</sup> Here, it would be too much to go into the A/C model, warrant, and all the various issues surrounding them. But let it be known for now that the believer of biblical miracles who rejects CF can still have properly basic beliefs, and that these beliefs do not have to be self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses in order to be properly basic.

One last word: we who do not find CF “obvious or compelling”<sup>50</sup> need not be troubled by Hume’s proviso that extraordinary events (like “the fact”) can be received as morally certain if (and only if) they are “rendered probable by so many analogies.”<sup>51</sup> For the (ultimate) basis of such a proviso is CF, which, as I have endeavored to show, is self-referentially incoherent. *Contra* Hume’s proviso, then, we *can* receive as morally certain those things (e.g., Jesus’ casting a demon out of a man<sup>52</sup> and raising Lazarus from the dead<sup>53</sup>) that are not “rendered probable by so many analogies.”

### Moving On

I move on to consider briefly three of the four reasons Hume gives to show that “there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence.” Each of these reasons, as well as select responses to them, will be stated for the reader before I offer my own brief response.

<sup>48</sup> Plantinga, “Is Belief . . . ?” 46.

<sup>49</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* 130; *Warrant: The Current Debate* 86.

<sup>50</sup> Plantinga, “Is Belief . . . ?” 49.

<sup>51</sup> *Enquiry* 184.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Matt. 9: 32–33.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. John 11: 1–44.

(Unfortunately, space and time limitations will not give me the liberty of canvassing or delving into the nuances.)

### The Three Reasons

"[F]irst," writes Hume,

there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned 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 falsehood; and at the same time, attesting facts, performed in such a public manner, and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable....<sup>54</sup>

The problem certain scholars have with this reason for why "there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence" is that it just doesn't cut it. David Johnson, for example, says that, as a "bare assertion" containing "hazily specified" requirements, it simply does not compel assent.<sup>55</sup> "*How many witnesses to a miracle,*" he asks, "are necessary, *and why?* How 'unquestioned' must their good sense, education, and learning be, and why? (Hume says that it must be 'such ... as to secure us against all delusion in themselves,' but what is needed for *that*, and why? Would, for example, expertise in Jewish law be sufficient?)"<sup>56</sup> (We might ask in passing since when "unquestioned" good sense, education, and learning *necessarily* "predispose[d] one to impeccable ethical conduct."<sup>57</sup>)

We might follow suit and ask like questions: "How 'undoubted' must their integrity be, and why? Enough, says Hume, 'to place them

<sup>54</sup> *Enquiry* 174.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Johnson 78-80.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>57</sup> Beckwith 50.

beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others’—but how much is *that*, and why? How much credit and reputation must they have, and why? Enough, says Hume, ‘as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood’—but why, exactly, cannot humble folk be credible witnesses to miracles? How *public* must the miracle be, how *celebrated* the locale, and why? ‘Certainly Jerusalem and environs were ... “celebrated part[s]” of the Middle East during the time of Christ....’<sup>58</sup> Or is that not so?”<sup>59</sup>

Gary G. Colwell and John Jenkins offer their own critical response to Hume’s “bare assertion.” As far as they are concerned, besides being “unworkably vague” at best (Colwell), its conditions for reliable testimony are “so stringent that ... [they] ... virtually [make] most of history impossible.”<sup>60</sup> “Can we think of any ancient historical event,” asks Colwell, “whose chronicler can pass the test[?] ... Can we not doubt any chronicler’s motives, ... his education, his sincerity and his reputation—not to mention his possible habit of writing at 3 a.m. with a bottle of spirits by his side?”<sup>61</sup>

“Secondly,” writes Hume,

We may observe in human nature a principle, which, if strictly examined, will be found to diminish extremely the assurance, which we might, from human testimony, have, in any kind of prodigy. The maxim, by which we commonly conduct ourselves in our reasonings, is, that the objects, of which we have no experience, resemble those, of which we have; that what we have found to be most usual is always most probable; and that where there is an opposition of arguments, we ought to give the preference to such as are founded on the greatest number of past observations.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Colwell 11.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson pursues a similar line of questioning. Some of my questions parallel his. See *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* 78–79.

<sup>60</sup> Jenkins 188.

<sup>61</sup> Colwell, “Miracles and History” 10.

<sup>62</sup> *Enquiry* 174–75.



Unhappily, we do not always observe this maxim. We tend to renounce it when we hear of the "utterly absurd" (e.g., land and sea monsters). Why is this so? Hume owes it to our love of wonder: "The passion of *surprize* and *wonder*, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events, from which it is derived."<sup>63</sup> The fact of the matter is that this passion is so great that a Tully (Cicero) or a Demosthenes (both of which were great classical orators) cannot touch it as well as a *Capuchin* (a friar of an austere branch of the order of St. Francis)!<sup>64</sup>

"Hume's point," Jenkins remarks, "is not all that persuasive. We can agree with him that we all want to believe in miracles and other extraordinary events but without agreeing with the implication Hume draws from the fact, that we become more gullible. Often, our reaction is just the opposite...."<sup>65</sup>

Keith Yandell agrees:

The point that, so to say, people love prodigies is well taken. They love order, too, and hate being taken in. I suspect that one could explain the disbelief in miracles of a Hume as readily along the lines of fear of being superstitious as one could explain the belief in miracles of a Pascal along the lines of fear of damnation.<sup>66</sup>

Colwell, too, concurs:

The difficulty with ... Hume's argument from wonder-love, is that it involves a form of special pleading. This supposed capacity in man to be duped by tales of the weird and wonderful is at least matched by his capacity to be sceptical. Human nature is just as sceptical as it is gullible.<sup>67</sup>

So does Johnson:

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Beauchamp, "Annotations to the Enquiry" 247.

<sup>65</sup> Jenkins 189.

<sup>66</sup> Yandell 332.

<sup>67</sup> Colwell 11.

Perhaps (for all Hume gives us any good reason to believe) in the case at least of the more weighty and realistically reported miracles the love of wonder is quite sufficiently counterbalanced by the love of order, and when the greatest matters are at stake men become the most sober.<sup>68</sup>

The third reason Hume gives to show that “there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence” is the one from ignorant and barbarous nations. “All supernatural and miraculous relations,” says Hume, “are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations ... where the whole frame of nature is disjointed, and every element performs its operations in a different manner, from what it does at present.”<sup>69</sup> To this, Jenkins offers the following rejoinder:

It is difficult to see how Hume can have the right to generalise in this fashion.... [E]ven if most miracles were reported by “ignorant and barbarous” people, the inference that their reporting is unreliable is contestable. It might be said that ignorant people, just by virtue of lacking “civilised” inhibitions, are more reliable witnesses than educated people.<sup>70</sup>

Colwell offers his own rejoinder, too:

In a very broad inductive generalization Hume appears to have said [this].... [But] how did Hume know that the love of wonderful events decreases in direct proportion to the enlightenment of a nation? ... If we take a thoughtful look around us we shall in fact see an age which is an excellent counter-example to Hume’s thesis ... that the love of wonder has decreased proportionately with the enlightenment of our society.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Johnson 79.

<sup>69</sup> *Enquiry* 176.

<sup>70</sup> Jenkins 189–190.

<sup>71</sup> Colwell 12, 14.

So does Johnson:

We are given no reason to suppose that even "ignorant and barbarous" Jews would not have known the difference between a corpse and a dinner guest, or that they would have been any less skilled in establishing the reality of a dinner guest than were the wise and civilized Gentiles of Athens or Rome.<sup>72</sup>

### Fundamental Problems Again

So we see three of the four reasons Hume has for thinking that "there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence." Accordingly, we see what Hume thinks is "requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men."<sup>73</sup> What we see, of course, will not be a problem for myself or for any other believer in biblical miracles; for we know that all of it is based directly on ABS and indirectly on CF. And since CF is self-referentially incoherent, we have no reason for thinking that ABS is true. Thus, we have no reason for accepting the three reasons and thinking that we are foolish, irrational, irresponsible, unreasonable, doing something wrong, or what have you, if we believe in testimonies to biblical miracles.

By way of conclusion: Hume's reasons for (i) rejecting testimonies to the miraculous, (ii) accepting extraordinary events if (and only if) they are analogous to so many of our past experiences, and (iii) why there never has been a miracle "established on so full an evidence," are based on ABS. ABS, however, is based on CF, a principle I have shown to be problematic in that it fails to fulfill itself; and since CF is to be rejected, ABS is also to be rejected, as well as Hume's reasons for (i), (ii), and (iii). It is clear,

<sup>72</sup> Johnson 80. Or, as Nathan, a friend of mine, has remarked, we are given no reason to suppose that "ignorant and barbarous" Jews would not have known what a virgin birth is.

<sup>73</sup> *Enquiry* 174.

then, that we may believe in a testimony to some biblical miracle and not necessarily be going against common sense. In fact, we may very well be justified. Besides showing these things in this essay, I also hope to have given a worthwhile, if not formidable, response to what Hume fancies to be an “everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion.”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

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