*Religious Studies* **45**, 325–338 © 2009 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0034412509009962 Printed in the United Kingdom

# Interpreting Hume on miracles

ROBERT A. LARMER

*Department of Philosophy, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada E3B 5A3*
*e-mail: rlarmer@unb.ca*

**Abstract:** **Contemporary commentators on Hume's essay, 'Of miracles' have increasingly tended to argue that Hume never intended to suggest that testimonial evidence must always be insufficient to justify belief in a miracle. This is in marked contrast to earlier commentators who interpreted Hume as intending to demonstrate that testimonial evidence is incapable in principle of ever establishing rational belief in a miracle. In this article I argue that this traditional interpretation is the correct one.**

Antony Flew's *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*,[1] published more than forty years ago, seems in retrospect to mark a watershed in the interpretation of Hume's essay, 'Of miracles'. Since that time, commentators have increasingly tended to argue that it was never Hume's intention to suggest that testimonial evidence is incapable, even in principle, of justifying rational belief in miracles.

Robert Fogelin provides a typical example of this tendency in his recent *A Defense of Hume on Miracles*, where he insists that Hume's intention was not to demonstrate that, no matter its quality, testimonial evidence must always be judged insufficient to establish rational belief in the miracles, but rather that the actual testimonial evidence available is not sufficient to justify such belief. In his introduction he writes,

> My exposition of Hume's position concerning miracles turns crucially on rejecting what I take to be two common misreadings of the text … . The first misreading is that, in part 1 of his essay on miracles, Hume maintains that no testimony could ever be sufficient to establish the occurrence of a miracle. Hume does not say this in part 1. Indeed, Hume *nowhere* assets this … . The second common misreading of the text is that in part 1 Hume presents what he takes to be an a priori argument sufficient by itself to establish his fundamental theses concerning the status of testimony in behalf of miracles [emphasis in the original].[2]

Fogelin concludes his book with the assertion that for Hume 'no matter of fact can be established a priori, it [therefore] remains an open, though remote,



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

possibility that testimony could establish the occurrence of a miracle'.[3] Similarly, John Earman, a far from friendly critic, maintains that Hume did not intend to suggest that testimonial evidence can never be sufficient to ground the credibility of a miracle, although he claims that the text is ambiguous enough to allow such a reading.[4]

The tendency to interpret Hume in this manner is in marked contrast to earlier commentators. Prior to Flew, there was widespread agreement among both friends and critics of the essay that its purpose is to provide an argument whereby testimonial evidence for the occurrence of miracles can be dismissed without examining the particulars of any case. George Campbell, whom Hume recognized as one of his most capable critics, wrote that Hume's intention is 'to prove, that miracles which have not been the objects of our own senses, at least such as are said to have been performed in attestation of any religious system, cannot reasonably be admitted by us, or believed on the testimony of others'.[5] Somewhat later, C.D. Broad expressed the consensus of opinion that existed prior to Flew, when he wrote that the goal of Hume's essay is to demonstrate that 'we have never the right to believe in any alleged miracle however strong the testimony for it may be'.[6]

Popular though they have become, interpretations of the essay which claim that it was never Hume's intention to disallow the theoretical possibility of justifying belief in miracles on the basis of testimonial evidence appear fundamentally mistaken. There are two mutually supporting lines of evidence, one direct and one indirect, which demonstrate that such interpretations are not tenable.

First, at the direct level, it seems clear that earlier commentators were correct in discerning in Part I of the essay an argument that testimonial evidence is in principle insufficient to justify belief in the occurrence of a miracle, and that there is therefore no need to consider the details of any reported instance of a miracle before rejecting it as providing insufficient evidence to warrant belief. To avoid suspicion of eisegesis the argument is given in Hume's own words:[7]

(1) Experience [is] our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact. (144)

(2) It must be acknowledged that this guide [experience] is not altogether infallible but in some cases is apt to lead us into errors. (144)

(3) A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event. In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: He weighs the opposite experiments: He considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: to that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgement, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call *probability*. (144–145)

(4) [I]t is evident that we ought not to make an exception to this maxim in favour of human testimony, whose connexion with any event seems, in itself, as little necessary as any other. (145)

(5) A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. (148)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(6) [Since] a firm and unalterable experience has established 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 imagined. (148)

(7) [Thus there is] a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior. (148)

(8) [Therefore] no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force which remains, after deducting the inferior. (148)

Commentators following Flew have made much of the fact that Hume does not explicitly draw the conclusion that testimonial evidence could never be sufficiently strong to justify belief in miracles. Given that he nowhere explicitly states such a conclusion, and given that he sets out in the final paragraph of Part I the conditions under which belief in a miracle would be justified, namely that the falsehood of the testimony would be more miraculous than the event related, they contend that earlier commentators were wrong to interpret Hume in the way they did.

This seems disingenuous, however. It can hardly have escaped Hume's notice that it follows from what he has claimed that testimonial evidence is incapable even in principle of establishing the occurrence of a miracle. To claim that '*the proof against a miracle … is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined*' (emphasis added) (148), and that '*such a proof* [cannot] *be destroyed or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior*' (emphasis added) (148), does not allow the possibility of establishing a miracle on the basis of testimonial evidence, since there is no way, even in theory, that one could trump a proof against a miracle which 'is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined'. The most a proponent of belief in miracle might hope for, even supposing she could produce an entirely convincing proof of a miracle, is a mutual destruction of arguments, i.e. a suspension of belief one way or another.[8] Hume, of course, is not unaware that this conclusion must follow, but with typical irony, and what Flew terms 'mischievous modesty',[9] he suggests that belief could be justified if, *per impossibile*, the evidence for a miracle could exceed the evidence against it.

Fogelin makes this point very clearly when, in an article entitled 'What Hume actually said about miracles', he writes that

> … it would be altogether wrong, in fact would miss the whole drift of Hume's argument, to read this passage [the last paragraph of Part I] as leaving open the possibility that the falsehood of the testimony just might, on some occasion, be *more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish***.** Hume surely expects us to remember the claim made only a paragraph earlier that *the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined* [Fogelin's emphasis].[10]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Indeed, Fogelin goes further and asserts that Hume's claim that there could never be sufficient testimonial evidence to establish a miracle derives from a stronger and more basic claim that miracles cannot occur. He writes that,

> … it is important to see that Hume describes this thesis concerning testimony as *the plain consequence* of some other thesis, and that other thesis can only be the one just stated, namely that there is *a direct and full proof from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.* Thus, contrary to the traditional reading, the text contains both a thesis denying the existence of miracles and a thesis denying the credibility of testimony in favour of miracles, and Hume explicitly describes the latter as a *consequence* of the former [Fogelin's emphasis].[11]

It is surprising, therefore, that in his more recent *A Defense of Hume on Miracles*, Fogelin asserts that Hume did not intend to disallow the 'possibility that testimony could establish the occurrence of a miracle',[12] without making any attempt to explain the basis upon which he would reject his earlier claims concerning the essay's intent.

A stronger reason for questioning the traditional interpretation of the essay appears to be the existence of Part II. If the argument of Part I was intended to demonstrate that testimonial evidence is in principle incapable of grounding rational belief in miracles, why include Part II, in which Hume argues that the actual testimonial evidence is very poor? Following Flew's lead in raising this question, Chris Slupik provides a typical example of this criticism of the traditional interpretation when he writes,

> … if Hume shows in Part I that it is impossible in principle for testimony to warrant belief in a miracle, then it is irrelevant how strong the testimony is, and Part II is superfluous. A two-part essay in which the second, lengthier part is superfluous is not what we expect from a philosopher and writer of Hume's calibre. Let us seek another interpretation that does not render Part II of Hume's essay superfluous.[13]

It is one thing to note that the principle of charity requires that the possibility of such an interpretation of the essay be explored; quite another, however, to demonstrate that the text permits such an interpretation. There are a number of reasons to think that it does not.

First, as J.C.A. Gaskin notes, 'it is as clear as anything could be that in his own person Hume strenuously and totally disbelieved in miracles'.[14] Although Gaskin attempts to defend Flew's claim that the intent of the argument of Part I is only to demonstrate that 'the wise man will require more evidence than usual' if a miracle claim is to be accepted,[15] he nevertheless recognizes that Hume makes far stronger claims than this in the essay. Gaskin asserts that such claims are 'occasional extravagances', inconsistent with the main thrust of Hume's argument.[16] His motive for regarding such claims as 'occasional extravagances' and insisting on Flew's reading is that if the traditional interpretation is correct, the argument of Part I leads to 'dogmatic obscurantism' regarding the rationality of belief in miracles.[17] The desire to save Hume from the charge of 'dogmatic obscurantism'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is understandable, but it cannot be allowed to eclipse the question of whether the interpretation of the text being proposed is justified. What Gaskin is inclined to call 'occasional extravagances' seem more an expression of settled opinion than mere slips of the pen.

Second, Hume originally conceived of the argument of Part I at some time between 1735 and 1737, during his sojourn in France. There is good reason to think that he viewed it as dealing a decisive blow to orthodox Christian apologetics, in the sense that it demonstrated that belief in miracles could never be justified on the basis of testimony.[18] It appears that Hume's original intention was to publish it in the *Treatise*, but, fearing it would prove too controversial and perhaps undermine acceptance of the *Treatise*, he decided to leave it out. The arguments of Part II are less original than the argument of Part I. They were 'stock-in-trade' objections used in the English debates that Hume wished to contribute to at the time of writing the *Enquiry*. We have, in the essay, material that was put together over a considerable span of time in both French and English contexts. Given the essay's muddled history and the disparate cultural contexts out of which it evolved, any insistence that it presents a unified structure in which the various elements form a coherent and harmonious whole deserves to be questioned.

Third, in the period between when he first conceived the argument of Part I and its appearance in print, Hume, despite his faith in its decisiveness, became aware that not all critics would find it persuasive. Part II seems to be both a response to those who would refuse to accept his 'in principle' argument of Part I and, at certain points, a reluctant recognition on Hume's part that demonstrating the decisiveness of the argument might not be quite so simple a matter as he first thought.

Fourth, there may also have been certain stylistic concerns motivating the inclusion of Part II. R. M. Burns notes that 'its inclusion may … have been motivated in part simply by a desire to lengthen the essay on the stylistic grounds that the unsupplemented argument of Part I might otherwise appear too short and sharp to be taken seriously by many readers'.[19] Also, as already mentioned, Hume desired to contribute to the English debate on miracles and may have wanted to include the popular a posteriori arguments that featured large in the debate.

That Hume, however, continued to regard the argument of Part I as decisive is evidenced by the fact that in Part II he several times appeals to it in a way that implies he regarded it as ruling out the possibility of belief in miracles on testimonial grounds. It thus seems that, although he was convinced that the argument in Part I of the essay rules out miracles *tout court*, Hume wished to respond to critics who disagreed with the decisiveness of his argument. Demonstrating an impatience that the topic of belief in miracles should even enter into rational discussion, he takes himself, in Part II, to be making the point that, even if his opponents are not convinced of his 'in principle' argument of Part I, the actual

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

evidence supporting belief in miracles is more worthy of ridicule than serious discussion.[20]

Whatever the explanation of Part II, it is clear that throughout it there are a number of comments which presuppose the argument of Part I understood as establishing the impossibility of grounding belief in miracles on the basis of testimony. Early in Part II, Hume straightforwardly identifies the miraculous with the utterly absurd (150), and shortly thereafter asserts that those who are wise and learned are justified in deriding a report of a miracle as absurd, 'without informing themselves of the particular facts by which it may be distinctly refuted' (153). Evidently, in Hume's view the fact that a reported event is a miracle makes rational justification of belief in its occurrence impossible. Detailed examination of apparent evidence in its favour is, therefore, unnecessary. Given there can never, even in principle, be enough positive evidence to justify belief in a miracle, reports of miracles should be rejected out of hand as absurd

An even clearer example of the fact that Hume takes himself to have demonstrated that testimonial evidence can never be sufficient to ground belief in miracles is found in his discussion of the Jansenist miracles. In the first argument of Part II Hume informs us that,

> … 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. (150)

Later, however, when he comes to consider the Jansenist miracles, he writes that,

> … many of the miracles were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age, and on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world. Nor is this all: a relation of them was published and dispersed every where; nor were the *Jesuits*, though a learned body, supported by the civil magistrate, and determined enemies to those opinions, in whose favour the miracles were said to have been wrought, ever able distinctly to refute or detect them. Where shall we find such a number of circumstances, agreeing to the corroboration of one fact? (157)

If Hume intended to leave open the possibility that testimonial evidence might be sufficient to establish a miracle, one would expect him to argue that the requirements he set out in the first argument of Part II have not really been met in the case of the Jansenist miracles. He does not, however, argue that the evidence is less strong than it first appears. Rather we find him asserting, 'what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate? And this surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation' (157–158).[21]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Short of simply making a dogmatic assertion that miracles cannot occur, Hume must be taken as justifying this claim on the basis of his argument in Part I, understood as precluding the possibility that there could ever exist sufficient testimonial evidence for a miracle.

Fogelin rejects this conclusion. He notes that later in the essay Hume writes,

> I beg the limitations here made may be remarked, when I say, that a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion. For I own, that otherwise, there may possibly be miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony; … . (163)

Fogelin then notes that Hume follows this with an example of a non-religious 'miracle'.

> Suppose 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: suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: that all travellers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction: it is evident, that our present philosophers, 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 phenomenon, which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform. (163)

Fogelin holds that the point of Hume's remark and subsequent example is to demonstrate that 'even if the standards for testimony in behalf of miracles are high, they remain, in principle, satisfiable'.[22]

Fogelin fails to mention, however, that Hume immediately follows this account of a non-religious miracle with an account of another non-religious miracle, which, even with testimony that is in principle as extensive as that in his preceding example, he would refuse to accept.

> Suppose, that all the historians who treat of England, should agree, that, on the first of January 1600, Queen Elizabeth died; that both before and after her death she was seen by her physicians and the whole court, as is usual with persons of her rank; that her successor was acknowledged and proclaimed by the parliament; and that, after being interred a month, she again appeared, resumed the throne, and governed England for three years: I must confess that I should be surprised at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances, but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. I should not doubt of her pretended death, and of those other public circumstances that followed it: I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was, nor possibly could be real … . The knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence, than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature. (163–164)

What is the difference between these two cases, that Hume would treat them so differently?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The answer seems to lie in the distinction Hume felt compelled to draw between a marvel and a miracle. A criticism of his argument that appears to have concerned Hume is that it is unreasonable to insist that one's uniform personal experience should inevitably trump the testimony of others. His concern to deal with this criticism seems to be what motivated Hume in the 1750 second edition, to include a discussion of Locke's well-known example of the Indian prince (147). This concern also seems to be responsible for the inclusion of the 'I beg the limitations here made' passage that we are examining. The essay was first published in 1748, but this passage was only incorporated into the main body of the text in 1768, previously appearing as a lengthy footnote.[23]

Hume attempts to deal with this criticism by drawing a distinction between miracles, events which are contrary to experience, and marvels, events which are not conformable to experience. In the case of the Indian prince, the fact that water can become solid is not conformable to his experience in the sense that it is foreign to anything he has personally experienced, but it is not contrary to his experience in the sense that he has no experience of how water behaves under different causal conditions than those with which he is acquainted. Given his lack of experience of how water behaves under these different conditions, and given sufficient testimonial evidence, he is justified in believing that water can become solid.

Hume's aim seems to be to distinguish between unusual events which can be viewed as having a natural, though unknown, explanation, from unusual events that require a supernatural explanation. The first class of events he calls marvels and holds that testimonial evidence is capable of justifying belief in their existence; the second class of events he calls miracles and denies that testimonial evidence is capable of justifying belief in their existence. It is dubious that this distinction will do the work Hume wants it to, but that is not an issue that need be explored in the context of the present discussion. Justifiably or not, it is clear that Hume holds that testimony is capable of establishing the occurrence of a marvel, but not of a miracle.

It is this distinction which explains his different treatment of the examples of eight days of darkness and the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth. In the case of the eight days of darkness, it is clear that Hume would regard its occurrence as what he terms a marvel. This is demonstrated by his comment 'our present philosophers … ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived' (163). His use of the plural 'causes' demonstrates that Hume has in mind natural causes and that by 'philosopher' he means natural philosopher or scientist.[24] The suggestion that scientists should search for the natural causes of an event that, by definition, is supernaturally caused makes no sense and reveals that despite his loose use of language, Hume would not view such an event as a genuine miracle, but rather as an unusual event with a natural explanation. As Flew notes, anyone who after admitting that some marvellous event had taken place still insisted on

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

proceeding to search for its causes would thereby reveal that he did not really concede it to have been genuinely miraculous: 'For a genuinely miraculous event … would … have … no natural causes'.[25]

Further to be noted is that Hume would be prepared to accept the testimony for the eight days of darkness only on the basis that such an event is analogous to other events produced by natural causes, as evidenced by his comment that,

> … the decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature, is an event rendered probable by so many analogies, [i.e. our experience of how natural causes operate] that any phenomenon, which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform. (163)

In the case of the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth, however, Hume does regard such an event as a miracle; remarking earlier in the essay, 'it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country' (148). It is precisely on the basis that he would regard it as a genuine miracle, rather than an unusual natural event, that he denies the possibility of there ever existing sufficient testimonial evidence to establish its occurrence.

Fogelin is wrong, therefore, to claim that 'the point of Hume's example of the eight days of total darkness [is to demonstrate that] even if the standards for testimony in behalf of miracles are high, they remain, in principle, satisfiable'.[26] Taken in conjunction with the example of the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth, its point is to demonstrate exactly the opposite; namely that, although it might prove sufficient to justify belief in marvels, testimonial evidence could never be sufficiently strong to justify belief in miracles. Far from undermining the traditional reading of the argument of Part I as precluding the possibility of justifying belief in miracles on the basis of testimonial evidence, Hume's discussion of the eight days of darkness and Queen Elizabeth's resurrection reinforces this reading of the argument. Contrary to Fogelin, it provides good reason to think that Hume's dismissal of the Jansenist miracles is based on his view that he has already shown in Part I the impossibility of establishing a rational belief in miracles by means of testimony.

It thus seems clear that when, in reference to the Jansensist miracles, Hume asserts 'what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events they relate', he is claiming that either such events are miracles, in which case it is impossible to believe they occurred, or, if they did occur they are not miracles; but marvels, that is to say, unusual and poorly understood natural events. Leaving aside the suspicion that Hume seems to be employing a 'heads I win, tails you lose' strategy regarding the possibility of viewing an unusual event as a miracle, it is clear that he did want to claim that rational belief in genuinely miraculous events is an impossibility. Unless one wishes to charge him with simply being dogmatic, this requires

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reading the argument of Part I as intending to demonstrate the impossibility of testimony justifying belief in miracles.

We have seen that Fogelin's and others' attempts to argue that Hume never intended in Part I of the essay to rule out the possibility of justifying belief in miracles on the basis of testimonial evidence fail. A more subtle attempt to read the essay as providing a complete argument in which Part I and Part II form a coherent whole is to argue that, although Hume does not in Part I allow the possibility that testimonial evidence could ever justify rational belief in a miracle, he does allow the possibility that testimonial evidence could, in principle, be sufficiently strong that one should suspend judgment. Thus, faced with impeccable testimony for an event that violates the laws of nature, and with uniform experience that such an event never occurs, one should recognize the counterpoise of conflicting bodies of evidence and suspend both belief and disbelief in the alleged miracle. On this reading, Part II of the essay is intended to demonstrate that there has never in fact existed such a body of impeccable evidence and thus the suspension of disbelief in the occurrence of miracles is only a theoretical possibility, not a genuine option.[27]

Attractive though such a reading might be, the text does not support it. Hume speaks of the laws of nature as based on unalterable experience. Leaving aside the fact that in using the word 'unalterable' Hume is at odds with his account of induction, and leaving aside the worry that he is begging the question by defining miracles as violations, that is to say exceptions, to exceptionless laws, he must be taken as claiming that we have never experienced an exception to the laws of nature. We do know, however, that testimony is not invariably reliable, inasmuch as a testifier may be deceived himself or a deceiver. So, when faced with a miracle claim, one must 'immediately … consider … whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened' (149). Given that we know that testimony is not always reliable, and given that we have never experienced violation of the laws of nature, it is impossible in principle that testimonial evidence for miracles could ever be of the same weight as the evidence for the laws of nature. Only if this impossibility could be overcome, would the suspension of belief/disbelief come into play.[28]

Further, his treatment of the Jansensist miracles is contrary to the suggestion that suspension of belief/disbelief was considered a genuine theoretical option by Hume. After commenting that these miracles,

> … were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age, and on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world [and that] the *Jesuits*, though a learned body, supported by the civil magistrate, and determined enemies to those opinions, in whose favour the miracles were said to have been wrought, ever able distinctly to refute or detect them,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and remarking 'where shall we find such a number of circumstances, agreeing to the corroboration of one fact?' (157), Hume goes on to say 'what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate?' (157). Unless one is prepared to take Hume's remark as a dogmatic denial that miracles can never occur, it must be taken as a reversion to his argument of Part I, understood in the sense that it precludes anything but disbelief in the occurrence of miracles.

Yet further to be noted is that prior to the 1768 edition of the *Enquiry*, the paragraph in Part II which now begins, 'Upon the whole, then, it appears that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less a proof' did not contain the phrase 'has ever amounted' (163), but rather read 'no Testimony for any kind of miracle can ever possibly amount to a Probability, much less to a Proof'. In the interval between the initial formulation of the argument of Part I in France and the final edition of the essay, Hume may have become reluctantly aware that criticisms could be raised against the argument, but his faith in its decisiveness is evidenced by the fact that, when challenged with what seems strong testimony for a miracle, he falls back on his claim that the evidence against a miracle must always trump the testimonial evidence in its favour.

We have been dealing directly with the text, but there are also indirect indications that Hume takes his argument of Part I to provide an insurmountable obstacle to accepting accounts of miracle or suspending disbelief in miracles. Several lines of evidence lend support to the reading of the text that has been defended. It is unfortunate that a great number of interpreters of the essay ignore this body of evidence.[29]

First, we have in the form of two letters Hume wrote, one to Henry Home dated 2 December 1737, the other to George Campbell dated 7 June 1762, evidence regarding the origin of the essay. In the Home letter of 1737, Hume notes that he is enclosing 'some reasoning concerning miracles', but that he is not going to include these reasonings in his *Treatise on Human Nature* for fear of giving offence to readers.[30] In the Campbell letter of 1762, Hume writes of the argument of the essay as occurring to him while 'walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits' College at La Flèche … and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning'.[31] Hume stayed at La Flèche between 1735 and 1737 and his *Treatise on Human Nature* was completed by the end of 1737, though not published until the beginning of 1739. There seems, then, good reason to think that what Hume conceived to be the main argument of the essay existed in written form by 1737.[32]

There is also good reason to think that Hume understands the argument spoken of in the Campbell letter as the argument of Part I, taken in the traditional sense of demonstrating the impossibility of establishing a miracle on the basis of testimony. Hume speaks of the argument not of arguments, which suggests that he has the argument of Part I in mind, rather than the four arguments of Part II.[33]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Further, in the Campbell letter, Hume writes with evident pride that his argument 'very much gravelled' his Jesuit companion.[34] This strongly suggests that, at least originally, Hume regarded the argument of Part I as simple in structure; not needing support by supplementary arguments, and as decisive; destroying at one blow any argument from miracles.

Second, although the existence of Part II may signal a response to anticipated criticisms,[35] the pride Hume so clearly took in the essay supports reading the argument of Part I as intending to demonstrate the impossibility of rational belief in miracles. This pride is evident not only in the Home and Campbell letters, but also in the phrasing of the essay itself, and in Hume's later refusal to engage in serious discussion of criticisms of his argument.[36] This pride is difficult to explain if Hume only took himself to be making the point that a greater degree and quality of testimonial evidence are required to justify belief in a miracle than is the case for ordinary non miraculous events. This was a point already granted by orthodox apologists such as Sherlock.[37] Add to this the fact that each of Hume's four arguments of Part II was well known and far from original to Hume and it becomes a mystery why Hume would display such pride in the presumed originality and decisiveness of the essay.

Third, it is significant that all the responses made to the essay during Hume's lifetime took him to be arguing the impossibility of testimony justifying belief in miracles, but Hume never suggested that these critics misunderstood the intent of the essay. Philip Skelton's *Opiomaches or Deism Revealed*[38] contains the first published reply to the essay and takes it as attempting to demonstrate that belief in miracles can never be rational, yet Hume as the publisher's reader recommended publication of Skelton's manuscript.[39] Similarly, Campbell in his *Dissertation on Miracles*, takes Hume to be arguing for an in-principle rejection of establishing belief in miracles on the basis of testimony. Hume accepted an invitation to respond to Campbell, but at no point in criticizing Campbell does he claim that Campbell has misunderstood what the argument of the essay is intended to establish. Hume's silence is inexplicable if he felt that all his respondents fundamentally missed the point of the essay, but makes good sense if, as is evident from considerations already discussed, he did intend to assert that no amount of testimonial evidence could be sufficient to justify accepting a miracle report.

It seems, therefore, that the insistence of Flew and many later commentators that Hume never intended to disallow the possibility of justifying rational belief in miracles on the basis of testimonial evidence is mistaken. Both direct and indirect lines of evidence strongly indicate otherwise. This is not to suggest that Hume was unaware of possible criticisms of the argument of Part I or that he made no attempt to respond to such criticisms. Thus, for example, we find him including in the 1750 second edition of the *Enquiry* a discussion of Locke's Indian prince example, in an effort to deal with the objection that his argument may prove too

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

much by automatically ruling out the acceptance of any events foreign to one's personal experience. It is to assert that he never ceased to view the argument of Part I as decisively demonstrating the impossibility of establishing rational belief in miracles by means of testimony.

The fact that the argument taken in this manner is vulnerable to a number of serious objections, not least of which, to use Gaskin's phrase, is the charge of 'dogmatic obscurantism',[40] should not cause commentators to insist that Hume cannot have meant what he so clearly claims. When, for example, Gaskin writes that 'in off-duty moments … [Hume] seems to want to use'[41] the argument of Part I as establishing the impossibility of rational belief in miracles, but that these are 'occasional extravagances'[42] that do not express Hume's considered view, it is hard to escape the impression that he, like many other commentators is trying to make Hume claim what he thinks Hume should claim, rather than what Hume does claim. It is important to read the text in light of the principle of charity, but that principle provides no brief for fundamentally altering the intent of the author.[43]

## Notes

1. Antony Flew *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).
2. Robert J. Fogelin *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 2.
3. *Ibid.*, 62.
4. John Earman *Hume's Abject Failure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21–22.
5. George C. Campbell *A Dissertation on Miracles* (Edinburgh: Kincaid and Bell, 1762), 7–8.
6. C. D. Broad 'Hume's theory of the credibility of miracles', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, **17** (1916–1917), 80.
7. David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Antony Flew (ed.) (La Salle IL: Open Court Publishing, 1988). All in-text references are to this work.
8. Chris Slupik, in his article 'A new interpretation of Hume's ''Of Miracles''', *Religious Studies*, **31** (1995), 517–536, 528, makes much of the fact 'that a proof, in Hume's sense of the term, can have a false conclusion: it is possible, and it sometimes happens, that one has a proof of a statement, and then one discovers a stronger proof for its negation, in which case the stronger proof ''destroys'' the weaker proof'. Granting this, however, does not support Slupik's claim that Hume intended to allow the possibility of establishing a miracle on the basis of testimony. Hume is explicit that the proof against a miracle is a direct and full proof, based on 'firm and unalterable experience' that 'is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined' and cannot be overcome except by 'an opposite proof, which is superior' (Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 148). To establish his claim, Slupik needs to show how such an opposite superior proof is possible, but he never does this. His citation of Hume's eight days of darkness depends upon the questionable assumption that Hume regards such an event as a genuine miracle rather than a 'marvel'. Even if it were to be granted that Hume proposed this as an example of a miracle that should be accepted, it does not explain how Hume could consistently say this given his earlier remarks
9. Flew *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 171.
10. Robert J. Fogelin 'What Hume actually said about miracles', *Hume Studies*, **16** (1990), 84.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Idem Defense of Hume on Miracles*, 62.
13. Slupik 'New interpretation of Hume's ''Of Miracles''', 519.
14. J.C.A. Gaskin *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 122.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press

15. *Ibid.*, 115.
16. *Ibid.*, 120.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Note that Hume speaks of the argument not of arguments, which suggests that he has the argument of Part I in mind, rather than the four arguments of Part II; R. M. Burns *The Great Debate on Miracles* (London: Associated University Presses, 1981), 140. Further, in a letter to George Campbell, Hume writes that his argument 'very much gravelled' his Jesuit companion'; David Hume *Letters of David Hume*, J. Y. T. Greig (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), I, 361. This suggests that Hume regarded the argument of Part I as simple in structure; not needing support by supplementary arguments, and as decisive; destroying at one blow any argument from miracles
19. Burns *Great Debate on Miracles*, 157.
20. Critics such as Fogelin and Slupik typically suggest that if Hume viewed himself as providing an 'in principle' argument against the possibility of miracles, he would not have made remarks concerning the degree and quality of evidence supporting miracles. This is scarcely evident, however. For example, many critics who view the intelligent design movement as in principle unscientific, nevertheless make claims concerning the degree and quality of the evidence cited by intelligent design advocates. There seems no reason to think that Hume would not do likewise as regards the issue of miracle.
21. Regarding Hume's citing of the Jansenist miracles, Slupik makes the claim that on Hume's view the only justification for accepting testimony is a positive record of past experience: testimony in the relevant circumstances – unique historical event, unreplicable, beyond the known power of human beings or unassisted natural causes, not publicly verifiable, made the basis of a new religion, sect, or doctrine – has a terrible record. It is therefore irrational to accept testimony in those circumstances. Since the Jansenist witnesses testified in those circumstances, it is irrational to accept their testimony; Slupik 'New interpretation of Hume's ''Of Miracles''', 535. This, however, is to ignore Hume's explicit remark that the Jansenist miracles are to be rejected on the basis that they are either absolutely impossible or cannot be regarded as genuinely miraculous. It is noteworthy that, in citing Hume's remarks concerning the Jansenist miracles, Slupik omits this key part of the passage.
22. Fogelin *Defense of Hume on Miracles*, 31.
23. Burns *Great Debate on Miracles*, 156.
24. *Ibid.*, 149.
25. Flew *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 200.
26. Fogelin *Defense of Hume on Miracles* 31.
27. I am indebted to an anonymous referee for pointing out this possible reading.
28. I do not mean to claim that Hume is treating probability and assessment of testimonial evidence properly, only that this was his view. As John Earman has argued in *Hume's Abject Failure*, Hume's treatment of probability and testimonial evidence is open to criticism.
29. Fogelin and Slupik, for example, make no mention of this evidence.
30. David Hume *New Letters of David Hume*, R. Klibansky and E. Mossner (eds), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 2–3.
31. Hume *Letters of David Hume*, I, 361.
32. Burns *Great Debate on Miracles*, 140.
33. *Ibid.*, 133.
34. Hume *Letters of David Hume*, I, 361.
35. Burns *Great Debate on Miracles*, 140, 154–158.
36. *Ibid.*, 155, 158.
37. Thomas Sherlock *The Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus*, 1st edn (London, 1729), 8th edn (London, 1736), 62.
38. Philip Skelton, *Opiomaches or Deism Revealed* (London, 1749), II, 15.
39. E. A. Mossner *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 232.
40. Gaskin *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 115.
41. *Ibid.*, 113.
42. *Ibid.*, 120.
43. I am indebted to the perceptive critical comments of an anonymous referee for this journal.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509009962 Published online by Cambridge University Press