

University of Windsor

## Scholarship at UWindor

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Theses, Dissertations, and Major Papers

---

1994

### Hume, miracle reports, and credibility (David Hume).

Hendrik. van der Breggen  
*University of Windsor*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd>

---

#### Recommended Citation

van der Breggen, Hendrik., "Hume, miracle reports, and credibility (David Hume)." (1994). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2333.  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/2333>

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email ([scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca)) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.



National Library  
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services Branch

Direction des acquisitions et  
des services bibliographiques

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0N4

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa (Ontario)  
K1A 0N4

*Your file - Votre référence*

*Our file - Notre référence*

## NOTICE

## AVIS

The quality of this microform is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

La qualité de cette microforme dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

Reproduction in full or in part of this microform is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30, and subsequent amendments.

La reproduction, même partielle, de cette microforme est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30, et ses amendements subséquents.

Canada

**HUME, MIRACLE REPORTS, AND CREDIBILITY**

by

**Hendrik van der Breggen  
B.A., University of Calgary, 1990**

**A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through the Department of Philosophy  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at  
The University of Windsor**

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada**

**1994**



National Library  
of Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et  
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa (Ontario)  
K1A 0N4

Author: *[illegible]*

Title: *[illegible]*

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-315-93319-4

© Hendrik van der Breggen 1994

## ABSTRACT

### HUME, MIRACLE REPORTS, AND CREDIBILITY

by  
Hendrik van der Breggen

The purpose of this thesis is to gain an accurate appreciation of the force of David Hume's arguments against reasonable belief in the truth of miracle reports (in particular, reports concerning the alleged resurrection of Jesus).

To avoid the possibility of misrepresenting Hume's arguments, which are found in his essay "Of Miracles," I expend considerable effort in attempting to interpret them fairly and charitably. Because an important claim in Part One of his two-part essay is understood by Hume in private correspondence to mean something significantly different from its obvious meaning; because Hume does not bother to change the claim in any of the multiple editions of the essay; and because each of the meanings allows the argument of Part One to be interpreted differently yet coherently with respect to the arguments of Part Two and with respect to broader contextual considerations: I set out *two* micro-interpretations of the argument of Part One and *two* macro-interpretations of the arguments in "Of Miracles" as a whole. Also, by close attention to the text of Hume's arguments as well as to his understanding of the concepts of proof and probability vis-a-vis the evidence for and against miracle, (1) I show that Hume's argument of Part One centres on the fact that our experience of a miracle is infrequent relative to our experience of the natural law the miracle purports to

violate, and (2) I show that Hume takes our experience of the allegedly-violated natural law as bearing completely, directly, and destructively on the credibility of miracle testimony. I show too that along with his arguments of Part Two, Hume takes the destructive experiential effect of the relative infrequency of a miracle to be a practically insurmountable barrier to the credibility of miracle reports.

In my critique, however, I argue that in Part One of his essay Hume has overestimated the extent of the destructive force arising from a miracle's infrequency, and I argue that the first three of his four arguments of Part Two are for the most part failures when they are directed to my miracle test-case (the alleged resurrection of Jesus). Also, I argue that Hume's last argument is unsuccessful, and I point out that in spite of the last argument's lack of success, it is useful in that it directs attention to the problem of interpreting an alleged miracle as an act of Deity. At the end of the thesis I sketch a solution for the problem of interpreting a miracle.

My overall evaluation: it is not clear that the arguments of "Of Miracles" show us that it is irrational to believe in the truth of miracle reports (especially those reports concerning the test-case).

## DEDICATION

*To my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ*

*Whom I believe to be the only manifestation  
in human flesh and blood--that is, the only  
incarnation--of the only and almighty God,  
the triune God described in the Bible*

*And to those who seek the Fountain of Truth  
for reasons more noble than gargling*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the help of my thesis supervisor, Dr. John P. Wright. Our almost weekly "wrestlings" spawned a more carefully-written thesis than would have been otherwise.

Also, I thank my second and third examining committee members, Dr. Ralph H. Johnson and Dr. J. Norman King, for helpful comments and criticisms. And I thank Professor J. Anthony Blair for serving as chair of my oral defense.

In addition, I thank Professor Marilyn Sutton for relieving me temporarily of some of my duties as her teaching assistant in Reasoning Skills. That precious week without needing to grade assignments allowed me to bring this thesis to near completion.

Finally--and most importantly--I thank my wife, Carla, and our two sons, Abraham and Thomas, for standing by me throughout the preparation of this work. *I love you!*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iv
DEDICATION .....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE: HUME'S EPISTEMOLOGY	
I. A brief overview of Hume's argument in "Of Miracles"; and the need for some conceptual tool-sharpening .....	7
II. Perceptions of the mind: Impressions and ideas .....	9
III. Objects of human reason: Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact .....	12
IV. How we get beyond the evidence of our memory senses: Cause and effect, constant conjunction, and belief--and testimony .....	14
V. Proofs and probabilities .....	24
A. Proofs .....	24
B. Probabilities .....	26
VI. Conclusion .....	29

CHAPTER TWO: HUME'S *A PRIORI* IN-PRINCIPLE ARGUMENT  
OF PART ONE

I. Introduction .....	31
II. The <i>a priori</i> in-principle argument(s) of Part One, in detail .....	32
A. Hume's <i>a priori</i> argument of Part One, according to the Face Value interpretation .....	50
B. Hume's <i>a priori</i> argument of Part One, according to the Blair interpretation .....	56
III. Conclusion .....	59

CHAPTER THREE: AN INTERPRETIVE TRANSITION FROM PART ONE  
TO PART TWO IN HUME'S "OF MIRACLES"

I. The need for an interpretive transition .....	62
II. Hume's fideistic stance .....	63
III. The overall Pyrrhonian-Academic Sceptical (PAS) interpretation .....	69
IV. The overall Extraordinarily Strong Proof Required (ESPR) interpretation .....	72
V. Tying up a loose end: A final justification for the Face Value interpretation of Hume's claim in Part One .....	75
A. Argument 1 .....	77
B. Argument 2 .....	77
C. Argument 3 .....	78
D. Argument 4 .....	79
VI. Conclusion .....	80

CHAPTER FOUR: HUME'S *A POSTERIORI* & *A PRIORI* ARGUMENTS  
OF PART TWO

I. Some preliminary remarks . . . . .	82
II. Hume's three arguments from a posteriori considerations, in detail . . . .	84
A. Some more preliminary remarks . . . . .	84
1. Hume's first argument from <i>a posteriori</i> considerations . . . . .	86
2. Hume's second argument from <i>a posteriori</i> considerations . . . . .	88
3. Hume's third argument from <i>a posteriori</i> considerations . . . . .	91
III. Hume's (second) argument from <i>a priori</i> considerations, i.e., Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument, in detail . . . . .	93
IV. Some additional arguments--against non-apologetic miracles . . . . .	100
V. Hume's conclusions . . . . .	105
VI. Conclusion . . . . .	106

CHAPTER FIVE: A CRITIQUE OF HUME'S ARGUMENTS

I. Introductory remarks . . . . .	108
II. Critique of Hume's <i>a priori</i> in-principle argument(s) of Part One . . . . .	109
A. Hume pits our experience of an allegedly violated law against the testimony for the alleged miracle . . . . .	110
B. What it is exactly that Hume takes to constitute our experience of an allegedly violated law . . . . .	112
C. A thought experiment which shows that Hume's estimate of the destructive force arising from a miracle's infrequency is too strong . . . . .	112

(Chapter Five, continued)

1. A hypothetical situation wherein belief in the testimony for a miracle appears to be rational . . . . .	113
2. The PAS interpretation and rational belief . . . . .	116
3. The ESPR interpretation and rational belief . . . . .	118
4. Epilogue . . . . .	121
III. Critique of Hume's three <i>a posteriori</i> arguments of Part Two . . . . .	122
A. Critique of Hume's first <i>a posteriori</i> argument . . . . .	123
1. No sufficient number is not sufficient for precluding reasonable belief in miracle testimony . . . . .	124
2. Degree of education depends on that to which the testimony testifies . . . . .	125
3. The requirement of social prominence is not necessary . . . . .	128
4. Having lots to lose by lying and being situated in such circumstances that, if lying, exposure would readily result makes for a patently honest witness . . . . .	129
B. Critique of Hume's second and third <i>a posteriori</i> arguments . . . . .	131
C. Conclusion concerning Hume's <i>a posteriori</i> arguments . . . . .	132
IV. Critique of Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument of Part Two . . . . .	134
A. The argument revisited . . . . .	134
B. Four criticisms, and The Problem of Interpretation . . . . .	134
1. Criticism number one . . . . .	134
2. Criticism number two . . . . .	136
3. Criticism number three . . . . .	137

(Chapter Five, continued)

4. Criticism number four .....	137
5. Conclusion concerning Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument, and The Problem of Interpretation .....	139
6. A sketch of how to solve The Problem of Interpretation .....	140
V. Main conclusion .....	144
APPENDIX A: Hume, the Indian prince, and the ice .....	146
APPENDIX B: Hume's arguments of Part One - Summaries .....	153
APPENDIX C: A reconceptualization of miracle .....	163
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	167
VITA AUCTORIS .....	173

## INTRODUCTION

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time....Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me....

Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

Peter, 2 Peter 1:16

A miracle, supported by any human testimony, [is] more properly a subject of derision than of argument.

David Hume, "Of Miracles"

In *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, Anthony Flew remarks that David Hume's essay "Of Miracles" has probably provoked more polemic than any of Hume's

writings.<sup>1</sup> J.C.A. Gaskin, in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, explains the interest in Hume's essay as follows:

To the philosopher "Of Miracles" offers, at the very least, an almost irresistible opportunity to try to distinguish between a miracle, a very unusual event, and an event which provides a falsifying instance of a natural law; to the historian or jurist it offers a fascinating discussion of the credibility of witnesses; to the believing Christian it threatens to demonstrate that no wise man would give any credit to the New Testament miracles; and, which is not now so readily perceived, to an eighteenth-century reader (or to a twentieth-century reader asking questions of the "Who moved the stone?" type) it offers a direct confutation of the crucial argument upon which the rational credibility of the Christian Revelation had been and is still sometimes made to depend, namely, the historical truth of the Resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

My interest in Hume's "Of Miracles" stems primarily from my belief that the historical truth of the resurrection of Jesus *can* be used to show the rational credibility of the Christian Revelation.<sup>3</sup> Like Hume and the general perspective

---

<sup>1</sup>Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 171.

<sup>2</sup>J.C.A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edition (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1978, 1988), p. 135. Gaskin's remark concerning twentieth-century readers asking questions of the "Who moved the stone?" type is an allusion to Frank Morison's book *Who Moved the Stone?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944). In "Science and Christianity: Toward Peaceful Coexistence," James R. Moore points out that "Frank Morison, for one, set out to disprove the resurrection and the sheer facticity of the event drove him to God and thus to answer the only question for which he could not conceivably rationalize an answer, viz., *Who Moved the Stone? . . .*" (in John Warwick Montgomery, ed., *Christianity For The Tough Minded* [Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1973], p. 87n).

<sup>3</sup>I believe the resurrection of Jesus--if it can be reasonably believed--goes some distance to substantiate the claim that God exists and hence Jesus' claims to be God. (For a reconciliation of the apparent logical contradiction inherent in the



of the 18th century, I understand the New Testament descriptions of Jesus' resurrection, or rising from the dead, in a literal and physical way as opposed to a figurative, non-physical way. (Note: This is not to say that I take the *whole* of the New Testament in literal terms; rather, I take those parts of the New Testament that are clearly literal to be literal and I take those parts that are clearly figurative to be figurative--and I either suspend judgment or proportion my belief in accordance to the direction and force of the reasons that can be produced one way or the other in those parts of the New Testament that are neither clearly literal nor clearly figurative.) Although my approach to Jesus' resurrection can also be described as coming from an evangelical Christian perspective (as opposed to a "liberal" interpretive perspective), I believe my approach is (unlike the liberal interpretive perspective) justified by the relevant New Testament texts, and I believe one need not be an evangelical Christian believer to appreciate the textual justification for this literal understanding.<sup>4</sup> Like Antony Flew (and Gary

---

proposition that Jesus is fully human as well as fully God, see Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* [Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1986]; for a defense of the thesis that Jesus claimed to be God, see William Lane Craig, *Apologetics: An Introduction* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1984], pp. 154-166, and see Josh McDowell & Bart Larson, *Jesus: A Biblical Defense of His Deity* [San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1983].)

<sup>4</sup>For examples of presentations of some non-evangelical, non-literal perspectives concerning the resurrection of Jesus, see: Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976); and Monika Hellwig, *Jesus, the Compassion of God: New Perspectives on the tradition of Christianity* (Wilmington, Delaware: M. Glazier, 1983). For some defenses of the evangelical perspective concerning the resurrection of Jesus, see: Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Norman L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson

Habermas), I believe "that the question whether, in that literal understanding, Jesus did rise from the dead is of supreme theoretical and practical importance."<sup>5</sup>

Why? Because, as Flew adds,

the knowable fact that he did [resurrect], if indeed it is a knowable fact, is the best, if not the only, reason for accepting that Jesus is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis, then, is a step in coming personally to grips with what Gaskin calls Hume's "direct confutation," i.e., Hume's arguments against the credibility of testimony concerning the occurrence of a miracle.

In this thesis, I will attempt to gain an accurate appreciation of the force of the arguments in Hume's two-part essay "Of Miracles." In Chapter One, I will examine the conceptual tools Hume employs in his arguments against the rationality of belief in miracle reports. In Chapter Two, I will set out two reasonable interpretations of Hume's major argument of Part One of "Of Miracles." (What I believe is original in this chapter consists of the following: [1] I give a strong textual defense of how Hume's argument of Part One centres on the fact that our experience of a miracle is infrequent relative to our experience

---

Publishers, 1989); Gary R. Habermas & J.P. Moreland, "The Resurrection of Jesus," in *Immortality: The Other Side of Death* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), pp. 54-72. (Kreeft and Tacelli's *Handbook* contains six concise and cogent arguments that refute the popular myth-interpretation of the resurrection.)

<sup>5</sup>Gary R. Habermas & Antony G. N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, edited by Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>Habermas & Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* p. 3.

of the natural law the miracle purports to violate; and [2] I show in detail how two interpretations relating to one crucially-important sentence in Part One spawn two corresponding interpretations for the major argument of Part One.) In Chapter Three, I will show how the two interpretations stated in the previous chapter connect with Part Two of Hume's essay. (What I believe is original in this chapter is that I show how on both interpretations Part Two is not redundant.<sup>7</sup>) Then, in Chapter Four, I will set out the arguments of Part Two. And finally, in Chapter Five, I will offer an evaluation. (Original to the final chapter are [1] the thought experiment that shows Hume's major argument of Part One is too strong, and [2] some of the criticisms of Hume's *a priori* argument of Part Two.) My conclusion is limited but significant: It is not clear that Hume is successful in showing us that Christianity is not founded on Reason--in particular, it is not clear that Hume has shown us that it is irrational to believe those miracle reports of the New Testament which concern the resurrection of Jesus.

The value of this thesis is, I hope, not to be limited merely to my own satisfaction on the matters discussed. According to Francis J. Beckwith, in *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles*, Hume's essay on miracles "so altered the course of the debate [about the evidential value of miracles, especially the resurrection] that Christian philosophers and theologians, for the most part, have

---

<sup>7</sup>As I will show, one of my interpretations (i.e., the Pyrrhonian-Academic Sceptical interpretation) solves the classical interpretation's problem concerning the redundancy of Part Two.

opted for avoiding evidential apologetics altogether."<sup>8</sup> Although Beckwith's claim concerning the extent of the influence of Hume's "Of Miracles" may be an overstatement, it very much seems that the negative influence of Hume's essay on evidential apologetics has been significant. My hope is that by helping to provide an increased understanding of the actual force of Hume's arguments against reasonable belief in miracles, this thesis will in some small way encourage investigators of the rational credibility of the Christian Revelation to reconsider the value of evidential apologetics--especially, the value of arguments for the miraculous resurrection of Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>8</sup>Francis J. Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1989), p. 10. (Beckwith is quick to point out that John Henry Cardinal Newman in the 19th century and C.S. Lewis and Richard Swinburne in the 20th century are examples of Christian thinkers who have not opted for avoiding the use of evidential apologetics.)

Chapter One  
HUME'S EPISTEMOLOGY

I. A brief overview of Hume's arguments in "Of Miracles";  
and the need for some conceptual tool-sharpening

In "Of Miracles" Hume is arguing against those defenders of Christianity who argue for the rational credibility of the Christian Revelation on the basis of the historical truth of the Resurrection of Jesus, and Hume's general conclusion is that "a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion"<sup>1</sup>--which is to say that Christianity is not found on Reason.<sup>2</sup> Hume gets

---

<sup>1</sup>David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 127. Hereafter I will refer to Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (as found in the aforementioned work) simply as *Enquiry*.

<sup>2</sup>Terence Penelhum (following Antony Flew) points out that in "Of Miracles" Hume "did not think of himself to have shown the irrationality of Christian belief in general [although Hume believed Christian belief to be irrational], but at most the irrationality of the suggestion that one should accept Christianity on the ground that its miracle stories are true" (Terence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality* [New York: Random House, 1971], pp. 271-272). When Hume argues

to his conclusion via three sets of arguments: (1) an *a priori* in-principle argument in Part One; (2) three *a posteriori* historical arguments in Part Two; and (3) an additional *a priori* in-principle argument in Part Two.

Since one of my goals in this thesis is to appreciate fully the force of the three sets of arguments in "Of Miracles," and since a prerequisite to such an appreciation is a clear and accurate understanding of the arguments on their own terms, my aim in this chapter is to understand thoroughly the epistemological concepts Hume employs in those arguments. With this aim in mind, I will present Hume's epistemology as it is articulated in the immediate textual context of "Of Miracles," namely, his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>3</sup> First, I will examine what Hume calls perceptions of the mind (impressions and ideas). Second, I will look at what Hume takes to be the objects of human reasoning (relations of ideas and matters of fact). Third, I will look at Hume's understanding of how we reason or make inferences beyond the immediate evidence of our senses or memory (the relation of cause and effect, constant

---

that Christianity is not founded on Reason, then, Hume is arguing against the reasonableness of belief in the purported foundational evidence for (historical) Christianity.

<sup>3</sup>Hume's *Enquiry* was published initially as *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* in 1748. *Philosophical Essays* was a reworking of the first part of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which was published in three volumes in 1738-1740, and with which Hume was displeased. The *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* first appeared in 1752 and maintained that title through subsequent editions. The Clarendon Press (1975) edition I am using in this thesis is a reprint of the 1777 edition. (I have gleaned these historical notes from Frederick Copleston's "Volume V: Hobbes to Hume," in his *A History of Philosophy* [New York: Doubleday, 1985], pp. 258-259).

conjunction, and belief), and I will take a careful look at Hume's analysis of testimony. And fourth, I will look at Hume's notions of proof and probability (notions considerably different from the contemporary view of proof and probability). As will become obvious as this thesis progresses, a thorough understanding of Hume's epistemology --especially his views concerning testimony, proof, and probability against the conceptual backdrop of his views concerning human thought processes and cause and effect--is *crucial* for getting an accurate and clear understanding of the arguments in "Of Miracles."

## II. Perceptions of the mind: Impressions and ideas

According to Hume, the contents of human consciousness, or objects of the human mind, consist of "perceptions," and these are divided into two categories: impressions and ideas.<sup>4</sup>

Hume distinguishes impressions and ideas primarily on the basis of the faculties from which these perceptions of the mind arise. According to Hume, impressions arise from the senses, emotions, and passions; ideas arise from the imagination and memory.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Hume points out that "all the materials

---

<sup>4</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>5</sup>Hume describes the memory and imagination as "faculties" on page 17 of his *Enquiry*. On page 14 he describes the will and understanding as "parts of

of thinking [i.e., ideas in the imagination and memory] are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment [i.e., impressions arising from the senses or from the emotions and passions]."<sup>6</sup>

Also, according to Hume, impressions and ideas can be seen to have differing degrees of "force and vivacity."<sup>7</sup> Impressions are those perceptions of the mind that are more forceful and vivacious than the other perceptions of the mind. Ideas, on the other hand, are those perceptions of the mind that are less forceful and less lively, or more "feeble." As if to place an unbridgeable gulf between impressions and ideas, apparently to avoid the possibility of confusing lively ideas with impressions, Hume also points out that "except the mind be disordered by disease or madness,....[t]he most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation."<sup>8</sup>

A further characteristic of impressions and ideas is their relation to one

---

the mind." And Hume writes of instincts on page 108. Hume, then, can be said to subscribe to a faculty psychology.

<sup>6</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 19. Hume, however, allows for one exception to his maxim that ideas must have a correspondent impression--namely, the case of a "particular shade of blue." According to Hume, most people are of the opinion that a man, observing a gradation of blue hues from deepest blue to lightest blue, will perceive a blank where a particular shade of blue is absent--yet will supply that particular shade of blue via his imagination. And, says Hume, "this may serve as a proof that the simple ideas are not always, in every instance, derived from the correspondent impressions; though this instance is so singular, that it is scarcely worth observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim" (p. 21).

<sup>7</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 17; see also Hume's *Treatise*, p. 2.



another in terms of copy and original. Ideas are different from impressions because ideas are images or copies of impressions, whereas impressions are the original perceptions of the mind. Also, although not as strongly stated in the *Enquiry* as in the *Treatise*, ideas and impressions may be either simple or complex.<sup>9</sup> According to Hume in his *Treatise*, "Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation. The complex are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts."<sup>10</sup> All complex impressions and complex ideas are reducible to simple impressions and simple ideas, respectively; and all simple ideas are ultimately traceable to or derived from their correspondent simple impressions.

To illustrate the above distinction between impressions and ideas, in his *Enquiry* Hume offers the notion of a golden mountain as a "compounded" (i.e., complex) idea which is reducible to the constitutive ideas of *gold* and *mountain*.<sup>11</sup> Presumably (in view of the *Treatise*), the ideas of gold and mountain are further reducible to simple impressions, such as yellow and hardness in the case of gold, and large triangular-shape in the case of mountain. An important result of this copy-original distinction between ideas and impressions is Hume's formulation

---

<sup>9</sup>David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 2. Hereafter: *Treatise*.

<sup>10</sup>Hume, *Treatise*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 19. Although Hume does not explicitly mention complex ideas, complex impressions, and simple impressions in the *Enquiry*, he does write of "compounded" ideas (p. 19), "simple ideas" (p. 19), and the "correspondent impressions" of simple ideas (p. 21).

of an empirical criterion of meaning:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, we cannot obtain knowledge about, say, an allegedly miraculous historical event if we have not had a prior impression in our sensory experience--an impression that somehow connects to that event.

### III. Objects of human reason: Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact

Hume understands that there are propositions which describe the relations which hold among the perceptions of the mind, and he takes these propositions to be the objects of human reason. Also, according to Hume, "All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*."<sup>13</sup>

Relations of ideas consist of "every affirmation which is either intuitively or

---

<sup>12</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 25.

demonstratively certain."<sup>14</sup> In addition, these intuitively or demonstratively certain propositions "are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe."<sup>15</sup> According to Hume, the propositions of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic fall under the category of relations of ideas. For example, the proposition that three times five is equal to half of thirty is a proposition which expresses a relation between ideas. In addition, Hume points out that the denial of a proposition expressing a relation of ideas leads to a contradiction.<sup>16</sup>

Matters of fact, on the other hand, consist of propositions that are neither necessary nor intuitively or demonstratively certain. Unlike propositions expressing relations of ideas, the contrary of a matter of fact is conceivable. According to Hume, "*That the sun will not rise to-morrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, *that it will rise*."<sup>17</sup> The veracity, then, of a proposition expressing a matter of fact depends

---

<sup>14</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 25. D. G. C. MacNabb describes the two different ways (intuition and demonstration) whereby relations of ideas can be discovered as follows: "I may consider two ideas and perceive a relation between them, for example, that two is half four; or I may discover a relation by the interposition of other ideas, as in Euclid's demonstration that the internal angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles" (D. G. C. MacNabb, "David Hume," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. IV, ed. Paul Edwards [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., & The Free Press, 1967], p. 79).

<sup>15</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 25. The word "a priori" is an appropriate description for relations of ideas.

<sup>16</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>17</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 26; Hume's emphasis.

not solely upon the ideas expressed in that proposition but on the world.<sup>18</sup>

What does Hume think the upshot is of his view that our knowledge consists of or is reducible to relations of ideas and/or matters of fact? If we are to grant to Hume that his arguments in "Of Miracles" are successful--i.e., that a factual miracle cannot be shown to be the foundation of a religious belief system--then Hume gives us the following recommendation (in the concluding paragraph of his *Enquiry*) concerning theological and metaphysical truth-claims:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.<sup>19</sup>

#### IV. How we get beyond the evidence of our memory and senses: Cause and effect, constant conjunction, and belief--and testimony

According to Hume, when we reason about matters of fact, we can only get beyond the evidence of our memory and senses via the relation of cause and

---

<sup>18</sup>Hume seems to take for granted the correspondence between our outward sentiments or impressions and the world "outside" (see Hume's *Treatise*, p. 29).

<sup>19</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 165. My recognition of the significance of this passage to Hume's discussion of relations of ideas and matters of fact is due to Francis J. Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1989), p. 37.

effect.<sup>20</sup> That is, we use the cause-and-effect relation to infer the existence of an object absent to us on the basis of what is present to us, where the object present to us may be either a cause or an effect. Hume provides two examples to illustrate the point. We infer a friend's whereabouts on the basis of a letter written by that friend and/or on the basis of comments made by that friend. That is, we infer from causes (the friend's "resolutions and promises," i.e., the evidence of our memory or senses) to effects (the friend's whereabouts). Also, if a person were to find a watch on a desert island (or have the memory of finding a watch on a desert island<sup>21</sup>), then that person would conclude that there had at one time been some other person on that island. In this case, the effect is the watch, and the cause is the human watchmaker; we infer the cause on the basis of the effect. According to Hume, "All our reasonings concerning fact are of the

---

<sup>20</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 26. The relation of cause and effect along with the relations of resemblance and contiguity comprise Hume's principles of connexion or association among ideas (see *Enquiry*, pp.23-24). In the *Treatise* (p. 10), Hume describes these principles of connexion as constituting an "associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another." Also in the *Treatise* (pp. 13-14), Hume distinguishes these, as it were, *natural* relations from *philosophical* relations, i.e., relations which arise from "that particular circumstance, in which, even upon the arbitrary union of two ideas in the fancy, we may think proper to compare them." In the *Treatise*, Hume takes the relation of cause and effect (and resemblance) to fall under *both* categories of relations, *natural and philosophical*. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that in the present discussion Hume is apparently concerned with cause and effect in both senses too.

<sup>21</sup>Hume does not add the case of having a memory of finding a watch. But I think it is appropriate to include, given his example about inferring a friend's whereabouts on the basis of recollecting comments made by that friend.

same nature."<sup>22</sup>

Hume describes the relation of cause and effect as "either near or remote."<sup>23</sup> When a cause is immediately connected with its effect (e.g., fire and heat), the cause and effect relation is *near*; when a cause is not immediately connected to its effect, that is, when there is a series of causes and effects between an initial cause and the effect in which we are interested (e.g., the collapse of a row of dominoes), the cause and effect relation is *remote*. In other words, a near cause and effect relation consists of a single link whereas a remote cause and effect relation consists of a chain.<sup>24</sup>

How do we know about the relation of cause and effect between two objects? According to Hume in his *Enquiry*, we arrive at our knowledge of particular relations of cause and effect not by reason but by *experience*—that is, "when we

<sup>22</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 26. It is of some interest to note that Hume uses the word "reasoning" in a fairly flexible manner. Sometimes Hume seems to use the word to describe the human activity of critical thinking (eg. pp. 6, 7, and 8). At other times, he uses "reasoning" to describe arguments (eg. pp. 5, 11, 13, and 18). When writing about matters of fact (as in the passage quoted above), Hume seems to use the word to describe inductive inferences. However, when Hume analyzes these reasonings psychologically (as I will show), Hume shows that he also understands "reasonings" to mean the psychological processes which constitute our inductive inferences. As we will see in Chapter Five, Hume's psychological "reasonings" allow him to overestimate the impact of our experience of an uninterrupted series of event on our experience of a violation of that series.

<sup>23</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup>Admittedly, this is my interpretation of Hume's notions of *near* and *remote*. But, given the facts that Hume does use these terms to describe the relation of cause and effect, and that Hume goes on to discuss two categories of cause and effect relation which neatly fit into my immediate-mediate dichotomy (as I will show), my interpretation is quite reasonable.

find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other."<sup>25</sup> Says Hume,

The mind can never possibly find the effect in the supposed cause, by the most accurate scrutiny and examination. For the effect is totally different from the cause, and consequently can never be discovered in it.<sup>26</sup>

And, says Hume,

All belief of matter of fact or real existence is derived merely from some object, present to the memory or senses, and a customary conjunction between that and some other object.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, says Hume,

Custom, then, is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past.<sup>28</sup>

In the *Enquiry* Hume illustrates his views primarily with examples of the

---

<sup>25</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 27. Hume seems to use the word "experience" in at least three distinct yet closely related senses. In the above passage, experience consists of our observations or discovery of the constant conjunction of similar objects or events (see also p. 42). In "Of Miracles," however, Hume writes of our actual experience of constant conjunction without reference to observations or discovery (p. 111). Hume also uses the word in a more general way simply as a contrast to reason (see pp. 28 and 54), perhaps as a synonym for *a posteriori*.

<sup>26</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p.46.

<sup>28</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 44.

cause and effect relation which he would characterize as *near* (but does not explicitly do so). Consider the collision of one billiard ball into another and the (apparently) consequent communication of motion from the first to the second. According to Hume, "Motion in the second Billiard-ball is a quite distinct event from motion in the first; nor is there anything in the one to suggest the smallest hint of the other."<sup>29</sup> That is to say, the idea of motion in the first billiard ball--without further appeal to our experience of billiard balls--will not give us the idea of motion in the second billiard ball. The effect is totally different from the cause. Yet every time we observed motion in the first billiard ball, we also observed motion in the second billiard ball. As a result, what presents the idea of the effect to the mind is an, as it were, ingrained memory of the constant conjunction between the cause and the effect. That is, our minds become so accustomed to conjoining a particular kind of cause with a particular kind of effect that they take on a "propensity" to infer the effect from the cause.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, when we see a billiard ball moving in a straight line towards another, our psychological propensity is activated and our mind moves from the impression of the motion of the first billiard ball to the idea of motion in the second billiard ball. Moreover, via this movement of the mind the vivacity of the impression is transferred to the idea of motion in the second ball; and this vivacity induces us

---

<sup>29</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 42-43. In the *Enquiry*, Hume explains this transition or inference of the mind as an unconscious, immediate, and automatic occurrence. In the *Treatise* (p. 87), the transition is very consciously made.



to belief.<sup>31</sup>

Other examples of the cause and effect relation which Hume uses and which he would characterize as *near* involve the conjunction of flame and heat<sup>32</sup>, snow and cold<sup>33</sup>, weight and solidity<sup>34</sup>, a sword and pain<sup>35</sup>, and dry wood and the augmenting of a fire.

Our conclusions concerning matter of fact and experience also involve those relations of cause and effect which are *remote*--and these relations are also supposed to involve an object present to the senses or memory and a customary transition to the idea of another object. (That Hume understands these relations as also involving an object present to the senses or memory and a customary

---

<sup>31</sup>Susan Castagnetto, in her essay "David Hume," in Dion Scott-Hakures *et al.*, *History of Philosophy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993), pp. 219-220, argues that "when we receive impressions of objects we have seen before, they are often followed by ideas of the effects with which they have been associated, together with a *belief impression*" (emphasis added). In view of the fact that Hume does not say this in his section concerning belief (*Enquiry*, pp. 47-55), and in view of the fact (as I have pointed out in my discussion of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas) that "The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation" (*Enquiry*, p.17), a belief for Hume is but a vivacious idea. For Hume, then, our psychological propensity to move from A to B, when A is presented without B (after A and B have been observed as constantly conjoined), is in effect a transference of the vivacity of A to the idea of B, and the resultant vivacity of B constitutes our belief in B. Also, Hume points in the *Treatise* (p. 627) that "belief only modifies the idea or conception; and renders it different to the feeling, without producing any distinct impression."

<sup>32</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 46.

<sup>33</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 46.

<sup>34</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 43.

<sup>35</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 54.

transition to the idea of another object is justified by the text I pointed out earlier: "All belief of matter of fact or real existence is derived merely from some object, present to the memory or senses, and a customary conjunction between that and some other object" [my emphasis].<sup>36</sup>)

What conclusions about matters of fact and experience involve *remote* relations of cause and effect? Hume has in mind our conclusions concerning the events of history (including, as we will see, miracles). According to Hume, we must "carry up our inferences from one testimony to another, till we arrive at the eyewitnesses and spectators of these distant events."<sup>37</sup> And, says Hume,

If I ask why you believe any particular matter of fact, which you relate, you must tell me some reason; and this reason will be some other fact, connected with it. But as you cannot proceed after this manner, *in infinitum*, you must at last terminate in some fact, which is present to your memory or senses; or must allow that your belief is entirely without foundation.<sup>38</sup>

The fact present to your memory or senses is a testimony (written or spoken).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p.46.

<sup>37</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 46.

<sup>38</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 46.

<sup>39</sup>According to Hume in the *Treatise* (p. 83), "we may chuse any point of history, and consider for what reason we either believe or reject it. Thus we believe that CAESAR was kill'd in the senate-house on the *ides of March*; and that because this fact is establish'd on the unanimous testimony of historians, who agree to assign this precise time and place to that event. Here are certain characters and letters present either to our memory or senses; which characters and letters likewise remember to have been us'd as the signs of certain ideas; and these ideas were either in the minds of such as were immediately present at that action, and receiv'd the ideas directly from its existence; or they were deriv'd from

But, we need to ask, what events or objects are we to have customarily conjoined so that at the presence of a particular testimony our minds will automatically move toward the idea of another object?

In "Of Miracles," Hume points out that the customary conjunction required for our remote reasonings based on cause and effect is between testimony and that to which the testimony testifies. Observes Hume,

...there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. This species of reasoning, perhaps, one may deny to be founded on the relation of cause and effect. I shall not dispute about a word. It will be sufficient to observe that our assurance in any argument of this kind is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses.<sup>40</sup>

In the above passage, Hume seems to acknowledge that some persons wish to challenge his analysis of testimony as based on the relation of cause and effect.<sup>41</sup> Yet, as his last sentence strongly suggests (given his understanding of the

---

the testimony of others, and that again from another testimony, by a visible gradation, 'till we arrive at those who were eye-witnesses and spectators of the event. 'Tis obvious all this chain of argument or connexion of causes and effects, is at first founded on those characters or letters, which are seen or remember'd, and that without the authority either of the memory or senses our whole reasoning wou'd be chimerical and without foundation."

<sup>40</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 111.

<sup>41</sup>Michael P. Levine, in *Hume and the Problem of Miracles: A Solution* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), points out that Hume does not explain why some persons may wish to challenge his analysis of testimony as reasoning based on cause and effect. Yet, says Levine, "The reason for the denial might be as follows. Hume is no longer talking about the constant

idea of cause and effect arising from the constant conjunction of similar objects and the consequent inference from one to the other<sup>42</sup>), *Hume* takes testimony as based on cause and effect. Indeed, Hume goes on to say,

It being a general maxim, that no objects have any discoverable connexion together, and that all the inferences, which we can draw from one to another, are founded merely on our experience of their constant and regular conjunction; it is evident, that we ought not to make an exception to this maxim in favour of human testimony....<sup>43</sup>

Additional evidence that Hume takes testimony to be based on cause and effect can be seen in Hume's discussion of the problem of determinism and free will in the *Enquiry*. There Hume points out that "readily and universally do we acknowledge a uniformity in human motives and actions as well as in the operations of body."<sup>44</sup> Castagnetto points out the direction Hume's thought takes in the determinism-free will discussion as follows:

So, if we believe determinism is true in the natural world because

---

conjunction of events for which people are ordinarily inclined to posit causal relations describable or 'explainable' in terms of laws of nature. He is now talking about a conjunction, with some degree of constancy, between what people *say* about an event they witnessed (i.e., their testimony) and the events testified to. The kind of connection between testimony and the event testified to does not seem, *prima facie*, to be the kind of connection--a necessary causal connection--we ([perhaps] wrongly) suppose exists between two billiard balls colliding. So perhaps our manner of reasoning in the two types of cases should be different." (P. 6.)

<sup>42</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 82.

<sup>43</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 111.

<sup>44</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 84.

there is regularity in the relations of events, then we have every reason to think that determinism is true of human behavior as well, for human behavior is just as regular.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, because Hume subsumes our reasoning about the natural world under the relation of cause and effect, Hume obviously subsumes human behaviour in general, and human testimony in particular, under the relation of cause and effect too.

For Hume, then, we come to believe an event absent to us via testimony, which is a remote cause and effect relation, in the following manner: On the basis of an impression of a particular testimony (or memory thereof) plus our experience of the conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses we infer the existence of that to which the testimony testifies.<sup>46</sup> Of course, our belief in testimony will admit of degrees, which is a topic to be discussed in the next section.

---

<sup>45</sup>Castagnetto, *History of Philosophy*, p. 224.

<sup>46</sup>Hume does not use his watch-watchmaker example (i.e., one of his exemplars with respect to reasonings concerning fact) to illustrate how we reason beyond the evidence of our senses and memory, yet the example is helpful in understanding Hume. Because the idea of a watch is totally different from the idea of a human being, an examination of the idea of a human being will not give us the idea of a watch, and the idea of a watch (without appeal to past experience) will not give us the idea of a human being. Yet when we find a watch on a desert island, we may appeal to our memory for the testimony of a parent, a teacher, or an article from an encyclopedia which informs us that watches are made by watchmakers. This memory plus our experience of the conformity of facts to the reports of our parents, teachers, or encyclopedia authors allows us to infer the existence of that to which the reports testify--namely, a watchmaker.

## V. Proofs and probabilities

Proofs and probabilities, for Hume, are argument types which concern our reasonings about matters of fact. (What Hume calls "demonstrations"<sup>47</sup> are arguments which concern relations of ideas.<sup>48</sup>) As we will see, the major argumentative thrust of Hume's "Of Miracles" consists of proofs and probabilities.

### A. Proofs

Hume defines proofs in the *Enquiry* as "such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition."<sup>49</sup> In the *Treatise*, Hume defines proofs as "those arguments, which are deriv'd from the relation of cause and effect, and which are entirely free from doubt and uncertainty."<sup>50</sup> Although the latter definition adds to the former, it is consistent with the former. Moreover, in the *Enquiry* Hume explains proof along the lines of his definition from the *Treatise*. According to Hume,

There are some causes, which are entirely uniform and constant in producing a particular effect; and no instance has ever yet been found of any failure or irregularity in their operation. Fire has always burned, and water suffocated every human creature: The

---

<sup>47</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 56; see footnote.

<sup>48</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 25.

<sup>49</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 56.

<sup>50</sup>Hume, *Treatise*, p. 124.

production of motion by impulse and gravity is an universal law, which has hitherto admitted of no exception.<sup>51</sup>

And Hume goes on to say that

Being determined by custom to transfer the past to the future, in all our inferences; where the past has been entirely regular and uniform, we expect the event [which has been uniformly conjoined with the effect] with the greatest assurance, and leave no room for any contrary supposition.<sup>52</sup>

According to Hume, then, an argument is a proof for an event B if and only if (1) there is a lengthy and exceptionless past experience of constant conjunction between A and B, (2) there is a present experience of A, and (3) the argument takes premises expressing (1) and (2) as the basis for concluding B.

---

<sup>51</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 57. On page 30 of his *Enquiry*, Hume writes: "Elasticity, gravity, cohesion of parts, communication of *motion by impulse*; these are *probably* the ultimate causes and principles which we shall ever discover in nature..." (emphasis added). On page 30 Hume displays uncertainty or scepticism concerning the universal law about which he seems to have certainty on page 57. To resolve the apparent tension we need only realize that Hume qualifies his universal law on page 57 with the clause, "which has hitherto admitted of no exception." This clause shows that Hume is not certain about the status of his universal law as an ultimate cause or principle ever to be discovered in nature. Interestingly, Hume goes on to say that "It is true, when any cause fails of producing its usual effect, philosophers ascribe not this to any irregularity in nature; but suppose, that some secret causes, in the particular structure of parts, have prevented the operation." (*Enquiry*, p. 58.) Presumably, then, if a "universal law" which had hitherto not admitted of any exception *did* admit of exception, then the law would need revision to account for the previously unknown *natural* laws governing the secret causes. But, as I will argue later, this naturalism serves to preclude the possibility of a *supernatural* causal explanation.

<sup>52</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 58.

## B. Probabilities

In his *Enquiry*, Hume distinguishes between two types of probability, the probability of chances and the probability of causes; and he explains the mind's operation in probabilistic reasoning in terms of *degree of frequency* of conjunctions (as opposed to the *constant* conjunctions of proofs) and the sentiment of belief.<sup>53</sup>

Francis J. Beckwith describes the distinction between Hume's probability of chances and probability of causes in terms of contemporary probability theory:

The former is similar to what probability theorists call the *a priori* theory of probability, and the latter is similar to what they call the relative-frequency theory of probability. An example of how both theories work can be seen in the odds of a flipped coin landing on heads. According to the *a priori* theory, prior to any flip, the odds are 1/2 that the coin will land on heads. In contrast, the relative-frequency theory measures the frequency of an event having occurred, and then a probability is calculated in light of this frequency. According to this theory, a coin which has landed on heads six times out of ten flips has a probability of 3/5, or .600.<sup>54</sup>

Hume explains the mind's operation with respect to the probability of chances, or *a priori* probability, in terms of the mind inspecting the various possibilities of a thousand-sided die marked one way on 999 sides and marked another way on the remaining side. Finding a more frequent conjunction of sides with the first mark than with the other, "the mind is carried more frequently to

---

<sup>53</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 56-59.

<sup>54</sup>Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles*, p. 68.



that event, and meets it oftener...."<sup>55</sup> As a result of this repeated transition in the mind from the inspection of a side to the more common mark, the sentiment of belief in the more common mark is produced. According to Hume,

This concurrence of several views in one particular event begets immediately, by an inexplicable contrivance of nature, the sentiment of belief, and gives that event the advantage over its antagonist, which is supported by a smaller number of views, and recurs less frequently to the mind.<sup>56</sup>

The psychological situation with probability of causes is essentially the same as that with probability of chances.<sup>57</sup> Instead of the imagination merely forming our belief in an event (via the conveyance of force and vivacity) as a result of our experience of *considering* the conjunctions of the events in question (via "revolving the various possibilities or chances, on which the ultimate result depends"<sup>58</sup>), the imagination forms our belief in an event (via the conveyance of force and vivacity) on the basis of our experience of the conjunctions of the *actual* events. Unlike the situation with respect to proofs, an apparently similar cause may be followed by various effects, and these effects must be taken into account when we determine the probability of a particular event. Indeed, says Hume,

Though we give the preference to that which has been found most

<sup>55</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 57.

<sup>56</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 57. See also Hume, *Treatise*, pp. 128-130.

<sup>57</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 57.

<sup>58</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 57.

usual, and believe that this effect will exist, we must not overlook the other effects, but must assign to each of them a particular weight and authority, in proportion as we have found it to be more or less frequent.<sup>59</sup>

And, says Hume:

Here then it seems evident, that, when we transfer the past to the future, in order to determine the effect, which will result from any cause, we transfer all the different events, in the same proportion as they have appeared in the past, and conceive one to have existed a hundred times, for instance, another ten times, and another once. As a great number of views do here concur in one event, they fortify and confirm it to the imagination, beget that sentiment which we call *belief*, and give its object the preference above the contrary event, which is not supported by an equal number of experiments, and recurs not so frequently to the thought in transferring the past to the future.<sup>60</sup>

Probabilities, then, are arguments from experience which, unlike proofs, leave room for doubt or opposition. In addition, an argument is a successful probabilistic argument for an event B if and only if: (1) it is not the case that there is an exceptionless past experience of constant conjunction between A and B; (2) there has been a past experience of considerably more frequent conjunctions

---

<sup>59</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 58.

<sup>60</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 58-59. Hume describes probability of causes in greater detail but in essentially the same way in his *Treatise*, pp. 130-143. On p. 103 of the *Treatise*, Hume succinctly describes how we arrive at our conclusion via probable reasoning as follows: "...all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. 'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. When I am convinc'd of any principle, 'tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me. When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence."

between A and B than the total of conjunctions between A and other effects -A (C, D, E, etc.); (3) there is a present experience of A; and (4) the argument takes premises expressing (1) and (2) and (3) as the basis for concluding B. As I will show, Hume employs this argument form to deal with our experience of matters of fact, which means that he is interested in the probability of causes as opposed to the probability of chances.<sup>61</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to gain a thorough understanding of the epistemological concepts Hume employs in the arguments of "Of Miracles." With this aim in mind, I did the following: (1) I examined what Hume calls perceptions of the mind (which consist of impressions and ideas); (2) I examined what Hume takes to be the objects of human reasoning (i.e., relations of ideas and matters of fact); (3) I examined Hume's understanding of how we reason or make inferences beyond the immediate evidence of our senses or memory (via the relation of cause and effect, constant conjunction, and belief), paying special attention to Hume's analysis of testimony; and (4) I examined Hume's two argument types,

---

<sup>61</sup>I do not believe anything hangs on Hume's focus on the probability of causes as opposed to the probability of chances. Indeed, in the case of infrequent events such as miracles it seems that the probability of chances must obtain its data from our experience of the matters of fact which concern miracles--which is in effect to engage in the probability of causes.

namely, proofs and probabilities.

Having examined the conceptual tools Hume uses for constructing his arguments in "Of Miracles," it is to those arguments that I turn next.

## Chapter Two

### HUME'S *A PRIORI* IN-PRINCIPLE ARGUMENT OF PART ONE

#### I. Introduction

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, in "Of Miracles" Hume defends his thesis that Christianity is not founded on Reason via three sets of arguments: (1) an *a priori* in-principle argument in Part One; (2) three *a posteriori* historical arguments in Part Two; and (3) an additional *a priori* in-principle argument in Part Two. Interestingly, a sentence in Part One can be interpreted in two ways, and these two ways allow for the *a priori* in-principle argument in Part One to be interpreted in two ways, which in turn allows the whole argument in "Of Miracles" to be interpreted in two ways. These two interpretations notwithstanding, Hume's conclusion remains the same: Christianity is not founded on Reason.

My aim in this chapter is to set out the two interpretations of Hume's *a priori* in-principle argument of Part One.

## II. The *a priori* in-principle argument(s) of Part One, in detail

Before I begin the exposition of Hume's argument(s) of Part One, it may be useful briefly to note the definition of miracle which Hume provides (in a footnote). According to Hume,

A miracle may be accurately defined [as] a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.<sup>1</sup>

As I will show later in this section, Hume's argument(s) of Part One against reasonable belief in a miracle report relies merely on the notion that a miracle is a transgression of a law of nature. I will show that, according to Hume, for a transgression of a law of nature to be a transgression, it must happen rarely--and the rarity of this occurrence relative to the abundant evidence for the allegedly transgressed law of nature makes it more reasonable not to believe in the transgression.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 115n.

<sup>2</sup>John P. Wright points out in his *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) that there are two ways of understanding Hume's view concerning natural law (also known as "objective causation," "necessary connection"): "On the first interpretation Hume reduces objective causation to a constant conjunction of experiences and our belief in necessity to a subjective feeling of expectation. On the second view it is said that he never attempted to justify a 'uniformity view of causation': rather, in Hume's discussions objective 'causal agency--power, efficacy, determination--is presupposed throughout." (P. 1.) In other words, according to the first view there are no necessary connexions or natural laws, only constant conjunctions between events; according to the second view constant conjunctions are taken as a sign of real natural laws, which we believe or assume exist. Wright dubs the first interpretation "sceptical" and the second "realist," yet he does not hold the two interpretations to be mutually exclusive. Wright points out that "Hume's realist

Hume begins Part One with a reference to an argument against the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation forwarded by the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson (1630-1694). (Irving Hexham, in his *Concise Dictionary of Religion*, defines transubstantiation as "the Roman Catholic dogma . . . that during the Mass the substance of the elements of bread and wine are transformed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ by the words of the priestly consecration, even though their appearance [accidents] remains the same."<sup>3</sup>) Hume points out that his (Hume's) argument against the credibility of miracle reports (in Part One) is similar to the argument of Tillotson. Says Hume,

There is, in Dr. Tillotson's writings, an argument against the *real presence*, which is as concise, and elegant, and strong as any argument can possibly be supposed against a doctrine, so little worthy of a serious refutation.<sup>4</sup>

---

assumptions about the existence of unknown powers are more pronounced in the *Enquiry* than in the earlier *Treatise*. However, in the later book, as well as the earlier, Hume clearly indicated his belief that we have no idea of the causal power in objects and that the idea which we have in its place is purely subjective." (P. 3.) But Wright points out that Hume did not see any inconsistency between the sceptical and realist sides of his philosophy (p. 3), and Wright goes on to "try to show how scepticism and realism combine to form a unified philosophical system..." (p. 7). Regardless of whether natural laws are real or not for Hume, however, the features of a natural law in which Hume is interested consist (as I will show) in the fact that they are established by proofs and in the fact that a transgression is extremely rare relative to the constant conjoinings which constitute the proofs which establish the natural laws (however understood).

<sup>3</sup>Irving Hexham, *Concise Dictionary of Religion* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 220.

<sup>4</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 109.

And, says Hume,

Nothing is so convenient as a decisive argument of this kind, which must at least *silence* the most arrogant bigotry and superstition, and free us from their impertinent solicitations. I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument of a like nature, which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures.<sup>5</sup>

The argument Hume attributes to Tillotson runs as follows.<sup>6</sup> Premise 1: The authority of Scripture or tradition is "founded merely in the testimony of the apostles, who were eye-witnesses to those miracles of our Saviour, by which he proved his divine mission."<sup>7</sup> Premise 2: For those who witnessed the miracles, the

<sup>5</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup>According to M. A. Stewart, in "Hume's Historical View of Miracles" (forthcoming in M. A. Stewart and J. P. Wright, eds., *Hume and Hume's Connexions* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994]), Hume's source is Tillotson's sermon, "The hazard of being saved in the Church of Rome," *Rule of Faith* (1676).

<sup>7</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 107. The miracles of Jesus--in particular, His resurrection in fulfilment of prophecy--were to show that Jesus was who He claimed to be, namely, the Father, or God, and hence gave His teachings authority. The apostle John writes: "Philip said [to Jesus], 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.' Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.'" (John 14:8-9, NIV.) John also writes: "...the Jews demanded of [Jesus], 'What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this [i.e., clear the temple of moneychangers, etc.]?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.' The Jews replied, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?' But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken." (John 2:18-22, NIV.) Because Jesus taught He was God, and because Jesus resurrected as a sign to prove His authority as God, Jesus' teachings began to be understood as having authority. Jesus' teachings were then recorded in the Scriptures; hence, the Scriptures became



evidence for the truth of the doctrine of transubstantiation (viz., a miracle) was immediately sensory.<sup>8</sup> Premise 3: The evidence for the truth of the doctrine of transubstantiation is, for us, less than immediately sensory (because it consists merely of testimony concerning a miracle worked by someone who espoused the

---

authoritative. And (according to Catholic Christians) since Jesus' teachings also gave authority to the traditions of His followers, church traditions became authoritative too. The authority of the Scriptures and traditions, then, are derived from Jesus' teachings, the authority of which is derived from Jesus' resurrection, the evidence for which consists merely of the eye-witness testimony of the apostles.

<sup>8</sup>As I pointed out in the previous footnote, the authority of Scripture and tradition can be reduced to a miracle of Jesus: that is to say, Jesus' resurrection in fulfilment of prophecy gives His teachings authority which in turn gives the Scriptures and tradition authority. One way of understanding how a miracle may be wrought as evidence for the doctrine of transubstantiation is simply to hold (1) that Jesus *taught* that the bread and wine of the Last Supper appeared as bread and wine but were really (i.e., substantially) His flesh and blood and (2) that Jesus' resurrection gave this teaching authority. But this need not be the only way of understanding how a miracle may be wrought as evidence for the doctrine of transubstantiation. The miracle worked by someone who espoused the doctrine of transubstantiation (not necessarily Jesus, but someone having the authority of Scripture or tradition) may be taken to have been an event wherein the substance *as well as the accidents* of the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper turned into flesh and blood and wherein instructions were given that in the future only the substances of the bread and wine would change. Or, the miracle worked by someone (not Jesus, but someone having the authority of Scripture or tradition) who espoused the doctrine of transubstantiation may be taken to have been some *other* miracle, whereby authority is given to the miracle worker who instructs us that although the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper maintained the appearances of bread and wine, the substances changed and they only will change in future enactments. Regardless of which of these cases is best supported by the biblical data or by the data of tradition, the fact remains that for those who witnessed the miracles wrought as support for the truth of the doctrine of transubstantiation—whatever miracles these might have been—the evidence for the truth of the doctrine of transubstantiation was immediately sensory.

doctrine,<sup>9</sup> and because the evidence for the truth of one's senses "must diminish in passing" via testimony from person to person<sup>10</sup>). Premise 4: The evidence against the doctrine of transubstantiation consists of "an immediate object of [our] senses" (i.e., we can see, touch, smell, and taste the bread as bread and the wine as wine).<sup>11</sup> Premise 5: Evidence of the immediate objects of one's senses is

---

<sup>9</sup>Regardless of which of the cases mentioned in the previous footnote is best supported by the biblical data and/or by the data of tradition, the evidence for us for the truth of the doctrine of transubstantiation consists merely of *testimony*, and so is *less than* immediately sensory.

<sup>10</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 109. This is not to say that Hume thinks that with each and every transmission of evidence the force of the evidence is reduced. In the *Treatise* Hume allows for evidence to be transmitted without diminution through "innumerable" links when "they are all of the same kind, and depend on the fidelity of Printers and Copists" (p. 146). The diminution occurs, then, only in the first transmission from the witness to him or her who sees and/or hears it and then records it and the last transmission from the record to the person who reads the record. (I gratefully acknowledge William Abbot's unpublished paper "Hume's Tillotson" as my source for this point; Abbot is a philosophy professor at the University of Waterloo, Ontario.)

Importantly for that evidence of the New Testament which was transmitted in an oral tradition prior to being put into written form, we can know that this evidence was transmitted without diminution too. Why? Because cogent arguments can be presented for the fidelity of that oral transmission, a fidelity on par with that of "Printers and Copists." According to John W. Montgomery in *History and Christianity* (San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1983), "We know from the Mishna that it was Jewish custom to memorize a Rabbi's teaching, for a good pupil was like a 'plastered cistern that loses not a drop.' And we can be sure that the early Church, impressed as it was by Jesus, governed itself by this ideal" (pp. 37-38). See also R. T. France's chapter "The Evidence of the New Testament" in *The Evidence for Jesus* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986), pp. 86-139.

<sup>11</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 109. Flew (quite correctly) thinks it is astonishing that Tillotson put forward his argument since the soon-to-be Archbishop should have known that, according to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, it is only the substance of the bread and wine that is converted into the body and blood of Christ, whereas all the accidents or appearances of the bread and wine remain the same (Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* [London: Routledge & Kegan

stronger evidence than testimony which provides us with less-than-immediate sensory evidence concerning the objects of that testimony. Premise 6: "[A] weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger."<sup>12</sup> C: Therefore,

were the doctrine of the real presence ever so clearly revealed in scripture, it were [i.e., would be] directly contrary to the rules of just reasoning to give our assent to it.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, we should not accept the doctrine of transubstantiation because the reason for accepting that doctrine, namely, the testimony concerning a miracle wrought as support for the (alleged) doctrine, is weaker than the reason for rejecting it, namely, the direct evidence of our senses.<sup>14</sup>

---

Paul Ltd., 1961], p. 172). Also, Dennis M. Ahern, in "Hume on the Evidential Impossibility of Miracles" (Nicholas Rescher, ed., *Studies in Epistemology* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975], p. 15), points out that "Hume might (though he never does) argue that transubstantiation is incoherent because it relies on the application of the substance-accident distinction. In the *Treatise* Hume argues that the concept of 'substance' is meaningless because there can be no impression of substance and no consequent idea to be annexed to the concept." The above observations notwithstanding, Hume takes an interest in Tillotson's argument.

<sup>12</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup>As I pointed out in footnote 6, according to M. A. Stewart, in "Hume's Historical View of Miracles" (Stewart and Wright, eds., *Hume and Hume's Connexions*), Hume's source is Tillotson's sermon, "The hazard of being saved in the Church of Rome," *Rule of Faith* (1676). According to Stewart, "It is only there that Tillotson makes the point that those who accept the 'credible relation' of the Apostles without having themselves seen the original miracles have less 'evidence of the truth of Christianity than of the falshood [sic] of Transubstantiation.'"

Following Flew (in *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*), Francis J. Beckwith, in *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms

In spite of the shortcomings of Tillotson's argument (see footnote 11 above), what is the "nature" of Tillotson's argument that Hume flatters himself as having discovered for his own? M. A. Stewart points it out this way: "Our evidence that something contrary to sense has occurred depends on something which has assumed the reliability of the senses elsewhere in the tradition."<sup>15</sup> In other words, according to Beckwith, "the reason you believe the miracle [wrought in behalf of transubstantiation] (it can be observed) is the same reason why you reject transubstantiation (it can not be observed)."<sup>16</sup>

---

International, 1989), takes Tillotson's *Discourse against Transubstantiation* (1684) as containing the argument Hume summarizes in "Of Miracles." Tillotson's argument in the *Discourse*, however, does not fully jive with the argument Hume attributes to Tillotson. In Tillotson's *Discourse*, Tillotson argues that "the very same assurance which any man hath of the truth of the miracle, he hath of the falsehood of the doctrine; that is, the clear evidence of his senses. For that there is a miracle wrought to prove that what he sees in the sacrament, is not bread, but the body of Christ, there is only the evidence of sense; and there is the very same evidence to prove, that what he sees in the sacrament, is not the body of Christ, but bread" (Tillotson, *A Discourse Against Transubstantiation*, Vol. II, p. 448, as quoted in Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, p. 172). But, as I have shown, the argument Hume attributes to Tillotson concerns *testimonial* evidence being weaker than immediate sensory evidence.

It is important to realize, then, that the argument to which Hume compares his is the argument in the *Enquiry* which Hume attributes to Tillotson. If Tillotson's actual argument and the argument Hume attributes to Tillotson are different, then, from the perspective of understanding Hume's argument against belief in miracles, it is a better interpretive strategy to go with what Hume perceives as Tillotson's argument since *that* is the argument that Hume's argument against belief in miracles is supposed to be like.

Having put forth the above caveat, I should point out that it very much appears Beckwith (and Flew) do not get into trouble as a result of their interpretive strategy.

<sup>15</sup>Stewart, "Hume's Historical View of Miracles," p. 22.

<sup>16</sup>Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles*, p. 48.

How does Hume make the essential principle of Tillotson's argument against transubstantiation apply to his argument against reasonable belief in miracle reports? Stewart explains as follows:

Parallel to the opposition between the senses being wrong in the particular case (in transubstantiation) and their being normally right (wherein lies the claim to authority of the alleged authors of the transubstantiation tradition) is an opposition between there being a departure from a law of nature (in a miracle) and there being a steady and uniform course of nature (to constitute the law from which the departure has occurred).<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, adds Stewart, "the evidence for the exception is weaker in kind than the evidence for that to which it is an exception." And, elaborates Beckwith,

the reason why you believe an event is miraculous --that it violates natural law--is the same reason why you reject the miraculous: the proof of natural law outweighs the proof of any miracle.<sup>18</sup>

Paralleling the nature of Tillotson's argument, then, Hume's argument against the credibility of miracle reports holds that our evidence that something contrary to the laws of nature has occurred conflicts with our evidence for the laws of nature which have been transgressed. (I will discuss Hume's *a priori* in-principle argument concerning miracle reports in greater detail later in this chapter. Later in this chapter I will also show that Stewart and Beckwith are *half* right: in

---

<sup>17</sup>Stewart, "Hume's Historical View of Miracles," p. 24.

<sup>18</sup>Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles*, p. 48.

Hume's argument not only can the proof of natural law be seen to outweigh the proof of any miracle but also the proof of natural law can be seen to *balance* the proof of any miracle. For now, however, I will continue my exposition of the early stages of Hume's argument in Part One.)

Following his claim to have found an argument against the credibility of miracle reports essentially similar to Tillotson's argument against transubstantiation, Hume provides a review of his epistemology. Hume re-emphasizes that in reasoning about matters of fact *experience* is our "only guide"; yet, adds Hume, "it must be acknowledged, that this guide is not altogether infallible, but in some cases is apt to lead us into errors."<sup>19</sup> Hence, "A wise man... proportions his belief to the evidence."<sup>20</sup>

Hume reiterates his view that the strongest form of evidence concerning matters of fact is that which constitutes a *proof*:

In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience [of constant conjoinings between two kinds of events], [the wise man] expects the event with the last [i.e., highest] degree of assurance, and regards his past experience [of constant conjoinings] as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event.<sup>21</sup>

As I have shown in my discussion of Hume's epistemology in the previous chapter (pp. 27-28), an argument is a proof for an event q if and only if: (1) there

<sup>19</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 110.

<sup>20</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 110.

is a lengthy and exceptionless past experience of constant conjunction between kinds of events P and Q; (2) there is a present experience of p; and (3) the argument takes premises expressing (1) and (2) as the basis for concluding q.

Of course, in those cases where the conclusions are not founded on an "infallible experience," that is, the conclusions are not founded on a constant conjunction between two kinds of events, the wise man is more cautious.

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 judgment, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call *probability*.<sup>22</sup>

And, says Hume,

A hundred instances or experiments on one side, and fifty on another, afford a doubtful expectation of any event; though a hundred uniform experiments, with only one that is contradictory, reasonably beget a pretty strong degree of assurance. In all cases, we must balance the opposite experiments, where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater, in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, in those cases where the conclusions are not founded on a constant conjunction between two kinds of events, the wise man relies on the argument type Hume has previously in his *Enquiry* termed a "probability."

---

<sup>22</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 111; the probability Hume refers to here is a probability of causes (i.e., a relative frequency probability, as discussed in my chapter on Hume's epistemology).

<sup>23</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 111.

As I have pointed out in my last chapter (pp. 31-32), Hume has understood a probability to be a successful argument if and only if: (1) it is not the case that there is an exceptionless past experience of constant conjunction between kinds of events P and Q; (2) there has been a past experience of considerably more frequent conjunctions between P and Q than the total of conjunctions between P and kinds of effects other than Q (R, S, T, etc.); (3) there is a present experience of p; and (4) the argument takes premises expressing (1) and (2) and (3) as the basis for concluding q. In other words, if there has been a past experience of considerably more frequent (yet less than constant) conjunctions between past similar causes and the kind of event in question than the total of conjunctions between the past similar causes and the other, opposing events, then this evidence constitutes a successful probability. For Hume *now*, however, when a wise person "proportions his [or her] belief to the evidence," the wise person proportions his or her belief to the frequency the kind of event in question has been in the past conjoined with its purported cause *minus* the sum of the frequencies of the conjoined opposing events.

Hume next considers human testimony in general as evidence. As I have pointed out in the earlier chapter in my discussion of Hume's epistemology, Hume takes testimony as a remote cause and effect relation, and he holds that we come to believe an event absent to us via testimony in the following manner: On the basis of an impression of a particular testimony (or memory thereof) plus our experience of the conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses, we infer the



existence of that to which the testimony testifies. But our belief admits of degree in proportion to the degree of conformity between the facts and the reports concerning those facts. As Hume points out,

And as the evidence, derived from witnesses and human testimony, is founded on past experience, so it varies with the 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.<sup>24</sup>

Where our experience of the conjunction between a kind of report and a kind of object is not constant, our judgments admit of an "unavoidable contrariety" and they admit of that "same opposition and mutual destruction of argument as in every other kind of evidence."<sup>25</sup> This is to say that the wise person proportions his or her belief concerning the credibility of a testimony to the frequency the kind of testimony in question has been in the past conjoined with the facts to which it testifies minus the sum of the frequencies where it has not been conjoined with the facts to which it testifies.

According to Hume, a "contrariety of evidence" (i.e., opposing evidence) for testimony may stem from a number of different sources: contradictory testimony; the dubious character of the witnesses; an insufficiency in the number of witnesses; the witnesses having an interest in what they affirm; the witnesses "deliver[ing] their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary, with too violent

---

<sup>24</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 112.

<sup>25</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 112.

asseverations"<sup>26</sup>; etc.

Of particular interest to Hume is that contrariety of evidence which stems from the *unusualness* or *infrequency* of the event to which the testimony testifies. That is, Hume is particularly interested in the situation wherein, according to Hume, "the fact attested is such a one as has seldom fallen under our observation."<sup>27</sup> Adds Hume,

Suppose, for instance, that the fact, which the testimony endeavours to establish, partakes of the extraordinary and the marvellous; in that case, the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the lesser the frequency of the fact attested to by testimony, the weaker that testimony is. Indeed, says Hume, referring to our experience of the reliability of testimony and to our experience of the infrequency of that which is testified to,

here is a contest of two opposite experiences; of which one destroys the other, as far as its force goes, and the superior can only operate on the mind by the force, which remains.<sup>29</sup>

In other words--and herein lies an instantiation of the "like nature" of Tillotson's

<sup>26</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>27</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113.

<sup>28</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113.

<sup>29</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113.

argument, previously discussed--experience gives us our assurance of the veracity of the testimony of witnesses concerning an unusual event, and experience "gives us also, in this case, another degree of assurance against the fact, which they [the witnesses] endeavour to establish...."<sup>30</sup> On the one hand, our experience tells us that witnesses are usually accurate; but on the other hand, our experience tells us that the extraordinary and marvellous do not usually happen. Thus, if the object of the testimony "has seldom fallen under our observation,"<sup>31</sup> then our experience of the infrequency of the event in question, which is tantamount to our experience of the force of the normal operation of the regularities of nature--this experience--serves to undermine or reduce the force of our experience of the credibility of the testimony in favour of that event.

Hume goes on to defend the above conclusion by attempting to justify a point which is crucial to his argument: namely, that the content of a report *can* work against the credibility of that report. Hume appeals to the Roman saying, "*I should not believe such a story were it told me by Cato*" (Hume's emphasis),<sup>32</sup> and he appeals to the example of the Indian prince who reasoned justly by requiring "very strong testimony" to believe in the ice he had never experienced previously.<sup>33</sup> The appeal to the Roman saying is an appeal to the authority of

<sup>30</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113.

<sup>31</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113.

<sup>32</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 113-114.

(Roman) tradition. And the effect of the Roman saying is very much like the effect of a believer in God saying "I would not believe it even if it were told to me by God."<sup>34</sup> The idea is that "The incredibility of a fact . . . might invalidate so great an authority."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, from the perspective of the Indian prince who had never before experienced ice, the initial incredibility of water turning instantaneously into ice may intuitively be taken to weaken the authority of the first testimonial evidence in behalf of such a phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> In the face of these examples, it is important to remember that for Hume the incredibility--or extraordinariness or marvellousness--of a fact translates into, or reduces to, the *infrequency* of that fact's occurrence in our experience. And, as I have shown above, it is that infrequency which Hume takes to oppose the credibility of the

---

<sup>34</sup>This is my example, not Hume's.

<sup>35</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113.

<sup>36</sup>Much more can be said--and will be said--about Hume's discussion of the case of the Indian prince and the ice. It is important to realize, however, that Hume's discussion of this case involves two sentences in the main text of "Of Miracles" and goes on at length only in a footnote added at a later date. It is also important to realize that a very solid case can be made that Hume's discussion of the Indian prince case is merely an aside whose purpose is to deal with some misconceptions prevalent in Hume's time, misconceptions concerning what it means for an event to be contrary to one's experience of nature, misconceptions which apparently blocked certain contemporaries of Hume from getting a clear understanding of the argument Hume is about to forward. Because I am convinced that Hume's discussion of the Indian prince case is not an integral aspect of the *a priori* in-principle argument he is in the process of making in Part One, and because I am here primarily interested in Hume's *a priori* in-principle argument of Part One--and because a lengthy discussion of the Indian prince case at this point may distract the reader from getting an accurate and clear understanding of the actual argument Hume is in the process of making in Part One--I will not deal with Hume's Indian prince discussion at length at this point of my thesis. Instead, I refer my readers to Appendix A.

testimony for the fact.

Hume next considers miracles. For the sake of his argument that purports to show the extent miracles "encrease the probability against the testimony of witnesses,"<sup>37</sup> Hume concedes that the fact affirmed by the testimony of witnesses "is really miraculous," and he concedes that the testimony for a miracle "amounts to an entire proof."<sup>38</sup> However, says Hume (and I quote Hume here *in extenso* to get his crucial argument right):

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as 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.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, says Hume,

---

<sup>37</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114. Stewart points out that in assessing the probability of a testimony Locke considered relevant "our experience both of the type of fact involved and of the reliability of the informant" *except* when Locke assessed the probability of a testimony concerning a miracle (Stewart, "Hume's Historical View of Miracles," pp. 17, 20). Locke's pre-miracle theism allowed him to hold miracles as that "one Case, wherein the strangeness of the Fact lessens not the Assent to a fair Testimony given of it. For where such supernatural Events are suitable to ends aim'd at by him, who has the Power to change the course of Nature, there, under such Circumstances, they may be the fitter to procure Belief, by how much the more they are beyond, or contrary to ordinary Observation" (Locke, *Essay*, p. 667). In other words, in assessing the probability of a testimony concerning a miracle, if Locke recognized a moral dimension or purpose to the event in question, then Locke would not judge that event as he would ordinary events. Hume, however, did not accept Locke's pre-miracle theism or natural theology, so, according to Stewart, "Hume's project, in effect, is to make Locke consistent" (Stewart, "Hume's Historical View of Miracles," p. 20).

<sup>38</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

<sup>39</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die on a sudden: because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation.<sup>40</sup>

And, says Hume,

as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here 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.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, says Hume,

The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), "That 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."<sup>42</sup>

Now, before I paraphrase Hume's argument, it is important to realize that the claim, "the proof against a miracle . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined," can be interpreted plausibly in two ways.

<sup>40</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 115.

<sup>41</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 115-116.

What I call the *Face Value* interpretation takes this claim at (you guessed it) face value. That is, according to the Face Value interpretation this claim means that if we take the strongest imaginable argument from experience, then the proof against a miracle is an argument equal in strength to it.<sup>43</sup> According to the Face Value interpretation, then, proofs against miracles are not only the strongest imaginable, these proofs are equally strong: any proof against a miracle will be as strong as any other proof against a miracle.

What I call the *Blair* interpretation, on the other hand, takes the claim that "the proof against a miracle...is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined" to be superseded by a different claim which Hume makes in a letter to the Reverend Hugh Blair. Hume's letter to Blair was written in 1761 and contains Hume's reactions to a manuscript version of George Campbell's *Dissertation on Miracles* (published in 1762). Hume's response to Campbell's manuscript is of particular interest because Campbell's work is a critique of Hume's "Of Miracles," and because in the letter Hume clarifies his view of the nature of proof vis-a-vis miracle. In the Blair letter Hume writes the following:

---

<sup>43</sup>The proof against a miracle cannot be stronger than the strongest imaginable argument because if it were stronger then either (1) the strongest imaginable argument from experience would cease to be the strongest imaginable argument from experience, which is absurd, or (2) the proof against a miracle would have to be stronger than itself, which is also absurd.

The above argument can be construed as an instance of the *reductio ad absurdum* (see Wesley C. Salmon, *Logic*, 3rd edition [Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984], p. 32). The logical force of the argument stems from the fact that falsehoods (e.g., absurdities such as A & -A) can only be deduced logically from other falsehoods.

The proof against a miracle, as it is founded on invariable experience, is of that *species* or *kind* of proof, which is full and certain when taken alone, because it implies no doubt, as is the case with all probabilities; but there are degrees of this species, and when a weaker proof is opposed to a stronger, it is overcome.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, on the Blair interpretation the proof against a miracle is *not* as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined, since some proofs against miracles are stronger than others. In other words, according to the Blair interpretation, proofs against miracles admit of degrees.

At this juncture it may be asked: Why not simply abandon the Face Value interpretation? After all, the Blair interpretation seems to have so much in its favour. That is, in the Blair interpretation Hume *himself* clarifies his intentions about how to interpret the claim in question. I will not abandon the Face Value interpretation because, as I will argue in the next chapter, there is evidence which shows the Face Value interpretation to be a plausible interpretation too. In the meantime I will continue to set out Hume's *a priori* argument of Part One--but in accordance to the two interpretations.

#### A. Hume's *a priori* argument of Part One, according to the Face Value interpretation

I will begin with what is in effect the conclusion of Hume's argument of Part

---

<sup>44</sup>J. Y. T. Greig, ed., *The Letters of David Hume*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 350.



One (according to the Face Value interpretation), and then I will put forth the argument which supports that conclusion.

According to the Face Value interpretation, the "plain consequence," or conclusion, of Hume's argument of Part One is that one must suspend his or her judgment when confronted with a testimonial proof for the occurrence of a miracle. As I have mentioned previously in this chapter, Hume begins his miracle argument by conceding that a miracle has really happened and that the testimony for a miracle amounts to an entire proof. Hume then goes on to point out that a miracle transgresses or "violates" the laws of nature. Although Hume is not clear on what exactly he means for a law of nature to be violated, Hume does clearly take the *infrequency or rarity* of a miracle's occurrence to be central and crucial to his argument (which purports to show that we cannot reasonably believe that a law of nature has been violated). To show that Hume *does* clearly take the infrequency or rarity of a miracle's occurrence as central and crucial to his argument, I will quote again some passages I quoted above. Says Hume,

Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die on a sudden: because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the

existence of any miracle....<sup>45</sup>

In other words, for an event to be deemed miraculous, it must be a very uncommon event. Also, says Hume,

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as 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.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, because proofs--i.e., firm and uninterrupted experiences of high frequencies of conjoinings between two kinds of events--have established the laws of nature, and because a miracle is an exception to these laws of nature, the "very nature" of a miracle which allows one to say that there is a proof against a miracle is merely the fact that a miracle occurs very rarely (relative to a particular regularity in nature).

Keeping in mind the fact that Hume's argument gets traction by focusing on the rarity of a miracle's occurrence, I will take another run at paraphrasing Hume's *a priori* argument of Part One (according to the Face Value interpretation).

---

<sup>45</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 115. When Hume writes that "it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country," it is tempting to charge Hume with the fallacy of question-begging, since in the case of the early Christian witnesses Jesus' resurrection is alleged to have been observed. But the point Hume is making here, given the context of the above sentence, is that a necessary condition for determining an event like the resurrection to be a miracle is that there is a high and uninterrupted frequency of non-resurrections prior to the occurrence of the event in question.

<sup>46</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

For the purpose of his argument against the reasonableness of belief in miracles, Hume concedes that a miracle has really occurred and that the testimony for a miracle amounts to an entire proof. Then Hume goes on to point out that a miracle transgresses or "violates" the laws of nature. But, says Hume, the laws of nature are established by a uniform experience--i.e., a very high and uninterrupted frequency--of conjunctions between two kinds of events P and Q. In other words, the laws of nature concerning P and Q provide the basis for proofs against the occurrence of any event other than q--where the event other than q would be a miracle--when p is given.<sup>47</sup> Since "the proof against a miracle . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined," that is, since proofs against miracles are all equally the strongest imaginable arguments from experience, a miracle by its very nature will always face a "direct and full" proof against its existence. But if we have a proof of a testimony which testifies to the occurrence of some event--that is, if we have a uniform experience of constant conjoinings between testimony and the object of the testimony--then we also have evidence of natural law concerning testimony (after all, "a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws"<sup>48</sup>). On the one hand, then, we have a proof for the truth of the testimony concerning a miracle, and on the other hand we have a proof for allegedly violated natural laws. That is, on the one

---

<sup>47</sup>A law of nature might be that dead people stay dead, and a violation of such a law is the resurrection of Jesus. (P = dead people; Q = staying dead; p = Jesus killed via crucifixion; r = Jesus is alive and well.)

<sup>48</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

hand we have the laws of human nature concerning testimony and the objects of that testimony, and on the other hand we have the laws of physical nature. How does one adjudicate? Since, according to Hume, the falsity of the testimonial proof is tantamount to a violation of a law of nature--i.e., a miracle<sup>49</sup>--Hume recommends (in the maxim of his "plain consequence") that we weigh the miracle of the falsity of the testimony against the miracle that testimony purports to establish, and reject the greater miracle.<sup>50</sup> In other words, Hume proposes the imagery of a legal weigh-scale whose two sides consist of two opposing miracles. But, because a proof against a miracle consists of the strongest imaginable

---

<sup>49</sup>Hume simply *asserts* that the falsehood of the proof for a testimony is a miracle. Presumably, Hume's reasoning would be along the following lines: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature" and "a firm and unalterable experience [i.e., an experience of constant conjunction] has established these laws" (Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114). It follows that if you have a proof (i.e., an experience of constant conjunction), then you have a law--which is to say that all proofs constitute sufficient evidence for laws. The violation of a proof, then, is tantamount to the violation of a law. But a violated law is a miracle. Thus, a violated proof is a miracle too. And hence, saying that a testimony is false when we have a proof for its truth is to say that the proof for the testimony has been violated--which is also to say that a miracle has occurred.

It is important to realize that because *Hume* takes the falsity of a testimonial proof to be a miracle, we can legitimately conclude that Hume takes a proof to be sufficient evidence for a law of nature.

<sup>50</sup>Gary Colwell, in "On Defining Away the Miraculous" (*Philosophy*, 57, 1982), p. 328, argues that Hume illicitly stacks the probabilistic deck in favour of the miracle of the falsity of the testimony because the falsity of the testimony is tantamount to the non-occurrence of the testified-to miracle (according to Colwell, "the occurrence of a miracle and its non-occurrence are both called 'miracles'" by Hume), and because the non-occurrence of a miracle is as regular as opposed to irregular event. Colwell's argument goes awry, however, because he misses the point that for Hume the miracle is constituted not merely by the non-occurrence of the reported event but by the fact that a report is false when we have a proof for its truth.

argument from experience, the two sides of the legal weigh-scale consist of two opposing but equally strong members of the set of all strongest imaginable arguments from experience--which is to say that the scale is left in a state of balance. On the one side there is the proof against the miracle of the falsity of the testimony; on the other side there is the proof against the miracle to which the testimony testifies.<sup>51</sup> And the proofs are equal in weight. In other words, we cannot believe that the testimony for the miracle is false *and* we cannot believe that the original miracle (i.e., the object of the testimony) has occurred. There is, then, a "mutual destruction of arguments" which is complete. Hence, Hume in effect concludes in Part One of "Of Miracles" (according to the Face Value interpretation) that one must suspend one's judgment when confronted with a testimonial proof for the occurrence of a miracle.

---

<sup>51</sup>It should be noted that there is an apparent incoherence in Hume's understanding of the opposition of proofs; but this problem can be easily remedied. Recall that proofs, for Hume, are "such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition" (Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 56n). It would very much appear, then, that if there is an argument from experience which leaves no room whatsoever for doubt or opposition, then there cannot be an opposing argument that *also* leaves no room whatsoever for doubt or opposition. However, in "Hume on the Evidential Impossibility of Miracles" (in *Studies in Epistemology*, ed. Nicholas Rescher [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975], p. 3), Dennis M. Ahern points out that Hume's use of the term show that he actually understands the notion of proof "as an indicator but not as a guarantee of truth." In other words, says Ahern, "A proof is an argument from experience, and even though it is attended with great conviction and a feeling of certainty, it is not an absolute guarantee of truth; one may in appropriate circumstances correctly be said to have a proof for a false proposition" (p. 3).

B. Hume's *a priori* argument of Part One, according to the Blair interpretation

Again, I will begin with what is in effect the conclusion of Hume's miracle argument of Part One, and then I will put forth the argument which gets us to that conclusion.

According to the Blair interpretation, the "plain consequence," or conclusion, of Hume's argument is merely that because there is a conflict between the testimonial proof for the occurrence of a miracle and the evidence for the laws of nature which a miracle violates, extraordinary evidence is needed to establish the occurrence of a miracle. That is, unlike the Face Value interpretation, the Blair interpretation allows the establishment of a miracle's occurrence in principle as long as strong evidence is available.<sup>52</sup>

In the Blair interpretation, as in the Face Value interpretation, Hume concedes for the purpose of his argument that the object of the testimony is really miraculous and that the testimony for a miracle amounts to an entire proof. Also as in the Face Value interpretation, Hume goes on to point out that a miracle transgresses or violates the laws of nature--which, for the purpose of his argument, Hume reduces (as I have shown above in my discussion of the Face

---

<sup>52</sup>Recall that on the Face Value interpretation we cannot establish a miracle's occurrence even though we have a testimonial proof. On the Face Value interpretation we are left with a suspension of belief because the strongest testimonial evidence for a miracle, i.e., a proof, is always balanced with equally strong evidence of the natural law which is alleged to be violated. On the Blair interpretation, however, the possibility exists that, in the face of the strong evidence for the allegedly violated natural law, the testimonial evidence for the violation may be stronger.

Value interpretation) to the rarity of a miracle's occurrence. But, again, the laws of nature are established by a uniform experience--that is, a very high and uninterrupted frequency--of constant conjoinings between two kinds of events. That is again to say, the law of nature concerning two kinds of events P and Q provides the basis for a proof against the occurrence of a miracle, an event other than q when p is given. Now--contrary to the Face Value interpretation--the proof against a miracle is *not* as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. That is, not all proofs against miracles are equal: some proofs are stronger than others. As a result, miracles by their very nature will always face a "direct and full" proof against their existence, but the fullness of the proof will admit of degrees. In other words, some very high and uninterrupted frequencies of conjoinings between two kinds of events will be greater than others. So how does one adjudicate between the testimonial proof for a miracle and the proof against the miracle's existence? As in the Face Value interpretation, Hume proposes the imagery of a legal weigh-scale whose two sides consist of two opposing miracles. And, since the falsity of the testimonial proof is tantamount to a violation of a law of nature--i.e., a miracle<sup>53</sup>--Hume recommends (as in the Face Value interpretation) that we weigh the miracle of the falsity of the testimony against the miracle that the testimony purports to establish, and reject

---

<sup>53</sup>See my previous footnote (#49) to understand how Hume may have reasoned to the conclusion that the falsity of a testimonial proof is tantamount to a miracle. It is important to keep in mind that because *Hume* takes the falsity of a testimonial proof to be a miracle, we can legitimately conclude that Hume understands proofs to be sufficient evidence for a law of nature.

the greater miracle. But, unlike the Face Value interpretation, because there are varying extents or degrees of uniform experience which establish the laws of nature, there is a possibility of a greater miracle. The greater miracle is that event which violates that law of nature which has a greater firm and unalterable experience to establish it as a law of nature than does the other law of nature which is violated. In other words, of the two miracles, the greater miracle is the event which violates that law of nature which has been established by a greater frequency of constant conjoinings between the events in question--which is to say that the greater miracle is that event which is, relatively speaking, most rare.<sup>54</sup> As a result, if the falsehood of the testimony is more miraculous than the fact it endeavours to establish, then the testimony *may* be sufficient to establish a miracle. Still, the evidential force of the testimonial proof is seriously weakened by subtracting the force of the opposing proof. Thus, Hume in effect concludes in Part One (according to the Blair interpretation) that we can in principle have testimony outweigh the evidence for the violated law of nature, but the frequency of the conjoinings in the experience of constant conjunction between the kind of testimony and the objects of that testimony must be *much* greater than the frequency of the conjoinings in the experience of the related natural law.<sup>55</sup> In

---

<sup>54</sup>If miracle X transgressed a law of nature established by one million uninterrupted conjoinings of A and B, and if miracle Y transgressed a law of nature established by two million uninterrupted conjoinings of C and D, then miracle Y would be the greater miracle.

<sup>55</sup>A reader of this thesis may feel some hesitancy about the frequency interpretation I am setting forth. Indeed, one might ask (as Professor Wright has



other words, for a testimony's proof to be sufficient to establish a miracle, it must be *very strong*.

### III. Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to set out the two interpretations of Hume's

---

asked): Why should not the additional strength on one side of the scale be the result of the fact that a careful scientific study has been done, wherein all variations in extraneous circumstances which might cause a change in the correlation have been ruled out? In other words, the objection might go, a stronger proof may just be the result of a better established law of nature, based on careful scientific investigation--indeed, Hume gives us lots of criteria other than frequency which make a law of nature credible.

To be sure, in Book I, Part 3, Section XV of the *Treatise* (pp. 173-175) Hume offers eight rules for determining whether a specific relation is one of cause and effect. And one of these rules--the fourth--allows us to "attain a knowledge of a particular cause merely by one experiment" (*Treatise*, p. 105). Rule four is the principle that "The same cause always produces the same effect, and the same effect never arises but from the same cause" (*Treatise*, p. 173). According to Hume, rule four is justified by our experience of "millions" of experiments, i.e., "a sufficient custom" (*Treatise*, p. 105). How does one obtain knowledge of a particular cause merely by one experiment? Carefully, by setting up a single experiment which isolates a particular set of conjoined events, and then by appealing to rule four. In other words, if a particular event p can be shown to cause a particular event q, then, via an appeal to rule four, we can generalize that for *all* events P and for *all* events Q, P causes Q.

We need to notice, however, that regardless of how a law of nature is established as a law of nature--via observation of constant conjunction or via a single well-done experiment--the statement or formula which describes the law of nature in question in effect *represents* a uniform experience of conjoinings between the kinds of events in question--i.e., it represents a very high and uninterrupted frequency of conjunctions. It is these conjunctions that Hume takes to constitute the proofs which weigh against the violations/interruptions of the conjoinings. Metaphorically put, the statement or formula which describes the law of nature in question purchases its weighing power with borrowed capital.

*a priori* in-principle argument of Part One. To achieve this aim: (1) I set out how Hume built up to his *a priori* in-principle argument of Part One via his attention to Tillotson's argument against transubstantiation and via his focus on how the infrequency of a marvellous and extraordinary event impinges on the credibility of testimony to that event; (2) I showed how in the case of miracles Hume continues the theme that the infrequency of an event impinges on the credibility of a testimony concerning that event; (3) I showed that a sentence in Part One can be interpreted in two ways (i.e., according to the Face Value interpretation and according to the Blair interpretation); and (4) I showed that these two ways allow for the *a priori* in-principle argument of Part One to be interpreted in two ways (on the one hand, the argument of Part One brings us to a suspension of belief; on the other hand, the argument of Part One brings us merely to a recognition that strong testimonial proof is required to establish a miracle's occurrence). For the sake of space, I will here not set out in summary fashion the Face Value and Blair interpretations of Part One's *a priori* in-principle argument; instead, I refer the reader to Appendix B.

In Chapter Three I will show how the Face Value interpretation and the Blair interpretation allow the whole or overall argument in "Of Miracles" to be interpreted in two ways as well. Then, with an eye to the two overall or macro-interpretations of "Of Miracles" which flow out of the Face Value and Blair micro-interpretations, I will go on to set out the arguments of Part Two in detail in

Chapter Four. Chapter Five will be my critique of the arguments of Part One and of Part Two.

## Chapter Three

### AN INTERPRETIVE TRANSITION FROM PART ONE TO PART TWO IN HUME'S "OF MIRACLES"

#### I. The need for an interpretive transition

Before I go on to look at Part Two of Hume's "Of Miracles," it is important to understand how Part One fits with Part Two. Why? Because if the arguments of Part Two do not cohere with the Face Value and Blair interpretations of the argument in Part One, then those interpretations are implausible and may misrepresent Hume.<sup>1</sup> However, if good sense can be made of Part Two vis-a-vis the Face Value and Blair interpretations, then that good sense lends merit to those interpretations. It is my view in this thesis that the Face Value and Blair micro-

---

<sup>1</sup>My goal is to provide an interpretation of Hume's argument which is reasonably charitable to Hume. I believe that in the essay "Of Miracles" Hume is trying to put forward good reasons for what he believes concerning the subject of miracle reports. I believe too that an important aspect of putting forward good reasons in an essay form is that the whole of the essay has an overall theme or rationale with which the parts cohere. Hence, I arrive at my conclusion that if the arguments of Part Two do not make sense with the Face Value and Blair interpretations of the argument in Part One, then those interpretations are implausible and may misrepresent Hume.

interpretations of Hume's argument in Part One result in two plausible overall or macro-interpretations of Hume's essay. These two macro-interpretations I have dubbed the "Pyrrhonian-Academic Sceptical" (PAS) interpretation and the "Extraordinarily Strong Proof Required" (ESPR) interpretation. (Why I have dubbed the two macro-interpretations with these names will become clear as this chapter progresses.) It is also my view in this thesis that these two overall interpretations are informed or guided by what may be called "Hume's fideistic stance."

In this chapter, then, I will argue that Hume adopts a fideistic stance in "Of Miracles," and I will present and defend the above two overall interpretations.

## II. Hume's fideistic stance

The overall tone or facade of "Of Miracles" is one of agreement with Christian *fideism*. Fideism, as Richard Popkin and Avrum Stroll point out, is "a view that our religious knowledge is not, and ought not to be, based upon rational or natural information, but solely on faith."<sup>2</sup> As Terence Penelhum elaborates, fideists hold "that faith and reason are so disparate that faith is not undermined,

---

<sup>2</sup>Richard H. Popkin & Avrum Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple*, 2nd edition (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 170.



but strengthened, if we judge that reason can give it no support."<sup>3</sup> The fideistic Christian holds that by God's Grace a person is miraculously moved to belief; religious belief is not obtained via reason. Consequently, fideists disparage the rational justification of religious beliefs, and, since religious beliefs are rationally unjustifiable in the view of the fideist, fideists require for religious belief a "leap of faith" contrary to rational principles.<sup>4</sup>

Hume's fideistic leanings can clearly be seen in the following texts from "Of Miracles." Hume writes,

I am the better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the *Christian Religion*, who have

---

<sup>3</sup>Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), p. ix.

<sup>4</sup>Not so incidentally, it is my view that the fideistic Christian is only *partly* correct. I agree with the fideist that it is by God's Grace that a person is miraculously moved to religious belief; however, I disagree that religious belief cannot be obtained via reason. In other words, along with my belief that it is by God's Grace that a person is miraculously moved to religious belief, I also believe that religious belief may be obtained via reason. To reconcile this apparent contradiction, I hold that *reason may be a vehicle of God's Grace*. (I am persuaded that my beliefs in this matter correspond very well with the example set by the apostles in the New Testament: e.g., John 20: 30-31, Acts 17:17, 1 Peter 3:15. This thesis, however, is not the appropriate place to offer a defense of my convictions vis-a-vis the New Testament. Nevertheless, I recommend: Frederic R. Howe's *Challenge and Response: A Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), pp. 13-76; John Warwick Montgomery's "The Place of Reason in Christian Witness," in his *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* [New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978], pp. 27-42; Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 11-44; and I recommend Terry L. Miethe's *A Christian's Guide to Faith and Reason* [Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1987].)

undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason. Our most holy religion [Christianity] is founded on *Faith*, not on reason....<sup>5</sup>

In addition, at the end of his essay Hume writes,

[U]pon the whole, we may conclude, that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, 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>6</sup>

Moreover, if we may be allowed to judge a tree by its fruit, there is yet another reason to think that Hume had fideistic leanings. As Manfred Kuehn points out,

From the time of the publication of *Socratic Memorabilia* in 1759 by Kant's critic and friend Johann Georg Hamann, Protestant fideist thinkers have employed Hume's critique of rationalist theology as a preparatory stage to authentic faith. A "Barthian Protestant" who believes that "there is no point of contact for arguments" between Christians and non-Christians because faith is a "gift from God" which cannot be understood by Christians themselves might even find some comfort in Hume's conclusions.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>6</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 131.

<sup>7</sup>Manfred Kuehn, "Kant's Critique of Hume's Theory of Faith," forthcoming in M. A. Stewart & John P. Wright, eds., *Hume and Hume's Connexions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994). Kuehn is quick to add that although Hume "clearly invited such a reaction," it would be incorrect to conclude that Hume favoured religious faith or such leaps of faith. According to Kuehn, "Hume thought not merely that (i) Christian faith is not based upon reason ('mere reason

Since protestant Christian fideists subscribe to the needed leap of faith of fideism, their acceptance of Hume's critique of rationalist theology as being at the very least consistent with orthodox Protestant teaching (i.e., "authentic faith") may be an additional reason for the claim that Hume very likely did portray himself as a Christian fideist in "Of Miracles."

But *why* did Hume don this Christian fideistic guise? For the sake of good health. Hume was writing at a time when overt challenges to the Christian religion often led to some undesirable social and/or physical consequences. As R. M. Burns points out,

The dangers involved in publishing sceptical opinions on matters of religion during this period perhaps need some stressing. Hume's own hesitations and the constant cautions of his friends had a solid basis in the reality of the situation. In spite of the official espousal of toleration in England, and the widespread adoption of irreligious attitudes in upper class society, almost all the leading Deists of the period suffered from some kind of persecution, such as loss of university positions or imprisonment.<sup>8</sup>

A received religious view in England at the time of Hume--a view under attack by Deists and others--was a Christianity whose rational credibility was made to

---

is insufficient to convince us of its veracity'), but also that (ii) it is inconsistent with a rational outlook (it 'subverts all the principles of his understanding' and gives the believer 'a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience')."

<sup>8</sup>R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1981), p. 138. Deists hold a belief in "one God who created the world but does not intervene in its present functioning, either by way of revelation or miracle..." (W. L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* [New Jersey: Humanities Press Inc., 1980], p. 121).



depend upon the evidence of miracles and fulfilled prophecy. According to Gaskin, such evidentialist defenders of Christianity were quite prevalent at the time of Hume: for examples, John Locke, Samuel Clarke, Bishop Thomas Sherlock, and Bishop Pearce.<sup>9</sup> In addition, according to Gaskin, Hume was responding primarily to Sherlock's *Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection*, wherein Sherlock "argued carefully and persuasively that the testimony of the Apostles established the Resurrection as an historical fact."<sup>10</sup> Thus, for someone, such as Hume, who is interested in showing the unreasonableness of belief in miracle reports, and who is interested in thereby offering "a direct confutation of the crucial argument upon which the rational credibility of the Christian Revelation had been...made to depend, namely, the historical truth of the Resurrection"<sup>11</sup>--and who is interested in maintaining social standing and physical health--an adoption of the fideistic stance is not at all an unreasonable means of achieving one's ends.<sup>12</sup> In

---

<sup>9</sup>J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edition (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1988), pp. 143-152.

<sup>10</sup>Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 145.

<sup>11</sup>Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 135.

<sup>12</sup>Gaskin's view that Hume was responding primarily to Sherlock's *Tryal* does not go unchallenged. Indeed, in "Hume's 'Of miracles': Probability and Irreligion" in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M. A. Stewart, Oxford Studies in the History of Philosophy, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 191-229, David Wootton argues that Hume was *not* responding primarily to Sherlock's *Tryal*. According to Wootton, in spite of the fact that "[Hume's] arguments seem to be a reply to Sherlock's" ("Probability and Irreligion," p. 224), Hume's essay actually arose in a context of written work furnished by the frenchmen Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) and Nicholas Freret (fl. circa 1729). Wootton argues that Hume wrote "Of Miracles" for his *Treatise* during his visit to La Fleche, France, in the years 1735 to 1737, but waited until 1748 for publication.

other words, by adopting the fideistic stance Hume took on the role of the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing--where the sheep are those followers of the Great Shepherd, Jesus, followers who hold that the truth concerning Jesus' resurrection is rationally credible; and the wolf is the person who pretends to follow Jesus (but as a fideist) and argues that the belief that Jesus resurrected cannot be rationally credible.<sup>13</sup> Hume's fideistic stance, as I will now show, will guide how we are to interpret "Of Miracles" as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

---

Although Wootton presents some persuasive arguments in defense of his views, the fact remains that when Hume did have "Of Miracles" published he had it published in England--and the fact remains that "Of Miracles" is an attack on the rational credibility of the Christian revelation.

<sup>13</sup>It is reasonable to think Hume is not a Christian-- fideist or otherwise--because of his views in *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) and in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). In the former work, Hume argues that monotheism developed out of polytheism, that monotheism is characterized by an undesirable intolerance, and that popular religions (such as Christianity) are not beneficial for people's behaviour. In chapter 12 of the latter work, Hume (as Philo) argues against the view (held by Cleanthes) that Christianity is needed for morals. (Both works can be found in David Hume, *Writings on Religion*, ed. Antony Flew [La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1992], pp. 107-292.) The implication of these works is that Hume does not subscribe to the Christian religion.

Also, some evidence from Wootton ("Probability and Irreligion") provides additional support for the view that Hume does not subscribe to the Christian religion. Wootton points out that A. A. Sykes (fl. circa 1725-1751), a contemporary of Hume and a defender of a rationalist Christianity, held the view that Hume "had written on miracles under the guise of being a Christian" (p. 221).

(Ultimately, of course--assuming the God of Christianity exists--*God* will be the Judge in this matter.)

<sup>14</sup>One way in which Hume's fideistic stance has already guided my interpretation of "Of Miracles" as a whole is the fact that I have taken Hume's talk in Part One of weighing miracle against miracle virtually *literally*. (I use the word "virtually" since I do not mean that I understand Hume to be referring to real weigh scales but I do mean that I understand Hume to mean a pitting against each other of the probative forces of the contrary evidences arising from the miracle attested to by testimony and from the falsity of this testimony.) A. E.

### III. The overall Pyrrhonian-Academic Sceptical (PAS) interpretation

According to the overall Pyrrhonian-Academic Sceptical (PAS) interpretation, which incorporates the Face Value interpretation of the claim in Part One<sup>15</sup>, Hume's conclusion in "Of Miracles" is the *fideistic* conclusion that Christianity is not founded on Reason. Also according to the PAS interpretation, Hume reaches this fideistic conclusion by first adopting a Pyrrhonian balance of judgment and then turning to considerations of Academic scepticism; and so some preliminary remarks concerning Pyrrhonian and Academic scepticism are in order.

In arguing the Pyrrhonian point of view, a Pyrrhonian sceptic pits the reasons in favour of a conclusion against the reasons against that conclusion with the result that we must suspend our judgment concerning the conclusion. In contrast, as John P. Wright points out, "The academic sceptic . . . argues both sides of the

---

Taylor (in "David Hume and the Miraculous," *Philosophical Studies* [London: Macmillan, 1934], p. 339) takes the weighing of miracles as "mere rhetorical amplification of the statement that proof of the miraculous is not forthcoming." Taylor, however, disregards the historical context of Hume's essay, i.e., that historical situation wherein it was dangerous for Hume to speak openly against Christianity. What Hume is doing, then, by his talk of weighing one miracle against another is this: Hume is making his point by implication, thereby disguising his dangerous conclusions, and thereby giving himself a modicum of protection.

<sup>15</sup>Recall that the Face Value interpretation in Part One takes at face value the claim that "the proof against a miracle...is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined." Recall, too, that according to the Face Value interpretation Hume argues in Part One that one must suspend judgment when confronted with any testimonial proof for the occurrence of a miracle (which means it is in principle not possible to establish via testimony the occurrence of a miracle).

question in order to obtain some positive result."<sup>16</sup> In other words, whereas a Pyrrhonian sceptic holds that certainty is not attainable because of a required suspension of belief, the academic sceptic transcends the Pyrrhonian suspension by holding that although certainty is not attainable, a probability in a particular direction is.

Now, given that the Face Value interpretation in Part One results in that suspension of belief so characteristic of Pyrrhonian doubt, and given that the arguments of Part Two serve to push the suspended scales of Part One in a particular direction, it is significant for the PAS interpretation that Hume is keenly aware of Pyrrhonian scepticism and that he has a penchant for Academic scepticism.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Hume holds that via the academic sceptic's argument the "undistinguished doubts" resulting from the Pyrrhonian sceptic's argument "are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection."<sup>18</sup> The PAS interpretation, then, takes Part One of Hume's two-part "Of Miracles" as a Pyrrhonian sceptic's argument from *a priori* in-principle considerations; it takes the first three arguments of Part Two as an attempt on the basis of *a posteriori* considerations to get beyond the Pyrrhonian sceptical position to a reasonable disbelief in miracle reports in general; and then it takes the fourth (and final)

---

<sup>16</sup>John P. Wright, "Hume's Academic Scepticism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 1986, p. 419.

<sup>17</sup>See Section XII of Hume's *Enquiry*: "Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy" (pp. 149-165).

<sup>18</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 161.

argument in Part Two as an additional and independent *a priori*, in-principle argument against reports of miracles (which are used as an evidential basis for a religious belief system). And so, Hume concludes fideistically, Christianity is not based upon Reason.

The heart or distinctive thrust of the PAS interpretation can roughly yet helpfully be described by what William Lane Craig calls an "Even if...but in fact..." form of argument.<sup>19</sup> According to Craig, Hume's overall argument has the following structure:

...even if the evidence for a miracle constituted a full proof, the wise man would not believe in miracles [since the scales are evenly balanced]....*But in fact...*the evidence for miracles does not amount to a full proof. Indeed, the evidence is so poor, it does not even amount to a probability. Therefore, the decisive weight falls on the side of the scale containing [the evidence against belief in miracles]....<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>William Lane Craig, *Apologetics: An Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), p. 103.

<sup>20</sup>Craig, *Apologetics*, p. 104.

Terence Penelhum in his chapter "God and the World: Miracles", in *Religion and Rationality* (New York: Random House, 1971), and Robert A. H. Larmer in *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988; see pp. 31-42 and pp. 103-109), exhibit the distinctive "Even if...but in fact..." thrust of the PAS interpretation. Norman L. Geisler, in *Miracles and Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982) does not subscribe to the heart of the PAS interpretation as clearly as Craig does. Referring to Hume's "Of Miracles," Geisler says "Hume actually has two arguments against miracles here. The first argument is an argument *in principle*, which assumes the credibility of witnesses. The second is an argument *in practice*, which challenges in fact whether any miracles have ever had credible witnesses" (Geisler, p. 25n). According to the first argument, says Geisler, miracles "are simply held always incredible by the very nature of the evidence. The wise man...simply never *believes* they happen, because he never has enough evidence for that belief" (Geisler, p. 28).

Thus, in view of Hume's very apparent use of sceptical arguments in "Of Miracles," in view of the textual evidence for Hume's fideistic leanings, and in view of the penchant of fideistic Christians to use sceptical reasoning (as pointed out by Kuehn), the overall PAS interpretation makes good sense.

#### IV. The overall Extraordinarily Strong Proof Required (ESPR) interpretation

The overall ESPR interpretation, on the other hand, takes Hume to his fideistic conclusion (that Christianity is not founded on Reason) via a slightly different route. Incorporating the Blair interpretation of the claim in Part One<sup>21</sup>,

---

Interestingly, in Geisler's work we can see what R. M. Burns in *The Great Debate on Miracles* (p. 142) calls the "classical interpretation," and we can begin to see that interpretation's concomitant problem. According to the classical interpretation, Part One of "Of Miracles" is seen as decisively showing that it is impossible for any testimonial evidence to make it reasonable to believe that a miracle occurred, and Part Two is seen as redundant in view of Part One. But since Part Two consists of, in terms of volume, the major portion of the whole essay, the view that Part Two is redundant is seriously problematic. Significantly, the PAS interpretation overcomes this redundancy problem.

In none of the above-mentioned works which interpret Hume's argument in terms of the distinctive thrust of the PAS interpretation is there a justification offered in terms of Hume's fideistic stance coupled with his views on Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism. In my view, an appeal to Hume's fideistic stance and his Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism adds legitimacy to the interpretation that the "Even if...but in fact..." structure is intended by Hume.

<sup>21</sup>Recall that the Blair interpretation in Part One replaces the claim that "the proof against a miracle...is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined" with the claim that proofs against miracles admit of degrees of strength--which means in effect that it is in principle possible to establish the occurrence of a miracle (contrary to the Face Value interpretation). Recall, too, that according to the Blair interpretation Hume argues in Part One that: there is

the ESPR interpretation takes Part One of "Of Miracles" as the Blair interpretation understands Part One: that is, as Hume allowing that it is possible to establish the occurrence of a miracle and simply arguing that to establish the occurrence of a miracle extraordinarily strong evidence is needed. However, on the overall ESPR interpretation, Part Two's three *a posteriori* arguments show (as is the case on the PAS interpretation) that such required extraordinarily strong evidence is not to be had in fact. Moreover (as on the PAS interpretation), Part Two's *a priori* in-principle argument serves to show that reports of miracles used apologetically (i.e., used as an evidential basis for a religious belief system) are to be rejected solely on the basis of their apologetic feature. And so, Hume concludes fideistically (again), Christianity is not based upon Reason.

Antony Flew perhaps best describes the heart or distinctive thrust of the overall ESPR interpretation. According to Flew, in the first part of "Of Miracles" Hume's

aim is to show that there must be peculiar and important difficulties inherent in any attempt to establish that a genuinely miraculous event did in fact occur.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Flew goes on to point out, Hume is trying to show *a priori* in Part One

---

a conflict in the testimonial evidence for a miracle (due to the nature of a miracle); this conflict weakens the force of the testimonial evidence; thus, *very* strong evidence is required to achieve rational belief in a miracle report.

<sup>22</sup>Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 176.

that "there must be a conflict in the evidence" required to establish the occurrence of a miracle.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, "Hume's argument in Part I is offered there explicitly only as a check,"<sup>24</sup> not an insurmountable barrier to reasonable belief in the historical occurrence of a miracle (as on the PAS interpretation). The upshot of Part One is that it is possible to establish a miracle claim, but extraordinary evidence is needed to do so. The first three arguments in Part Two, however, show, as on the PAS interpretation, that such evidence is not available.<sup>25</sup> In addition, as on the PAS interpretation, the last argument in Part Two shows that for apologetic purposes such evidence *cannot* be available.

Thus, in view of the fideist's disparaging attitude toward the rational justification of religious beliefs, in view of the textual evidence for Hume's fideistic leanings, and in view of how the ESPR interpretation disallows the

---

<sup>23</sup>Flew, *Hume's Philosophy*, p. 176.

<sup>24</sup>Flew, *Hume's Philosophy*, p. 177. Flew adds: "The Oxford English Dictionary affords no reason for believing that this word ["check"] carried a stronger meaning then than now. The reference nearest in date (Smollett, 1751) is: 'But all the checks he received were insufficient to moderate his career.'"

<sup>25</sup>M. A. Stewart's interpretation of Hume's overall argument, in "Hume's Historical View of Miracles" (forthcoming in M. A. Stewart & J. P. Wright, eds., *Hume and Hume's Connexions* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994]), can be characterized as an ESPR interpretation. Stewart understands Part One of "Of Miracles" as allowing the "bare possibility" of testimonial evidence to outweigh the evidence against miracles, and he understands Part Two as thwarting the realization of this possibility in actual fact.

With some important qualifications, Gaskin's interpretation in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* could be considered as an ESPR interpretation too. Gaskin sees Part Two's *raison d'être* arising from Hume apparently "sensing" that the main argument of Part One is weak (p. 155). (Francis J. Beckwith, in *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles* [Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1989], follows Gaskin.)



rational justification of religion via Part Two's blockage of any testimonial evidence for miracles, the overall ESPR interpretation makes good sense too.

To conclude this section, then, we can legitimately say that the PAS and ESPR macro-interpretations, which are spawned by the Face Value and Blair micro-interpretations, allow the arguments of Part Two to connect with the argument(s) of Part One, and thereby allow Parts One and Two to form a coherent and plausible whole. And this coherence and plausibility of the whole serves to lend merit to the Face Value and Blair interpretations of the argument in Part One.<sup>26</sup>

#### V. Tying up a loose end: A final justification for the Face Value interpretation of Hume's claim in Part One

All is not yet well on the interpretive front, however. There remains a problem which, if without a satisfactory solution, will undermine the Face Value micro-interpretation of Part One *and* the consequent overall PAS interpretation.

In view of Hume's clarification concerning proofs against miracles as found

---

<sup>26</sup>R. M. Burns, in Chapter 7 of *The Great Debate on Miracles*, explains the existence of two strains of argument in "Of Miracles" as the result of (1) Hume's pride in Part One's *a priori* in-principle argument, (2) Hume's reluctant recognition that this argument was not as decisive as initially thought, and (3) Hume's later attempts at revision. From an historical point of view, Burns' work is impressive. From a logical point of view, however, Burns does not seem to recognize the foundational interpretive significance of the face value and Blair interpretations of Hume's claim that "the proof against a miracle...is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined" (Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114).

in his letter to Blair (quoted in the previous chapter), I need again to raise the question: So why not simply abandon the Face Value interpretation (and its consequent overall PAS interpretation) and stick only with the Blair interpretation (and its consequent overall ESPR interpretation)? After all, the mere fact that the Face Value interpretation can produce a coherent overall interpretation of "Of Miracles" does not stand up very well against the more powerful argument that the Blair interpretation ought to be the sole interpretation since it is coherent *and* in it *Hume himself* very obviously clarifies his meaning concerning proofs.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the objection is this: without any apparent justification, the Face Value interpretation ignores Hume's explicit intentions whereas the Blair interpretation does not--so we should stick with the Blair interpretation. Now I shall again answer, *but also argue*: I will not abandon the Face Value interpretation (and its consequent overall PAS interpretation) and stick only with the Blair interpretation (and its consequent overall ESPR interpretation) because the Face Value interpretation has good evidence to show that Hume intended it *too*.

The evidence that supports the Face Value interpretation's handling of the claim in Part One (i.e., that "the proof against a miracle . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined") is employed as premises in the following four arguments; and these arguments, along with the evidence for the Blair interpretation (i.e., the Blair letter), strongly support the thesis that

---

<sup>27</sup>Coherence, then, is necessary but not sufficient as a criterion of interpretation. Correspondence with certain facts about the world is necessary too.

Hume wished to maintain an ambiguity with respect to the claim in question--an ambiguity that is captured by the Blair interpretation *and* the Face Value interpretation.

#### A. Argument 1:

Premise 1: It is a fact that in the letter to Blair Hume prefaces his clarification by saying "I find no difficulty to explain my meaning, and yet *shall not probably do it in any future edition*" (my emphasis).<sup>28</sup> Premise 2: It is a fact that Hume wrote the letter to Blair in 1761. Premise 3: It is a fact that Hume did *not* make the clarification in any future edition his *Enquiry*. Premise 4: It is a fact that Hume prefaces his *Essays and Treatises* in 1776 with the claim that "the following Pieces [i.e., the essays of his *Enquiries, Dissertation on Passions, and Natural History*] *may alone be regarded* as containing his [Hume's] philosophical sentiments and principles" (my emphasis).<sup>29</sup> Conclusion: Therefore, Hume may well have intended to keep the Face Value interpretation of the claim in question intact.

#### B. Argument 2:

Premise 1: It is a fact that in Part One of "Of Miracles" Hume describes his

---

<sup>28</sup>Greig, *Letters*, p. 350.

<sup>29</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 2.

argument of Part One as an "everlasting check." Premise 2: It is a fact that in the game of chess (a game popular with intellectuals) an everlasting check results in a stalemate.<sup>30</sup> Premise 3: It is a fact that the Pyrrhonian conclusion resulting from the Face Value interpretation of the claim in question is the consequence of a stalemate between opposing arguments. Premise 4: It is a fact that the Pyrrhonian conclusion requires the Face Value interpretation. Conclusion: Therefore, there is strong textual evidence in Part One that Hume intended to keep the Face Value interpretation of the claim in question intact.

### C. Argument 3:

Premise 1: It is a fact that in Part Two of "Of Miracles" Hume claims that "a miracle, supported by any human testimony . . . [is] more properly a subject of derision than of argument." Premise 2: It is a fact that in Part Two of "Of Miracles" Hume claims miracles are an "absolute impossibility." Premise 3: These claims in Part Two are entirely consistent with the Face Value interpretation of the claim in question in Part One, but do not fit as well with the Blair interpretation. Conclusion: Therefore, there is some further textual evidence that Hume intended the claim in question to be understood in terms of the Face Value interpretation.

---

<sup>30</sup>As I have pointed out above, Flew takes a weak meaning of the word "check" (see Flew, *Hume's Philosophy*, p. 177). The existence of a weak meaning of a word, however, does not preclude the existence of a strong meaning when the word in question is ambiguous. To disambiguate, one must appeal to the context of the word's usage. As I have argued, in the case of Hume's essay the context is ambiguous--which means that Flew's meaning need not be the only one.

## D. Argument 4:

Premise 1: The PAS macro-interpretation, which requires the Face Value micro-interpretation, gives a good understanding of the overall structure of Hume's arguments. Premise 2: It is a fact that Hume has a predilection for Academical scepticism over Pyrrhonian scepticism.<sup>31</sup> Premise 3: The PAS interpretation, which requires the Face Value interpretation of the claim in question, fits well with this predilection of Hume (i.e., PAS's understanding of the claim in question allows Part One to be a Pyrrhonian argument which is superseded by the academically sceptical arguments of Part Two). Conclusion: Therefore, there is additional contextual evidence that Hume displayed some intention for the claim in question to be understood in terms of the Face Value interpretation

Together, these four arguments provide a solid case for the Face Value micro-interpretation of Part One and its consequent overall PAS interpretation. The first and second arguments strongly and independently support the Face Value interpretation by enlisting relevant contextual as well as internal textual evidence. The third and fourth arguments are not strong when taken independently of the first and second, but they do serve to provide some additional contextual as well as general background support. Along with the Blair letter, then, the above four

---

<sup>31</sup>See Section XII of Hume's *Enquiry*, titled "Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy" (pp. 149-165).

arguments show that Hume intended the Face Value interpretation as well as the Blair interpretation.

Thus, there is solid evidence to show that the Face Value *and* Blair micro-interpretations and hence the PAS and ESPR macro-interpretations are coherent and plausible. Indeed, the micro-interpretations and their consequent macro-interpretations very much appear to be supported by roughly equally strong cases. Hence, *both* the Face Value and Blair micro-interpretations *and*, respectively, their consequent PAS and ESPR macro-interpretations need to be addressed in any serious examination of Hume's "Of Miracles."

## VI. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to understand how Part One of Hume's "Of Miracles" fits with Part Two. My concern has been the fact that if the arguments of Part Two do not cohere with the Face Value and Blair interpretations of the argument in Part One, then those interpretations are implausible and may misrepresent Hume. After showing that Hume took on a fideistic stance in "Of Miracles," I showed how the Face Value and Blair micro-interpretations spawned two coherent and roughly equally plausible macro-interpretations—the "Pyrrhonian-Academic Sceptical" (PAS) interpretation and the "Extraordinarily Strong Proof Required" (ESPR) interpretation. (According to the PAS interpretation, Part One sets up the weigh-scales for a Pyrrhonian suspension

of belief, and Part Two takes up the Academically sceptical mandate of pushing the scales down on the side of disbelief. According to the ESPR interpretation, Part One merely defends the thesis that to establish the occurrence of a miracle extraordinarily strong evidence is needed, and Part Two shows that such evidence is not available.) In view of the above, my fear of misrepresenting Hume has been alleviated, and the aim of this chapter has been achieved.

Keeping in mind the overall PAS and ESPR interpretations, I will in my next chapter--Chapter Four--set out Hume's arguments of Part Two. The task of Chapter Five will be to critique Hume's arguments of Parts One and Two.

## Chapter Four

### HUME'S *A POSTERIORI* & *A PRIORI* ARGUMENTS OF PART TWO

#### I. Some preliminary remarks

My aim in this chapter is to set out Hume's arguments of Part Two of his "Of Miracles," while keeping in mind the overall PAS and ESPR interpretations.<sup>1</sup> To facilitate the achievement of this aim, some preliminary remarks are in order.

Although the arguments in Part Two of "Of Miracles" perform different macro-functions in the PAS and ESPR macro-interpretations, it is important to realize that their micro-interpretation does not change. Recall that according to the PAS macro-interpretation, the macro-function of Part One is to set up the weigh-scales for a Pyrrhonian suspension of belief, and the macro-function of Part Two is to take up the Academically sceptical mandate of pushing the scales down probabilistically on the side of disbelief. Recall too that according to the ESPR

---

<sup>1</sup>"PAS" stands for Pyrrhonian-Academic Sceptical, and "ESPR" stands for Extraordinarily Strong Proof Required.



macro-interpretation, the macro-function of Part One is merely to defend the thesis that to establish the occurrence of a miracle extraordinarily strong evidence is needed (to outweigh the evidential force of the allegedly violated law of nature), and the macro-function of Part Two is to show that such evidence is not available. Now, at the micro-interpretive level of Part Two, the micro-function of Part Two is to show that Hume's concession in Part One, that the testimony for a miracle amounts to an entire proof, is "a great deal too liberal."<sup>2</sup> More specifically put: via three arguments from *a posteriori* historical consideration Hume argues not only that there is no proof for testimony concerning the occurrence of a miracle but also that the probability is extremely weak if not non-existent; and via an additional argument from *a priori* in-principle considerations Hume argues that in the case of apologetic miracles the probability is always non-existent. In other words, it is clear that these four arguments of Part Two at the micro-level of interpretation perform the required PAS and ESPR macro-functions of Part Two: i.e., they push the scales down probabilistically on the side of disbelief *and* they show that extraordinarily strong evidence for a miracle is not to be had. Of great significance for the purpose of this chapter, then, is that the details of the arguments of Part Two require only one micro-interpretation. Hence, in the following examination of Hume's arguments in Part Two, I need

---

<sup>2</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 116.

only focus on *one* interpretation of those arguments.<sup>3</sup>

## II. Hume's three arguments from *a posteriori* considerations, in detail

### A. Some more preliminary remarks

As I have mentioned above (p. 91), the purpose of Hume's three arguments from *a posteriori* historical considerations is (at the micro- as well as macro-interpretive levels) to show not only that there is no proof for testimony concerning the occurrence of a miracle but also that the probability is very weak.

---

<sup>3</sup>Another way of explaining what I have said above is that, in contrast to the arguments of Part One, whose differing functions at the macro-interpretation arise from the differences in their micro-interpretations (i.e., the ambiguity concerning the strength of a proof against miracles), the difference in the macro-level functions of the arguments of Part Two arises not from the micro-interpretations of the arguments of Part Two but from the macro-interpretations which arise from Part One. That is to say, since the micro-interpretation of the four arguments of Part Two satisfies the two macro-functions required by the PAS and ESPR macro-interpretations (i.e., that the PAS suspension of belief in Part One be pushed in a particular direction and that the ESPR requirement of very strong proof not be met), we can conclude that, although the two different macro-functions of Part One are performed by two different micro-interpretations of Part One, the two different macro-functions of Part Two are performed by a single micro-interpretation of Part Two.

(My analysis of Hume's arguments serves to confirm to some extent Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst's Pragma-Dialectical Theory of Argument as presented in their *Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions* [Dordrecht, Holland: Foris Publications, 1984]. In terms of van Eemeren and Grootendorst's expanded Austinian-Searlean Speech Act Theory [see "Argumentation as an illocutionary act complex," *Speech Acts*, pp. 19-46], Hume's arguments very much appear to have various "higher levels" of illocutionary force, levels ranging from an argument's immediate function as justification or refutation to its functions vis-a-vis its varying degrees of contextual scope.)

Recall from Chapter Two that for Hume an argument is a *proof* for an event  $q$  if and only if: (1) there is an exceptionless past experience of constant conjunction between kinds of events  $P$  and  $Q$ ; (2) there is a present experience of  $p$ ; and (3) the argument takes premises expressing (1) and (2) as the basis for concluding  $q$ . Recall too that for Hume an argument is a successful *probability* if and only if: (1') it is not the case that there is an exceptionless past experience of constant conjunction between kinds of events  $P$  and  $Q$ ; (2') there has been a past experience of considerably more frequent conjunctions between  $P$  and  $Q$  than the total of conjunctions between  $P$  and  $Q$  than the total of conjunctions between  $P$  and kinds of effects other than  $Q$  ( $R$ ,  $S$ ,  $T$ , etc.); (3') there is a present experience of  $p$ ; and (4') the argument takes premises expressing (1') and (2') and (3') as the basis for concluding  $q$ . In other words, a testimonial proof or successful probability requires, respectively, a constant conjoining or a more-often-than-not-to-near-constant conjoining between miracle-testimonies and their corresponding miracles. Significantly, then, the presumption for both of these cases (i.e., proofs and probabilities) is that the individual miracle-testimonies that correspond with actual miracles must satisfy the criteria of what constitutes a *good individual miracle-testimony*. In other words, before the *quantitative* requirements of a proof or a successful probability can be met, it is required of the particular miracle-testimonies of proofs and successful probabilities that certain *qualitative* conditions are satisfied. (What these qualitative conditions are, Hume will soon reveal, as I will show.) But, as Hume attempts to argue via the set of arguments consisting

of the first three arguments in Part Two (especially the second and the third arguments), these qualitative conditions are *not* satisfied; and hence, miracle testimony has in its behalf neither a proof nor a successful probability.

#### 1. Hume's first argument from *a posteriori* considerations

In his first argument from *a posteriori* considerations, Hume sets out the qualitative requirements of a proof and a successful probability for a miracle along with the quantitative requirements of a miracle proof, and he argues for the (implied) thesis that the quantitative requirements of a proof have not been satisfied. Says 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: All which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men.<sup>4</sup>

For Hume, then, the following qualitative conditions are required for a good individual miracle-testimony: the witness must be highly educated, socially outstanding, patently honest, have lots to lose by lying, and be situated in such

---

<sup>4</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 116-117.

circumstances that, if lying, exposure would readily result. But also, according to Hume, a "full assurance"--i.e., a proof--based on the satisfaction of these qualitative conditions is not forthcoming, since there has not been "a sufficient number" of conjoinings of qualitatively good individual miracle-testimonies with the miraculous objects of those testimonies.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in defense of the thesis that the testimony for a miracle does not amount to a proof, Hume merely specifies what he considers the qualifications of a good witness to be, and he points out that there have not been enough witnesses who have these qualifications.

Although Hume does not in "Of Miracles" defend his list of qualifications of a good witness, it is reasonable to think that Hume built up these criteria by his observation of human nature in many circumstances quite independently of miracle reports. As Hume points out in the introduction of his *A Treatise of Human Nature*,

We must...glean up our experiments in this [study of human nature] from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Recall that for Hume proofs are "such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition" (*Enquiry*, p. 56n) and that for Hume proofs give us an expectation of an event "with the greatest assurance" (p. 58). Thus, to have a "full assurance" in the testimony of men is to have a proof of the testimony of men.

<sup>6</sup>Hume, *Treatise*, p. xix.

In view of Hume's weigh scales consisting of opposing frequencies of constant conjoinings--now with those of the allegedly violated natural law on the one side and those of testimonies and their objects on the other--the implication of Hume's assertion is that the scales are heavier on the side of natural law (i.e., natural law descriptive of the physical, non-human world). To what extent the scales are leaning to this side is left for the remaining two *a posteriori* arguments to determine.

## 2. Hume's second argument from *a posteriori* considerations

Hume's second argument from *a posteriori* considerations holds that because people have a tendency to believe stories about the miraculous and the wonderful, and because people have a tendency to exaggerate (tendencies vindicated by the abundance of false tales of miracles), the aforementioned qualitative requirements of a good testimony are not satisfied--which means that the frequency of the conjunction between good testimony and actual miracles is diminished in the extreme. According to 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.... [W]hen anything is affirmed utterly absurd and miraculous, it [the mind] rather the more readily admits of such a fact, upon account of that very circumstance, which ought to destroy all its authority.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 117.

Indeed, adds Hume,

The passion of *surprise* 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>8</sup>

And, says Hume,

this goes so far, that even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events, of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, says Hume,

if the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder [which is exactly the case, Hume implies, where miracles are concerned], there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, says Hume,

The many instances of forged miracles, and prophecies, and supernatural events, which, in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence, or which detect themselves by their absurdity, prove sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvellous, and ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 117.

<sup>9</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 117.

<sup>11</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 118.

Hence, because of the human tendencies toward credulity and exaggeration with respect to the subject of miracles, individual reports concerning miracles should not be believed.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>In the interest of interpreting Hume charitably and fairly, it is tempting to understand Hume as not making such a strong claim about the effects of the human tendencies toward credulity and exaggeration with respect to the subject of miracles. On the bases of our own experiences and of an instance of Hume's attribution of these strong tendencies merely to "the generality of mankind" (Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 119), it seems reasonable to think that *not all* people are at the mercy of these tendencies. Indeed, it seems reasonable to think that Hume would think that witnesses who apparently meet his previously-mentioned qualitative requirements of good individual testimony have overcome their propensities for credulity and exaggeration. Am I, then, interpreting Hume *uncharitably*? Answer: No. Why? Because *Hume's conclusion* demands that he makes the strong claim concerning the human tendencies. Hume summarizes his conclusion of the first three arguments of Part Two as follows: "Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof...." (Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 127). Since (as I have shown) the first argument of Part Two merely specifies the qualitative conditions of miracle-testimony and asserts that there is not a sufficient number of testimonies which satisfy these qualitative conditions to constitute a proof for miracles; since (as I will show) the third argument of Part Two depends on the strong interpretation of Part Two's second argument to arrive at the above conclusion; since (as I have shown) there is substantial textual evidence in the second argument itself which provides solid support for a strong interpretation for the second argument; and since the conclusion can only be reached under a strong interpretation of the second argument: the strong claim concerning human tendencies is justified.

(An objection to my claim that the above quotation summarizes the conclusion of the first three arguments of Part Two might run as follows: Because Hume uses the words "upon the whole," and because this summary comes *after* Hume completes his Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument, Hume's summary does not accurately describe the conclusion of the first three arguments--so my use of it to interpret Hume's second argument is not legitimate. My response to this anticipated objection is that the objection fails to recognize the significance of the fact that Hume also uses the words "any kind of miracle." That is to say, because [as I will show] Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument focuses only on apologetic miracles, and purports to show that the apologetic feature of such miracles renders *only* their proofs and probabilities impossible, the possibility of extant proofs and probabilities for non-apologetic miracles remains--and Hume's objections to these possible miracle-testimonies fall under the larger jurisdiction



In view again of Hume's weigh scales consisting of opposing frequencies of constant conjunctions (those of the allegedly violated natural law on the one side and those of testimonies and their miraculous objects on the other), the implication of Hume's second *a posteriori* argument is that the scales are now *very much* heavier on the side of the natural law—to say the least. Indeed, because virtually no miracle-testimonies satisfy the qualitative conditions required for conjoining a miracle-testimony to its object, weighing against the constant conjunctions on the side of natural law there are virtually no conjunctions between testimonies and miracles.

### 3. Hume's third argument from *a posteriori* considerations

Hume's third argument from *a posteriori* considerations builds on the second argument from *a posteriori* considerations. Hume argues that there is "a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations" because testimonies about miracles "are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations."<sup>13</sup> According to Hume, in the early histories of our ignorant and barbarous ancestors, miracles (prodigies, omens, oracles) are intermingled with natural events. But, says Hume, we have learned that "all [reporting about supernatural events] proceeds from the usual propensity of mankind towards the

---

of his first three arguments of Part Two.)

<sup>13</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 119.

marvellous."<sup>14</sup> In other words, "it is nothing strange . . . that men should lie in all ages."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, because in an ignorant and barbarous nation lies are not readily detected and exposed, it is nothing strange that in such a nation "Men's inclination to the marvellous has full opportunity to display itself."<sup>16</sup> Thus, according to Hume, in view of the facts that humankind has a propensity to tell lies about the miraculous, that lies are less readily exposed in ignorant and barbarous nations, and that miracle reports arise primarily in ignorant and barbarous nations, it is again the case that virtually no miracle-testimonies satisfy the qualitative conditions required for conjoining a miracle-testimony to its object—which is to say (again) that there are virtually *no* conjunctions between testimonies and miracles.

In terms of Hume's weigh scales consisting of opposing frequencies of constant conjoinings, the combined implication of Hume's first, second, and third *a posteriori* arguments is (allegedly) that the scales are unequivocally heavier on the side of the allegedly violated natural law. Indeed, the testimonial evidence for a miracle consists neither of a proof nor even of a very weak probability, if of any probability at all. As Hume summarizes later (prior to summarizing the effect of his fourth argument of Part Two), "Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much

---

<sup>14</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 119.

<sup>15</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 120.

<sup>16</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 121.

less to proof . . . ."<sup>17</sup> According to Hume, then, his three *a posteriori* arguments show that the force of the probabilistic evidence of testimony in behalf of a miracle has virtually disappeared.

### III. Hume's (second) argument from *a priori* considerations, i.e., Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument, in detail

Hume wants to go even further, however. He wants to show that "a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion."<sup>18</sup> Up to this point in "Of Miracles," Hume has not distinguished between apologetic and non-apologetic miracles.<sup>19</sup> Now, he does. As Hume points out,

---

<sup>17</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 127.

<sup>18</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 127.

<sup>19</sup>According to A.J. Hoover's entry under "Apologetics" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 68, "The English word ['apologetics'] comes from a Greek root [*apologia*] meaning 'to defend, to make reply, to give an answer, to legally defend oneself.' In NT times an *apologia* was a formal courtroom defense of something (II Tim. 4:16). As a subdivision of Christian theology apologetics is a systematic, argumentative discourse in defense of the divine origin and the authority of the Christian faith." According to Frederic R. Howe, in *Challenge and Response: A Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), "Apologetics may be defined as the *clarification and defense of the total system of biblical Christianity with reference to specific attacks against the total system, or with reference to selective attacks against one or more of the basic elements inherent within the system*" (p. 20; Howe's emphasis). As the title of Howe's work indicates, Howe is concerned specifically with *Christian* apologetics. Apologetics, however, as Hoover's entry suggests, need not be limited to Christianity: Islam has its apologists (e.g., Maulvi Muhammad Ali), atheism has its apologists (e.g., Kai Nielsen), feminism has its apologists (e.g., Gloria Steinem), etc. Apologetics, then, is that endeavour to clarify and defend *any* belief system. Thus, *apologetic miracles*

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 [i.e., in the case of miracles that are not to be the evidential foundation of a system of religion], 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 . . . .<sup>20</sup>

In other words, Hume concedes the possibility of testimonial proofs for miracles that do not serve to ground a religion in reason<sup>21</sup>; but, according to Hume, testimonial proofs for miracles that *do* serve to ground a religion in reason are *not* possible. Hence, Hume forwards his additional *a priori* in-principle argument, i.e., what I have dubbed "Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument."

Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument defends the thesis that a consequence of the apologetic feature of a miracle and its report is "that not only

---

are miracles used to defend or establish a particular belief system which holds that God intervenes in the affairs of the world via miracles. However, as Robert A. H. Larmer points out in *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), "Traditionally conceived, God is concerned not just with the conveying of propositional truths [with miraculous confirmations], but also with the welfare of His creatures [e.g., healings]. It is theologically naive, therefore, to think that in general the sole or even chief purpose of a miracle is to guarantee the truth of the system in which it occurs" (p. 12). Hence, *non-apologetic miracles* are, as it were, free-floating miracles with no justificatory ties to a religious belief system.

<sup>20</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 127.

<sup>21</sup>Of course, the probability for this possibility must weigh against our experience of the allegedly violated laws and must face Hume's three *a posteriori* arguments. In other words, although testimonial proofs for miracles that do not serve to ground a religion in reason are possible in principle, their probative force is seriously curtailed by the first *a priori* in-principle argument and almost completely destroyed by the three *a posteriori* arguments (or so the argument goes).

the miracle destroys the credit of testimony, but the testimony destroys itself."<sup>22</sup>

Hume argues as follows:

. . . [L]et us consider, that, in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary; and that it is impossible the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China should, all of them, be established on any solid foundation. Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles, on which that system was established; so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts, and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite to each other.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, because religious belief-systems are contrary to one another, it is not possible for all of them to be true together; and, because it is not possible for all of them to be true together, it is also not possible for them all to be established as true via miracles; and, because it is not possible for all the contrary religious belief-systems to be established as true via miracles, such grounding or apologetic miracles are to be considered as contrary facts; and, because these grounding or apologetic miracles are to be considered as contrary facts, their reports are contraries as well. Hence, not only does the apologetic miracle destroy the credit

---

<sup>22</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 121-122.

of testimony in its behalf (since contraries cannot be true together<sup>24</sup>), but also the testimony for an apologetic miracle destroys itself (since it attempts to establish what contrary testimony overthrows<sup>25</sup>).

To illustrate his argument, Hume sets out three examples of what could be understood as religious systems apparently well-evidenced with three respective miracles. (Although the miracles are apparently well-evidenced, their reports are, according to Hume, false.<sup>26</sup>) The first example concerns a report by the

---

<sup>24</sup>One might be tempted to argue at this point that because Hume talks earlier of events such as miracles occurring contrary to one's experience of the occurrence of other events (i.e., one's experience of the usual course of nature), and because Hume concedes for the sake of his argument in Part One that a miracle actually occurred and that we could have a proof for its occurrence, Hume is not here taking the word "contrary" in the sense of incompatible. One should keep in mind, however, that Hume has also in his *Enquiry* clearly illustrated the notion of a contrary matter of fact with the propositions "*That the sun will not rise tomorrow*" and "*that it will rise*" (pp. 25-26; Hume's emphasis). Obviously, Hume does at times take the word "contrary" when applied to facts to describe those facts as incompatible. In the absence of further textual indicators, how, then, does one arbitrate between the two interpretations? Answer: By looking to Hume's clarification on the matter. As Gaskin points out (in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 141-142), the latter interpretation is confirmed in a letter from Hume to Hugh Blair: "If a miracle proves a doctrine to be revealed from God, and consequently true, a miracle can never be wrought for a contrary doctrine. The facts are therefore as incompatible as the doctrines." (J. Y. T. Greig, *The Letters of David Hume*, Vol. 1 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932], pp. 350-351.)

<sup>25</sup>Hume goes on to say that "This argument . . . is not in reality different from the reasoning of a judge, who supposes, that the credit of two witnesses, maintaining a crime against any one, is destroyed by the testimony of two others, who affirm him to have been two hundred leagues distant, at the same instant when the crime is said to have been committed." (Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 122.)

<sup>26</sup>It is important to realize that the examples Hume deploys are used merely to illustrate the problem of contrary facts, given the assumption that miracles have actually occurred. At the end of each example, Hume reminds his reader that the reports are false. Interestingly, in the process of so reminding his reader Hume tips his hand to show his personal views about miracle reports. For

apparently-credible Roman historian Tacitus (*circa* 55-117 A.D.). Tacitus reports that, in accordance to directions from the god Serapis<sup>27</sup>, the Roman Emperor Vespasian (9-79 A.D.) restored sight to a blind man "by means of his spittle" and healed a crippled man "by the mere touch of his foot."<sup>28</sup> The second example concerns a report by the apparently credible Cardinal de Retz of an apparently well-evidenced case in Spain of a doorkeeper for a Roman Catholic cathedral who

---

Hume, miracle reports are "gross and palpable...falsehood[s]," and the miracles themselves are an "absolute impossibility" as well as "more properly a subject of derision than of argument" (Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 123, 125, & 124).

For a discussion of what Hume could mean by his use of the phrase "absolute impossibility," see Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 162-165, and see Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, pp. 185-187. Both Gaskin and Flew argue that Hume is making a "robust" appeal to the notion of physical impossibility, since (at least in part), in Gaskin's words, "it is unreasonable to presume that Hume is suddenly and inconsistently abandoning his distinction between matters of fact whose negation is conceivable and relations of ideas whose negation is not, in other words, he is not attempting to say that certain events are *logically* impossible" (Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 163; Gaskin's emphasis). (Beckwith, in *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles*, p. 86, similarly understands Hume's use of "absolute impossibility" to mean "the [extremely high] antecedent improbability of an event.") This interpretation of Hume seems charitable and fair. Whether Hume is here charitable and fair is another matter, for Chapter Five.

<sup>27</sup>According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition, ed. David B. Guralnik (Cleveland, Ohio: William Collins & World Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), p. 1299, the god Serapis is "an Egyptian god of the lower world whose cult spread to Greece and Rome." David Kravitz's *Who's Who in Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc./Publisher, 1975) gives more detail: "'Serapis' is an epithet for Osiris, an Egyptian god of the Underworld, who in Greek mythology is son of Zeus and Niobe, is brother of Argus, Pelasgus and Typhon, was married to Isis, is father of Horus, and was murdered by Typhon" (p. 173).

<sup>28</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 122.

recovered a missing leg "by the rubbing of holy oil upon the stump."<sup>29</sup> The third example concerns the apparently very credible reports of various healings which had allegedly occurred at the tomb in France of the Jansenist Abbe Paris.<sup>30</sup> Hume then concludes, somewhat obscurely:

Is the consequence just, because some human testimony has the utmost force and authority in some cases, when it relates the battle of Philippi or Pharsalia for instance; that therefore all kinds of testimony must, in all cases, have equal force and authority? Suppose that the Caesarean and Pompeian factions had, each of them, claimed the victory in these battles, and that the historians of each party had uniformly ascribed the advantage to their own side; how could mankind, at this distance, have been able to determine between them? The contrariety is equally strong between the miracles related by Herodotus or Plutarch, and those delivered by Mariana, Bede, or any monkish historian.

What is Hume saying? Flew helpfully clarifies Hume's conclusion as follows:

[Hume's] concluding comment shows that the object of the exercise [of giving the three examples of religious systems apparently well-evidenced by miracles] is to give practical point to the contention that—at least insofar as miracles are premised to be infallible guarantees of whatever religious system they may be employed to endorse—miracles alleged under the auspices of all rival and incompatible systems must 'be regarded as contrary facts'.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup>According to Irving Hexham's *Concise Dictionary of Religion* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 119, Jansenism is a "French religious movement within the ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, named after Cornelius Otto JANSEN. Jansenists stressed vigorous personal PIETY and PREDESTINATION. They opposed the theology of the JESUITS." (Hexham's capitalization.)

<sup>31</sup>Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, p. 183.



Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument in conjunction with his illustrations may be summarized, then, as follows (in the words of Swinburne):

The argument is that if a miracle of ancient Graeco-Roman religion occurred as described, that is evidence that the gods of the Greeks and Romans exist, and if a Christian miracle occurred as described, that is evidence that the God of Christians exists. But if the gods of the Greeks and Romans exist, the God of the Christians does not, and conversely. Therefore the evidence in favour of a Graeco-Roman miracle is evidence against the existence of the God of the Christians, and hence evidence against the occurrence of Christian miracles, and conversely.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 18.

In view of the fact that the Jesuit movement in the Roman Catholic Church originated in Spain; in view of the fact that the miracle reported by Cardinal de Retz is alleged to have occurred in a Roman Catholic cathedral in Spain; in view of the fact that the Jansenists and Jesuits have some opposing theological doctrines; and in view of the fact that the miracles at the tomb of Abbe Paris may have been taken to support doctrines peculiar to Jansenist Roman Catholicism: it might be added that if the miracle in Spain reported by Cardinal de Retz was taken to be evidence for a Jesuit theological doctrine that Jansenist theology opposed, then Swinburne's description of Hume's argument would need to be expanded to include *intra*-Christian contraries (i.e., not just contraries between Christianity and other religions). As interesting as it may be to investigate what (if any) distinct doctrines actually hinge on the Spanish and French miracles, I will consider such an investigation beyond the scope of this thesis. Keeping in mind the fact that Hume is very apparently interested in showing that Christianity is not founded on Reason--that is, not founded on testimonial evidence for the resurrection of Jesus--I do not believe that the apparent force of Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument is impinged upon significantly by my bracketing such an investigation for another place and time.

#### IV. Some additional arguments—against non-apologetic miracles

Having completed his Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument, Hume repeats (with added rhetorical flourish) aspects of his previous arguments from *a posteriori* considerations<sup>33</sup>, Hume summarizes the results of his arguments of Part One and Part Two<sup>34</sup>, and then Hume addresses the possibility of proofs for *non-apologetic* miracle reports.

Unlike the case with apologetic miracles, Hume allows the theoretical possibility of non-apologetic miracles to admit of testimonial proofs. However, Hume is quick to point out that, although non-apologetic miracles may admit of testimonial proofs, "perhaps, it will be impossible to find any such [testimonial

---

<sup>33</sup>The passages to which I am referring consist of the six paragraphs commencing with the last paragraph on p. 125 of Hume's *Enquiry* and ending with the first paragraph on p. 127. The first and second of these six paragraphs are but an echo of Hume's second *a posteriori* argument; the third is an appeal to the results of all three *a posteriori* arguments; the fourth, fifth, and sixth paragraphs make and emphasize the claim that in the infancy of new religions the records and witnesses needed "to undeceive the deluded multitude . . . have perished beyond recovery" (p. 126).

<sup>34</sup>Hume writes on p. 127 of his *Enquiry*: "Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact, which it would endeavour to establish. It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience 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. But according to the principle here explained, this subtraction, with regard to all popular religions, amounts to an entire annihilation; and therefore we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion."



proofs for miracles] in all the records of history."<sup>35</sup> To support his view, Hume considers two hypothetical "miracles": (1) total darkness falling over the world for eight days, and (2) the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth (I).

As evidence for the first hypothetical miracle, Hume supposes that all the world's authors agree that the earth was in total darkness for eight days commencing the first day of January 1600 A.D. Moreover, supposes Hume, reports of travellers from foreign countries corroborate this period of darkness. In view of such evidence, Hume points out that

it is evident, that our present philosophers [scientists], 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.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, if an extraordinary and seemingly miraculous event is characterized by decay or deterioration, then it is not really a violation of a law of nature, i.e., not really a miracle (and so it, a non-miraculous event, may be established by strong testimony).

As evidence for the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth, Hume supposes there is unanimous agreement among historians of England that: Queen Elizabeth died on January first in the year 1600; her doctors and court saw her before and after

---

<sup>35</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 127.

<sup>36</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 128.

her death; parliament proclaimed her successor; a month later she returned to life, returned to her throne, and governed for an additional three years. How does Hume respond to such evidence? Says Hume,

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.

Why not? Because, says Hume,

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.

Apparently, then, in the above hypothetical case of an apparently well-evidenced violation of a law of nature--i.e., a miracle, in this case a non-apologetic miracle--Hume simply appeals to the results of his *a posteriori* arguments of Part Two coupled with the *a priori* argument(s) of Part One. That is to say, because the evidence for the allegedly violated laws of nature weighs very heavily against the testimonial evidence for a miracle (the result of Part One), and because the testimonial evidence for a miracle fails to satisfy the requirements of good testimony (because of the endemic knavery and folly of human beings; i.e., the result of the three *a posteriori* arguments of Part Two), Hume refuses to accept the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth as an explanation for the circumstances alleged to evidence her resurrection.

Hume also considers (apparently tangentially) the possibility of Queen

Elizabeth's resurrection being "ascribed to any new system of religion."<sup>37</sup> But, Hume provocatively points out,

men, in all ages, have been so much imposed on by ridiculous stories of that kind [i.e., resurrection stories], that this very circumstance [of ascribing a resurrection to a new system of religion] would be a full proof of a cheat, and sufficient, with all men of sense, not only to make them reject the fact, but even reject it without farther examination.<sup>38</sup>

And, Hume goes on to point out, our experience and observation

obliges us to compare the instances of the violation of truth in the testimony of men, with those of the violation of the laws of nature by miracles, in order to judge which of them is most likely and probable. As the violations of truth are more common in the testimony concerning religious miracles, than in that concerning any other matter of fact; this must diminish very much the authority of the former testimony, and make us form a general resolution, never to lend any attention to it, with whatever specious pretence it may be covered.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, in his consideration of the possibility of Queen Elizabeth's resurrection being used as the evidential or rational basis for a religion (notice the

<sup>37</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 128. This obviously is a thinly veiled reference to the resurrection of Jesus.

<sup>38</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 128-129. Flew, in *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, points out that "The innuendo here is harshly offensive" (p. 209). Also, Flew describes Hume's use of language here as "crude" and as "typical of the unsubtle categories within which the controversialists in Hume's day conducted the discussion" (p. 209). The crudity of Hume's language and unsubtlety of his categories notwithstanding, Hume clearly is making an appeal to the conclusion of his Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument (i.e., that apologetic miracles and miracle reports are self-destructive).

<sup>39</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 129.

parallel to Jesus' resurrection serving as the rational foundation for Christianity), Hume appeals to the result of his Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument of Part Two<sup>40</sup>, and he appeals to his *a priori* in-principle argument(s) of Part One coupled with his previous *a posteriori* arguments of Part Two.

Thus, and aside from Hume's apparent deviation in considering Queen Elizabeth's resurrection as an apologetic miracle<sup>41</sup>, even though Hume allows the theoretical possibility of non-apologetic miracles "to admit of proof from human testimony,"<sup>42</sup> Hume thinks it is not possible in practice to find non-apologetic miracles in the records of history, given Part One's argument(s) and Part Two's first three arguments (especially the second, i.e., the argument from humankind's propensities for knavery and folly).

In addition, in an attempt to clench the above conclusion, Hume appeals to the authority of Francis Bacon, who, in the *Novum Organum* (1620), writes that "Above all, every relation must be considered as suspicious, which depends in

---

<sup>40</sup>A strong case could also be made that Hume is appealing to ridicule. But this would be nit-picking, in view of the fact that Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument is his crucial argument here.

<sup>41</sup>Hume's apparent deviation in considering Queen Elizabeth's resurrection as an apologetic miracle is, I believe, Hume's way of addressing, in Gaskin's words, "the crucial argument upon which the rational credibility of the Christian Revelation had been and is still sometimes made to depend, namely, the historical truth of the Resurrection" (Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 135.). (Even if Hume did not have the resurrection of Jesus in mind, defenders of the historical truth of Jesus' resurrection have to deal with the implications of Hume's argument for their position.)

<sup>42</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 127.

any degree upon religion . . . ."<sup>43</sup>

## V. Hume's conclusions

Hume's conclusion to Parts One and Two of "Of Miracles" is that

Our most holy religion [Christianity] is founded on *Faith*, not on reason . . . . Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity....<sup>44</sup>

Hume arrives at this main conclusion via his sub- conclusion(s) of Part One coupled with his sub-conclusion of Part Two. The sub-conclusion of the PAS interpretation of Part One is that there is a Pyrrhonian suspension of belief which results from the miracle report and the evidence for the allegedly violated law of nature. The sub-conclusion of the ESPR interpretation of Part One is the claim that extraordinarily strong evidence is required for a miracle report to be credible. The sub-conclusion of Part Two is that miracle testimonies in general--and apologetic miracle testimonies in particular--have neither a proof nor a probability in their favour. Thus, the Pyrrhonian scales are probabilistically pushed down on the side of disbelief and the requirement for extraordinarily strong evidence has not been met. Fideism's scepticism concerning miracle reports is vindicated:

---

<sup>43</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 129.

<sup>44</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 130 & 131.

Miracle reports are not to be believed on the basis of reason.

What about those apologists who also defended Christianity via prophecies?

Has Hume ignored their arguments? No, says Hume,

What we have said of miracles may [also] be applied, without any variation, to prophecies; and indeed, all prophecies are real miracles, and as such only, can be admitted as proofs of any revelation.<sup>45</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to set out Hume's arguments of Part Two of his "Of Miracles," while keeping in mind the overall PAS and ESPR interpretations. To achieve this aim: (1) I argued that a single interpretation of the arguments of Part Two is sufficient to meet the macro-requirements of the PAS and ESPR interpretations; (2) I showed how Hume's three *a posteriori* arguments attempt to destroy the qualitative foundations of any proof or successful probability for a miracle testimony; (3) I showed how Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument attempts to destroy the evidential force of any miracle report which purports to serve as an evidential basis for a religious belief system; (4) I showed how Hume's miscellany of additional arguments in Part Two are

---

<sup>45</sup>That Hume is concerned with *predictive* prophecy is clear from the sentence that immediately follows the above sentence: "If it did not exceed the capacity of human nature to foretell future events, it would be absurd to employ any prophecy as an argument for a divine mission or authority from heaven" (Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 131).



merely a redressing or restatement of the previous arguments; and (5) I reviewed the macro-effects of the arguments of Part Two on the overall argument(s) of "Of Miracles"--namely, that Hume concludes (fideistically) that Christianity is not founded on reason.

In the next chapter, I will *evaluate* Hume's arguments of Part One and of Part Two.

Chapter Five  
A CRITIQUE OF HUME'S ARGUMENTS

I. Introductory Remarks

My aim in this chapter is not to provide a complete assessment of the arguments in Hume's "Of Miracles" (such an assessment may be the aim of some further philosophical work on this topic); rather, my aim here is to set out and briefly defend what strikes me as those arguments' most significant problems. In section II, I will deal with Hume's first *a priori* in-principle argument. I will argue that although Hume is right in holding the view that rational belief of testimonial evidence for an unusual event requires strong testimonial evidence, he has (on both the PAS and ESPR interpretations) overestimated the strength of the counter-evidence that miracle testimony must overcome. In section III, I will look at Hume's three *a posteriori* arguments. I will argue that although the first of these three arguments has some merit from a general perspective, they *all* are problematic because they need to deal with miracle testimony on a case-by-case

basis. (I will use the alleged resurrection of Jesus as a test-case.) In section IV, I will argue that Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument is successful only in a limited sense, and I will point out that its importance arises out of bringing to the forefront what I call "The Problem of Interpretation." (I will sketch a possible solution to The Problem of Interpretation relative to our test-case.) The conclusion I will draw from my critique is limited but significant: that is, it is not clear that Hume is successful in showing us that Christianity is not founded on Reason.

## II. Critique of Hume's *a priori* in-principle argument(s) of Part One

Although Hume is right in holding the view that rational belief of testimonial evidence for an unusual event requires the testimonial evidence to be stronger than that for a not unusual event, Hume's *a priori* in-principle argument(s) of Part One is problematic because Hume has overestimated the destructive force of our experience of the infrequency of a miraculous event on the testimony for that event. I will defend the claim that Hume has overestimated the destructive force of the infrequency of an event on the testimony for that event via three steps. First, by appealing to the text of Hume's first argument, I will clarify and substantiate the claim that Hume indeed pits our experience of an allegedly violated law against the testimony for the alleged miracle. Second, by appealing

to the text of that same argument, I will clarify and confirm what it is exactly that Hume takes to constitute our experience of an allegedly violated law. Third, by means of a thought experiment (also known as the method of *counter-example*), I will attempt to show that in the case of a miracle Hume's estimate of the destructive force arising from that event's infrequency is, on both the PAS and ESPR interpretations, too strong.<sup>1</sup>

A. Hume pits our experience of an allegedly violated law against the testimony for the alleged miracle

As the following appeals to the text of Hume's argument show, Hume does in fact pit our experience of an allegedly violated law against the testimony for the alleged miracle. Recall the following. Hume is particularly interested in those testimonies wherein "the fact attested is such a one as has seldom fallen under

---

<sup>1</sup>William L. Rowe, in *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1978), pp. 135-136, follows C. D. Broad in pointing out that "on Hume's weighing of the evidence it is difficult to understand how anyone could reasonably believe that an exception to a supposed law of nature had occurred, since the supposed law will have an invariable experience in its favor. It is clear, however, that exceptions do occur to supposed laws and also clear that reasonable people revise their scientific principles accordingly. Clearly, then, in his efforts to attack miracles Hume has weighted the scale so heavily in favor of the invariable experience in support of a supposed law of nature that a reasonable practice of scientists--rejecting and revising supposed laws in the light of exceptions--has been made to appear unreasonable." Whereas Rowe (and Broad) allude to the evidence that shows Hume is mistaken, via my thought experiment I attempt to show it.

our observation."<sup>2</sup> Concerning the case of a testimony for an extraordinary and marvellous event, Hume says: "in that case, the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual."<sup>3</sup> Also, "in order to encrease the probability against the testimony of witnesses," Hume supposes "that the fact, which they affirm, instead of being only marvellous, is really miraculous."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, says Hume, "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature" and "a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws."<sup>5</sup> Now, also recall that Hume supposes (for the sake of argument) there is a testimonial proof for the miracle, and that the result, according to Hume, is a situation of "proof against proof."<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, then, there is the testimonial proof for the miracle; on the other hand--and weighing against the testimonial proof for the miracle--there is the *proof* constituted by that "firm and unalterable experience" which in the first place established those laws of nature the miracle is alleged to have violated.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 113.

<sup>4</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

<sup>5</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

<sup>6</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

<sup>7</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114.

- B. What it is exactly that Hume takes to constitute our experience of an allegedly violated law

What is it that constitutes a "firm and unalterable experience"? Hume lets us know when he discusses the miracle of a resurrection. Says Hume,

it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.... [Hume's emphasis]<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the uniform experience (of dead people staying dead) which opposes a miracle (such as a resurrection) is constituted by personal observation and by all of the testimony of others concerning the content of that uniform experience.

- C. A thought experiment which shows that Hume's estimate of the destructive force arising from a miracle's infrequency is too strong

To show that Hume's estimate of the destructive force arising from a miracle's infrequency is too strong, I will carefully consider a hypothetical situation in which it seems clearly rational to believe in the testimony for a

---

<sup>8</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 115.

(Humean) miracle<sup>9</sup>, and I will then show that on both the PAS and ESPR interpretations a consequence of Hume's estimate is a belief that conflicts with rational belief. (As will become clear, the nature of the conflict shows that Hume's estimate is too strong as opposed to too weak.)

1. A hypothetical situation wherein belief in the testimony for a miracle appears to be rational

Consider the following hypothetical situation. Suppose we have a testimony to the alleged fact that a bit of sodium chloride did not dissolve in water at room temperature, under normal atmospheric conditions, etc. The alleged fact that this particular bit of sodium chloride does not dissolve in water would be a miracle for Hume (in Hume's limited sense of "miracle"--see footnote 8) because it is a violation of a law of nature. It is a violation of a law of nature because it is a violation or interruption of that well-established uniform experience of sodium chloride dissolving in water at room temperature, under normal atmospheric

---

<sup>9</sup>I parenthetically qualify the notion of miracle here with "Humean" because the event in my hypothetical situation satisfies those conditions upon which Hume hinges his first *a priori* argument against reasonable belief in miracle testimony: namely, the fact that the occurrence of the event interrupts a well-established regularity of nature. As I have shown in Chapter Two, whether the event is caused by God or some other invisible agent is not a consideration for Hume's argument.

In the event the reader thinks my argument somehow ignores the opposition for miracle testimony which arises solely from Hume's conceptualization of a miracle as a *violation* of a law of nature in the sense of some sort of *ontological conflict* with a law of nature, I refer the reader to Appendix C, wherein I show (with Robert A. H. Larmer's help) that a miracle need not be so conceptualized.

conditions, etc. Indeed, a non-dissolving bit of salt interrupts several hundred if not several thousand years of well-established personal and testimonial experience of sodium chloride dissolving in water--experience arising from scientific laboratories, primary-school science classes, cooking, everyday life, and so on. Of course, God or some other invisible agent may be causing the salt in question not to dissolve, but we do not know this.<sup>10</sup> Suppose too that 350 highly-qualified university and private laboratories (from around the globe) examine the case of the reported non-dissolving salt. And suppose that after performing numerous experiments they unanimously testify: (1) the salt sample in question *clearly* appears to be in every respect exactly like regular dissolving salt; and (2) in every conceivable experiment wherein regular salt samples dissolve, the salt sample in question for some unknown reason did not dissolve. Also, suppose that there are no circumstances present which experience shows make people lie or be mistaken. And suppose that the particular bit of non-dissolving sodium chloride is

---

<sup>10</sup>Before we work on the question of what or who caused the event, Hume would have us establish the reasonableness of our belief *that* the salt did not dissolve. Interestingly, in "Of Miracles" Hume for the most part ignores the causal question of a violation of a law of nature presumably because the success of his argument against the reasonableness of belief in testimonial evidence for an alleged miracle would render such a question moot. Nonetheless, given the views about miracles Hume expresses in "Of Miracles"--i.e., that miracles are an "absolute impossibility" as well as "more properly a subject of derision than of argument" (*Enquiry*, pp. 125 & 124)--it is reasonable to think Hume would consider the content of the following descriptive sentence to be prescriptive as well. Says Hume, "It is true, when any cause fails of producing its usual effect, philosophers [i.e., scientists] ascribe not this to any irregularity in nature; but suppose, that some secret causes, in the particular structure of parts, have prevented the operation" (*Enquiry*, p. 58). In other words, Hume would very apparently seek a naturalistic explanation.



accidentally flushed down a toilet (!). Granting the truth of these suppositions, is it rational to believe the testimony of these 350 prestigious scientific laboratories that although salt dissolves in water in general, it did not in this one specific case? From the perspective of scientific practice, such a belief *is* rational. We have, then, an uncontroversial situation of pre-Humean-theoretic rational belief in a miracle. That is, we have an uncontroversial situation of pre-Humean-theoretic rational belief in a "miracle" in Hume's limited sense of a violation of a law of nature, that is, as an interruption of a very well-established regularity of nature.

At this juncture, one might object that the case of the non-dissolving salt may not *really* be a violation of an *actual* law of nature (i.e., a violation of a law of nature in some kind of ontological sense). There could be some unnoticed structural difference in the non-dissolving salt. That is, there could still be something different about the salt, albeit unnoticed, which explains its odd behaviour. Thus, or so the objection continues, we should not believe that an actual bit of *sodium chloride* did not dissolve.

The objection misses the point of the hypothetical situation. To be sure, there very well may be something different about the non-dissolving salt sample--even something so different that we can no longer call it a *bona fide* sample of sodium chloride. But the point of the hypothetical situation is that it shows that we are rationally justified in believing that what *very much appears* to be a typical sample of salt did not dissolve--*regardless of the nature of the causal agents at work*.

Now, before going on to examine how the PAS and ESPR interpretations of

Hume's first *a priori* in-principle argument handle the testimony of these 350 laboratories, I simply need to point out that, given Hume's high regard for the practice of science, it is safe to presume that Hume would hold that the above testimony constitutes a (Humean) proof.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. The PAS interpretation and rational belief

According to the PAS interpretation of Hume's first argument, we need to weigh the miracle of the non-dissolving salt against the miracle of the falsity of the testimony for that miracle, and we are to "reject the greater miracle."<sup>12</sup> In addition, according to the PAS interpretation, as we do our weighing we need to realize 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."<sup>13</sup> As I have

---

<sup>11</sup>If there are any doubts that Hume would consider the testimony of 350 highly-qualified and reputable scientific laboratories as sufficient for constituting a proof, then I ask the reader to feel free to increase the number of testifying labs to 400 or 500 or more and/or to increase the number of experiments these labs performed. As will become clear later in this section, what is important for the purposes of my critique is not the absolute magnitude of the number, but the number's magnitude relative to the magnitude of another, allegedly competing number.

<sup>12</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 116.

<sup>13</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114. Recall from Chapter Two that because proofs--i.e., firm and uninterrupted experiences of high frequencies of conjoinings between two kinds of events --have established the laws of nature, and because a miracle is an exception to these laws of nature, the "very nature" of a miracle which allows one to say that there is a proof against a miracle is merely the fact that a miracle occurs very rarely relative to a particular regularity in nature.

explained in Chapter Two, because a proof against a miracle consists of the strongest imaginable argument from experience, the two sides of the weigh-scale consist of two opposing but equally strong members of the set of all strongest arguments from experience. In other words, the scale is left in a state of balance. We cannot believe that the testimony of the 350 labs is false *and* we cannot believe that the sample of salt did not dissolve. There is a "mutual destruction of arguments" which is complete, which is to say that we are left with a suspension of judgment. According to the PAS interpretation, then, it is *not* rational to believe the testimony of the above-mentioned 350 scientific laboratories.

But the PAS interpretation's result contradicts the apparently true claim that it is rational to believe the testimony of the above-mentioned laboratories. Hence, Hume's estimate of the destructive force arising from an event's infrequency is too strong. (If Hume's estimate were too weak, we would be "rationally" believing testimonies that are clearly not rational to believe. But in this case we are "rationally" not believing testimonies that clearly *are* rational to believe. Thus, Hume's estimate is too strong.)

At this juncture, a reader (who may be more emotionally attached to the ESPR interpretation than to the PAS interpretation) might simply wish to abandon the PAS interpretation with the hope that redemption for Hume's first *a priori* in-principle argument might be found in the ESPR interpretation. Such a move, however, blatantly ignores the textual and contextual evidence that (as I have shown in Chapter Two) justifies the PAS interpretation. Moreover, the hoped-for

redemption is not forthcoming; although Hume's argument fares better under the ESPR interpretation rather than under the PAS interpretation, it still does not fare well.

### 3. The ESPR interpretation and rational belief

According to the ESPR interpretation of Hume's first argument, we again need to weigh the miracle of the non-dissolving salt against the miracle of the falsity of the testimony for that miracle, and we are again to "reject the greater miracle."<sup>14</sup> In addition, according to the ESPR interpretation, as we do our weighing we need to realize that the proof against a miracle is *not* as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. That is (as I have explained in Chapter Two), not all proofs against miracles are equal: some proofs are stronger than others. In other words, the greater miracle is that event which violates that law of nature which has been established by a greater frequency of constant conjoinings (i.e., the greater miracle is that event which is, relatively speaking, most rare). The two sides of the weigh-scale, then, consist of two opposing but unequally-strong proofs, and the side with the strongest proof represents the greater miracle. On the one side is the proof against the miracle of the falsity of the testimony; on the other side there is the proof against the miracle to which the testimony testifies. In other words, on the one side is the

---

<sup>14</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 116.

proof consisting of the testimony of 350 scientific laboratories; on the other side is the proof for the law of nature that the non-dissolving salt violates. Because Hume holds that scientists can "attain a knowledge of a particular cause merely by one experiment,"<sup>15</sup> that is, because the results of a well-done scientific experiment in effect represent a uniform experience of conjoinings between the kinds of events in question<sup>16</sup>; and because each of our 350 labs has done numerous experiments on the non-dissolving salt; and because *ex hypothesi* we can ensure it is reasonable to believe that number of experiments done by the 350 labs are sufficient to outweigh all other experience to the contrary: the falsity of the testimony of the 350 scientific laboratories would be the greater miracle. Hence, the proof for the truth of the laboratories' testimony outweighs the proof for the violated natural law.<sup>17</sup> According to the ESPR interpretation, then, it is rational to believe the testimony of the above-mentioned 350 scientific laboratories.

But, one might quickly point out, this result *agrees* with our apparently true case of rational belief. How then, one might ask, is the claim that Hume's argument under the ESPR interpretation does not fare well justified? Indeed, how is it possible to hold that Hume's estimate of the destructive force arising from a miracle's infrequency is too strong?

---

<sup>15</sup>Hume, *Treatise*, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup>For a defense of my claim that for Hume the results of a well-done scientific experiment in effect represent a uniform experience of conjoinings between the kinds of events in question, see my last footnote in Chapter Two.

<sup>17</sup>Rejecting the falsity of the greater miracle is tantamount to accepting the truth of the proof the greater miracle allegedly violated.

My response: Bracket these questions temporarily and consider the following continuation of our thought experiment.

Let us now also suppose that we have just learned that 20,000 other university and private laboratories have carefully examined various samples of salt--samples of salt *other than* the reported non-dissolving sample. And let us suppose that these other labs testify: (1) that their samples appear to be in every respect exactly like the non-dissolving sample; and (2) that in every conceivable experiment wherein regular salt samples dissolved in water, their samples dissolved in water too. And let us suppose too that there is no conceivable reason for these labs to lie. Clearly again, from the perspective of scientific practice, it is *still* rational to believe the testimony of the 350 labs: it is still rational to believe that although salt dissolves in water in general, it did not in one specific case. Why is it rational to believe the testimony of the 350 labs? I submit it is because the relevance of the testimony of the 20,000 labs concerning salt in general to the testimony of the 350 labs concerning a specific sample of salt is tenuous. Testimony concerning the general situation is not always directly and completely relevant to testimony concerning the specific situation.<sup>18</sup>

Hume's argument on the ESPR interpretation, however, would require us to

---

<sup>18</sup>In the case of event types other than that of our hypothetical situation it is very clearly true that testimony concerning the general situation is not directly and completely relevant to testimony concerning the specific situation. The testimony of millions of medical specialists that billions of people do not have cancer does not weaken the testimony of the ten medical specialists who say I do have cancer. (This is merely an example. I do not have cancer—I hope.)

consider the testimony of the 20,000 labs to be directly and completely relevant to the testimony of the 350 labs. Indeed, according to Hume's high estimate of the destructive force arising from an event's infrequency, we would have to weigh the full force of 20,000 testimonies (plus general experience) that in general salt dissolves in water *directly against* the 350 testimonies that salt did not dissolve in a particular case. The result is the belief that the latter testimony is much more likely to be false than true. But the belief that the latter testimony is much more likely to be false than true is a belief that conflicts with what very apparently is rational belief. Hence, Hume's estimate of the destructive force arising from an event's infrequency is again too strong.

#### 4. Epilogue

Does this mean that the infrequency of a miraculous event does not count *at all* against testimony for that event? No. The above arguments merely show that the infrequency of an event does not count *as much* as Hume thought. That the infrequency of an event does count against testimony for that event seems to be obviously true. However, we need now to ask: *How much* does the infrequency of an event actually count against the testimony for that event? This, I believe, is a very interesting question. However, due to limitations of time and space, I will consider it beyond the scope of this thesis. I agree with Hume, then, that rational belief that an unusual event like a miracle occurred requires strong

testimony (this seems obviously true), but I disagree with Hume that such testimony needs to be so strong as to outweigh all the experience of the allegedly violated laws. Thus, if my arguments are sound, the testimonial evidence required for rational belief in a miracle need not be as strong as Hume thinks<sup>19</sup>; and hence, *some doubt* is cast on the success of Part One of Hume's overall project of showing us that Christianity is not founded on Reason.

### III. Critique of Hume's three *a posteriori* arguments of Part Two

My task in this section will be to show that although Hume's three *a posteriori* arguments have some merit from a general perspective, they are problematic from the perspective of an individual miracle test-case, i.e., the alleged resurrection of Jesus.<sup>20</sup> I will argue that although the first of Hume's three *a posteriori* arguments

---

<sup>19</sup>I qualify my conclusion here with the provisional claim concerning the soundness of my arguments because I recognize that there may be some controversy over what I take to be rational belief vis-a-vis the testimony of the 350 scientific laboratories.

<sup>20</sup>It is appropriate that I focus on the alleged miracle of Jesus' resurrection as an evidential test-case since, as I have pointed out in previous chapters, a rational belief that the resurrection of Jesus actually occurred very apparently is the belief Hume intends to discredit in "Of Miracles." (Note: By the words "resurrection of Jesus" I mean Jesus' tangible, physical, bodily resurrection; not some sort of intangible or merely spiritual event, i.e., not an event in the sense of being completely non-physical. For a defense of the New Testament textual evidence for Jesus' resurrected body being identical to--i.e., numerically the same as--the physical body Jesus had prior to His resurrection, see Norman L. Geisler's *The Battle for the Resurrection* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989]. As I pointed out in the Introduction of this thesis, my literalist understanding of Jesus'



succeeds in showing that there may be no miracle proofs, none of the three arguments show that there is not a sufficient probability for establishing our test-case. Granting the cogency of my critique of Hume's first *a priori* in-principle argument, and keeping in mind the limitations of that critique,<sup>21</sup> the upshot of my criticisms in this section will be to cast further doubt on the success of Hume's overall project of showing us that Christianity is not founded on Reason. (Due to limitations of time and space, the question of exactly how much doubt these criticisms cast on the success of Hume's overall project is, again, beyond the scope of this thesis.)

#### A. Critique of Hume's first *a posteriori* argument

Recall that Hume's first *a posteriori* argument holds that there is in fact no miracle proof because history gives us no miracle attested by (1) a sufficient number of (2) highly educated, (3) socially outstanding, (4) patently honest men who have (5) lots to lose by lying and who are (6) situated in such circumstances that, if lying, exposure would readily result.<sup>22</sup> I will examine each of these

---

resurrection can be described as evangelical.

<sup>21</sup>In section II of this chapter I have only shown that the opposition to a miracle report arising from a miracle's "very nature" (Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114), or infrequency relative to the allegedly violated law of nature, is not as strong as Hume thought. I have not shown *how much* opposition to a miracle report arises from the miracle's infrequency.

<sup>22</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 116-117.

criteria of credible testimony individually and with respect to our miracle test-case.<sup>23</sup>

1. No sufficient number is not sufficient for precluding reasonable belief in miracle testimony

Even though Hume gives no specific number as to what exactly constitutes a sufficient number of high-quality witnesses for a miracle proof, Hume seems safe in simply asserting that there is no such number of that type of witness available. After all, for there actually to be a testimonial proof for a miracle requires that we have a very frequent and constant conjunction of good miracle-testimony and miracles, and it is common knowledge that such a conjunction is not a characteristic of our world. However, in view of the fact that Hume overestimates the opposition to miracle testimony (see my critique in section II), it does not follow that the lack of a miracle proof necessarily precludes the establishing of reasonable belief in a miracle's occurrence. With a reduced estimate of the destructive force for a miracle testimony arising from the infrequency of the miracle, to establish or found a miracle on reason the strength of the miracle testimony need only be a successful probability as opposed to a

---

<sup>23</sup>For a worthy discussion on the credibility of sources, see Robert C. Pinto, J. Anthony Blair, and Katharine E. Parr's *Reasoning: A Practical Guide for Canadian Students* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall Canada, Inc., 1993), pp. 21-35. Although I make no specific references to this work, I wish to acknowledge that it informs my critique.

proof. And, as we will see, the remainder of Hume's criteria do not show that such a successful probability does not exist.

## 2. Degree of education depends on that to which the testimony testifies

According to R. M. Burns, a higher education "is not a necessary qualification for a witness in a court of law except specifically where a special expertise is relevant."<sup>24</sup> In other words, for a miracle such as our non-dissolving salt sample a higher (relevant) education is required of a credible witness because only with the competence that comes from a higher education can the witness perform the tests to ensure the specimen is in fact sodium chloride, to ensure the water is in fact water, etc. However, for a miracle such as our test-case--i.e., the alleged resurrection of Jesus--it is not so clear that a higher education is needed.

To be sure, no higher education is needed of witnesses for them to see that Jesus was in fact alive after His alleged death<sup>25</sup>; however, it may not be so clear

---

<sup>24</sup>R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1981), pp. 237-238.

<sup>25</sup>An objection here might be that the witnesses to Jesus were hallucinating. No doubt some witnesses to alleged miracles do hallucinate. However, in the case of the alleged resurrection of Jesus the charge of hallucination neglects (1) the variety of times and places of Jesus' resurrection appearances, (2) the variety of personalities and numbers constituting the sets of witnesses, (3) the absence of prior belief and expectation of a resurrection in the witnesses, and (4) the care taken by some witnesses (e.g., "doubting Thomas") to ensure the reality of the resurrection appearance. For an extended defense against the claim that the witnesses were hallucinating, see Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands A Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith*, revised edition (San

that no higher education is needed of the witnesses for them to see that Jesus was in fact dead before His alleged resurrection. That a higher education is not required for the witnesses of Jesus' death to discern that Jesus was actually dead can be determined from the circumstances of Jesus' execution. In the New Testament record<sup>26</sup>, Matthew reports not only (a) that Jesus died via crucifixion but also (b) that during the night before his crucifixion Jesus' accusers from the Sanhedrin "struck him with their fists" (Matthew 26: 67 NIV) and (c) that on the day of his crucifixion Roman soldiers used a "staff and struck him on the head again and again" (Matthew 27: 30). Also, John reports that while Jesus was still impaled on a cross, after having endured an official flogging and then an unofficial beating from Roman soldiers, "one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water" (John 19:34 NIV). Concerning the Romans' efficiency of execution by crucifixion, Paul L. Maier writes:

True, there is a recorded instance of a victim being taken down from a cross and surviving. The Jewish historian Josephus, who

---

Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1979), pp. 247-255. See also William Lane Craig's *Apologetics: An Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), pp. 199-200.

<sup>26</sup>For arguments defending the historical reliability of the New Testament record concerning Jesus, see: R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986); Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1987); Gary R. Habermas, *The Verdict of History: Conclusive Evidence for the Life of Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988); J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987), pp. 133-157.

had gone over to the Roman side in the rebellion of 66 A.D., discovered three of his friends being crucified. He asked the Roman general Titus to reprieve them, and they were immediately removed from their crosses. Still, two of the three died anyway, even though they apparently had been crucified only a short time. In Jesus' case, however, there were the additional complications of scourging and exhaustion, to say nothing of the great spear thrust that pierced His rib cage. . . . Romans were grimly efficient about crucifixions: victims did *not* escape with their lives.<sup>27</sup>

Also, Gary R. Habermas writes:

the prevailing medical opinion is that death by crucifixion is essentially death by asphyxiation. Hanging in the low position on the cross induces the victim's muscles around the lungs to constrict, eventually making it impossible to exhale. But the individual is not able to keep pulling himself up indefinitely in order to breathe. So, once a victim has been hanging in the low position for any extended length of time without pushing himself up, he is dead. A Roman soldier or bystander could easily tell when such had occurred in Jesus' case. An autopsy was not needed.<sup>28</sup>

Hence, the witnesses of Jesus' death had no need for special expertise to believe that Jesus was dead: the fact that the Roman executioners obviously did their job well along with the fact of the obvious brutality of the manner of execution and

---

<sup>27</sup>Paul L. Maier, *First Easter* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 112. Maier is cited in Josh McDowell's *The Resurrection Factor: Does the historical evidence support the resurrection of Jesus Christ?* (San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1981), p. 49. My quote from Maier is taken from McDowell's work. (According to McDowell, Maier is Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University.)

<sup>28</sup>Gary R. Habermas & J. P. Moreland, "The Resurrection of Jesus," in *Immortality: The Other Side of Death* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), p. 59.

its preamble of beatings constitute an easily recognizable case of fatality.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. The requirement of social prominence is not necessary

Were the witnesses of Jesus' alleged resurrection socially outstanding persons? Definitely not, except perhaps for Matthew, Luke, and Paul. Matthew was a tax agent for an occupying foreign government (and therefore socially outstanding in a negative way); Luke was a physician; and Paul was a Jewish lawyer as well as a citizen of Rome. The others were primarily fishermen of low social status. Nevertheless, as Burns points out (citing John Leland),

the requirement of 'credit and reputation' is worthless as a general

---

<sup>29</sup>In *Knowing the Truth about the Resurrection* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1988), William Lane Craig points out that, in "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255 (1986), pp. 1455-63, William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer apply twentieth-century medical knowledge to the New Testament evidence for Jesus' beatings, flogging, and crucifixion, and they "conclude that Jesus was dead even before the spear thrust, which passed through his right ribs and perforated both the right lung and the pericardium and heart, thereby making his death certain" (Craig, p. 148n). Apparently, as Craig also points out, the "flow [of blood and water described by John] could have been either a serum from the pericardial sac [which surrounds the heart] mixed with blood from the heart or a hemorrhagic fluid in the pleural cavity between the ribs and the lungs" (Craig, p. 33). In *The Resurrection Factor*, p. 48, McDowell cites from "The Crucifixion of Jesus," *Arizona Medicine*, March 1965, pp. 185-186, wherein medical doctor C. Truman Davis takes the flow of blood and water described by John as "rather conclusive post-mortem evidence that [Christ] died, not the usual crucifixion death by suffocation, but of heart failure due to shock and constriction of the heart by fluid in the pericardium." Even from a highly educated perspective, then, the evidence concerning Jesus' death shows that Jesus was dead. (This evidence rules out attempts to explain Jesus' resurrection appearances in terms of an apparent death and subsequent resuscitation.)

principle: 'If the facts recorded in the Gospel, the miracles and resurrection of Jesus Christ, had been patronized and attested by the Chief Priests and Rulers of the Jewish nation, it would undoubtedly have been pretended that they had political designs in view.'<sup>30</sup>

In other words, an individual's social prominence is not a necessary requirement for that individual to be a credible witness.

4, 5, & 6. Having lots to lose by lying and being situated in such circumstances that, if lying, exposure would readily result makes for a patently honest witness

In the case of the witnesses for the alleged resurrection of Jesus, we do not have information concerning their honesty prior to their testimony for the resurrection. However, it is clear that regardless of a witness's previous track record, a witness can be determined to be honest on a particular occasion if the witness has lots to lose by lying and if the witness is situated in such circumstances that, if lying, exposure would readily result.

Would the witnesses to Jesus' alleged resurrection suffer great personal loss by telling lies? Yes. As Burns points out, the apostles "may not have had 'reputation' to lose, but we know that they had lives to lose, and many of them did so."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, says Francis J. Beckwith, "The disciples of Jesus were willing

---

<sup>30</sup>Burns, *The Great Debate*, p. 238; John Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers*, 2nd ed. (London, 1755), 2:91.

<sup>31</sup>Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles*, p. 238.

to suffer martyrdom and torture because of what they allegedly had witnessed."<sup>32</sup>

If the witnesses were dishonest, would their lies be readily detected? Yes.

As John Warwick Montgomery points out,

Admittedly, [the New Testament witnesses] were never put on a literal witness stand, but they concentrated their preaching on synagogue audiences, thus putting their testimony at the mercy of hostile Jewish religious leadership who had had intimate contact with Jesus' ministry and had been instrumental in ending it. Such an audience eminently satisfies [the] description of 'both a cross-examiner and a tribunal': they had the *means, motive, and opportunity* to expose the apostolic witness as inaccurate and deceptive if it had been such, and the fact that they did not can only be effectively explained on the ground that they *could not*.<sup>33</sup>

And, as F. F. Bruce points out,

The disciples could not afford to risk inaccuracies (not to speak of wilful manipulation of the facts), which would at once be exposed by those who would be only too glad to do so. On the contrary, one of the strong points in the original apostolic preaching is the confident appeal to the knowledge of the hearers; they not only said, 'We are witnesses of these things,' but also, 'As you yourselves know' (Acts ii. 22). Had there been any tendency to depart from the facts in any material respect, the possible presence of hostile

---

<sup>32</sup>Francis J. Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1989), p. 84n.

<sup>33</sup>John Warwick Montgomery, *Human Rights & Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 145-148. Montgomery establishes first that the historical records concerning Jesus are "solid enough to rely upon" and then that testimony in these records establishes the facticity of Jesus' resurrection (see Montgomery, *Human Rights*, pp. 131-160). See also Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1983). (Montgomery was Professor of Jurisprudence and Dean of Simon Greenleaf School of Law, Anaheim, California; Montgomery was also Head of the Department of History at Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario.)



witnesses in the audience would have served as a ...corrective.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, it is reasonable to believe that even though we may not be aware of the previous track record of the witnesses for the alleged resurrection of Jesus, these witnesses can be judged to be honest because they had lots to lose by lying and because they were situated in such circumstances that, if lying, their lies would have been readily exposed.

#### B. Critique of Hume's second and third *a posteriori* arguments

Hume's second and third *a posteriori* arguments are not successful in showing that there is not a successful probability for a miracle either. Recall that Hume's second *a posteriori* argument holds that because people have tendencies toward credulity and exaggeration with respect to the subject of miracles, individual reports concerning miracles should not be believed; hence, there is *no* testimonial probability for a miracle. And recall that Hume's third *a posteriori* argument holds that because people have a propensity to lie about miracles, because lies are less readily exposed in what Hume calls "ignorant and barbarous nations," and because miracle reports arise primarily in these ignorant and barbarous nations,

---

<sup>34</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th revised edition (Leicester, England & Grand Rapids, Michigan: Inter-Varsity Press & William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), p. 46. Bruce is also cited in Montgomery's *Human Rights*, p. 148. (Bruce is Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, England.)

individual miracle reports should (again) not be believed; hence (again) there is *no* testimonial probability for a miracle.

The second and third arguments fail, however. Why? Because they are, as Colin Brown puts it, "too wholesale."<sup>35</sup> That is to say, Hume's second and third arguments are too general. Not *all* people are equally prone to credulity; not *all* people are equally prone to exaggeration and lying; not *all* people are ignorant and barbarous (even though they might come from what Hume takes to be an ignorant and barbarous nation); and not *all* lies are not readily exposed in these so-called ignorant and barbarous nations (as Montgomery and Bruce have shown above).

### C. Conclusion concerning Hume's *a posteriori* arguments

In view of the fact that (contrary to Hume's first *a priori* argument) the quantitative requirements for a miracle testimony need only be that of a successful probability as opposed to a proof; in view of the fact that (contrary to Hume's first *a posteriori* argument) our miracle test-case of the alleged resurrection of Jesus seems to satisfy the qualitative requirements of credible testimony; and in view of the fact that (contrary to Hume's second and third *a posteriori*

---

<sup>35</sup>Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, & Exeter, Devon [UK]: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company & The Paternoster Press Ltd., 1984), p. 96.

arguments) not all "ignorant and barbarous" people are liars and credulous: it is not clear that Hume's three *a posteriori* arguments are successful in showing that the testimony for our miracle test-case is not sufficient to establish a rational belief in a miracle's occurrence.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup>Interestingly, Hume himself inadvertently shows us that there is such a thing as a qualitatively good miracle testimony as well as that there are a considerable number of them. Consider Hume's Jansenist miracle case. According to Hume, "There surely never was a greater number of miracles ascribed to one person, than those, which were lately said to have been wrought in France upon the tomb of Abbe Paris, the famous Jansenist, with whose sanctity the people were so long deluded. The curing of the sick, giving hearing to the deaf, and sight to the blind, were every where talked of as the usual effects of that holy sepulchre. But what is more extraordinary; 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 [i.e., a report] 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? And 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." (Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 124-125.) Charitably granting that by "absolute impossibility" Hume means maximal improbability (thereby avoiding charging Hume with question-begging and an unswerving dogmatism), and keeping in mind that my critique in section II of this chapter shows Hume is not reasonable in viewing miracles as maximally improbable, the fact remains that in the Jansenist case the qualitative aspects of Hume's stringent set of requirements obviously have been satisfied--and the quantitative requirements for a successful probability may very well have been satisfied too.

#### IV. Critique of Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument of Part Two

##### A. The argument revisited

Before I show how Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument is successful only in a limited sense, it may be helpful to review the argument. Recall from Chapter Four that the Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument goes as follows: (1) Because all religious belief-systems are contrary to one another, it is not possible for all of them to be true together; (2) because it is not possible for all religious belief-systems to be true together, it is also not possible for them all to be established as true via apologetic miracles; (3) because it is not possible for all religious belief-systems to be established as true via apologetic miracles, apologetic miracles are to be considered as contrary facts; (4) because apologetic miracles are to be considered as contrary facts, their reports are contraries as well; hence, (5) "not only the [apologetic] miracle destroys the credit of [apologetic miracle] testimony, but the [apologetic miracle] testimony destroys itself."<sup>37</sup>

##### B. Four criticisms, and The Problem of Interpretation

###### 1. Criticism number one

The first criticism of Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument concerns his

---

<sup>37</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 121.

first premise: namely, it is not the case that all religious belief-systems are contrary to one another. For example, Hinduism with its millions of gods could arguably be seen to be consistent with the religions of ancient Greece and Rome with their pantheon of gods.<sup>38</sup> Thus, it might seem that Hume's argument gets no traction. Hume, however, is interested in that exclusivist religion whose founder allegedly not only resurrected from death but also claimed, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father [i.e., God] except through me." (John 14:6 NIV.) Hence, Hume's argument can be shored up. Instead of claiming that all the members of the set of religious belief-systems are contrary to one another (which results in the false claim that no two members can be true together), Hume could say that the set of all religious belief-systems is inconsistent—since all the members cannot be true together *because of the exclusivist religions*. Relativizing the apologetic miracles of all other religions to the foundational apologetic miracle(s) of the exclusivistic religions (e.g., Christianity's resurrection of Jesus), Hume then could go on with his Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument.

In the interest of fairness to Hume, the above criticism should not reflect badly on Hume. Why? Because Hume may very well have deliberately set out his argument less than forthrightly to avoid the dangers of openly criticizing

---

<sup>38</sup>Also, from a more contemporary perspective, the Baha'i religion attempts to be compatible with all other major religions. This attempt, however, fails to take seriously the logical incompatibility between the exclusivist religions and Baha'ism. See Francis Beckwith's *Baha'i* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1985).

Christianity (as I have pointed out in Chapter Three concerning the overall argument(s) of Hume's "Of Miracles").

## 2. Criticism number two

A more significant problem with Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument arises from the fact that it only works if the apologetic miracle testimonies of contrary religions are equally strong. To be sure, because it is not possible for all religious belief-systems to be true together, it is not possible for them all to be established as true via apologetic miracles. But, as Robert A. H. Larmer points out,

although he does talk of weak and strong evidence for individual miracles, Hume seems to assume that the body of evidence supporting belief in the miracles of one religion can be no greater than the body of evidence supporting belief in the miracles of some [other] religion. There is no *a priori* reason why this should be so. If in fact the evidence for miracles in a certain religion is very strong and the evidence for miracles in other religions is very weak, there exists no reason for seriously questioning the strongly evidenced claims.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, it may be the case that only one of the apologetic miracle testimonies amounts to a successful probability. And if that is the case, then Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument is no longer relevant. Why? Because

---

<sup>39</sup>Robert A. H. Larmer, *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), p. 108.

there would be no reason to believe in a contrary apologetic miracle that weakens the testimony.

### 3. Criticism number three

Also, even if we were to grant that the miracle testimonies were equally strong, Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument fails to address the significance of the qualitative differences between miracles. Not all alleged miracles are qualitatively equal. Indeed, some alleged miracles have greater existential and moral significance than others. As Beckwith points out,

if the miracles of religion A and religion B are evidentially equal, and religion A claims to be ordained by the true God because its leader has the ability to instantaneously heal patterned baldness, while religion B appeals to the resurrection of its founder, then religion B has a qualitatively better miracle.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, even if the apologetic miracle testimonies of contrary religious systems are equally strong, a miracle's highly significant qualitative dimension counts in the favour of the religious system the miracle is alleged to establish.

### 4. Criticism number four

The most significant problem for Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument

---

<sup>40</sup>Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles*, p. 100.

stems from the application of his notion of *contrary facts*. Consider miracles A and B from an ontological perspective. Suppose miracle A is an event actually caused by one god of many gods. Suppose miracle B is an event actually caused by the one and only God. Ontologically speaking, A and B are incompatible states of affairs--i.e., *contrary facts*. A and B definitely cannot occur together. Also, consider events C and D. Consider these events not from an ontological perspective but from a phenomenological or experiential perspective. Suppose we do not know the causes of C and D. As far as we know, then, C and D need not be *contrary facts*, which means that the possibility of their occurring together is not automatically ruled out. Now, suppose someone claims that C is actually an event of kind A and D is actually an event of kind B. Supposing that we do not know whether that someone is God, and supposing that we do not know that C is actually A and D is actually B, and supposing that we know neither whether C has occurred nor whether D has occurred, does it follow that we know C is actually caused by one god of many gods and D is caused by the one and only God and hence that we know that not both C and D occurred? Twice no. Why? Because from a human experiential-epistemological point of view--i.e., Hume's epistemological point of view--the experiential aspect of a fact is discovered before the ontological aspect of a fact. Hume, then, has put the proverbial interpretive cart before the experiential mule. In other words, if each of two hypothetical or alleged events is given a metaphysical-religious interpretation incompatible with the other, our knowledge of whether in fact the merely physical aspects of those



events occurred individually or together depends not on the incompatible interpretations given to them but on the evidence for those events. The most significant problem with Hume's argument, then, is that it takes the difficulties arising from connecting a metaphysical-religious interpretation to an event as relevant to the evidence for the mere physical occurrence of that event, when such difficulties are not relevant.

##### 5. Conclusion concerning Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument, and The Problem of Interpretation

Thus, Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument is successful only in a very limited sense: i.e., only when (1) the testimonies for an apologetic miracle are equally strong, (2) the apologetic miracles are qualitatively equal, and (3) the ontologies of the facts of the matter are correctly understood. The limitedness of this success notwithstanding, Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument is important in that it points to a serious problem for the defender of reasonable belief in miracles--namely, The Problem of Interpretation. The Problem of Interpretation is this: How does the defender of reasonable belief in miracles (apologetic or non-apologetic, but especially apologetic miracles) ensure that he or she has the ontology of the fact of the matter correctly understood? In other words: Given that it is reasonable to believe that the physical or material aspects of a purportedly miraculous event did in fact occur, on what rational grounds--if any--can one connect the alleged religious-metaphysical interpretation to that

event (i.e., interpret that event as an act of Deity)?

## 6. A sketch of how to solve The Problem of Interpretation

The solution to the problem of interpretation for a particular miracle lies, I believe, in understanding the historical and religious context of that miracle.<sup>41</sup> Because I, like Hume, am interested particularly in the case of the alleged resurrection of Jesus, I will restrict my sketch to this case. What seems to me, then, to be the most plausible way of interpreting the resurrection of Jesus consists of the following steps: (1) determining what Jesus is alleged to have claimed about Himself and the authenticity of those claims; (2) determining the historical details of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; and (3) then comparing the findings from (1) and (2) to the allegedly predictive prophetic claims of the Old Testament--in particular, the Messianic prophecies.

An immediate objection from Hume or a follower of Hume might be the claim that "What we have said of miracles may be applied, without any variation, to prophecies" since "all prophecies are real miracles."<sup>42</sup> This objection, however,

---

<sup>41</sup>Just as the solution to the problem of interpreting a particular word lies in understanding the context of that word's use, so too (I submit) the solution to the problem of interpreting a particular miracle lies in understanding the historical-religious context of its occurrence. My motive for taking this approach stems from the Gospel of John, when, in referring to Jesus, John writes: "The Word [i.e., Logos] became flesh and lived for a while among us" (John 1:14 NIV).

<sup>42</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 131.

neglects the fact that what I have said about what Hume has said of miracles may also be applied to what Hume is now saying of prophecies. It is not clear, then, that Hume's argument against prophecy is successful. For the sake of my sketch of a solution to the problem of interpretation, I will assume Hume's argument against the miracle of prophecy is not successful. (Showing that Hume's argument against the miracle of prophecy is not successful will have to be *yet another* higher educational project.)

Another immediate objection might be that, granting (for the sake of argument) that (1) and (2) have been satisfactorily completed, the alleged Messianic prophecies of the Bible are simply too vague to be useful. To be sure, *some* of the alleged Messianic prophecies are vague. The fact remains, however, that many of the prophecies are quite specific: e.g., that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, that the Messiah would be of the lineage of David, that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem apparently triumphantly on a donkey, that the Messiah would be falsely accused and spat upon, that the Messiah's hands and feet would be pierced, that lots would be cast for the Messiah's clothing, that the Messiah's body would not see decay, etc.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup>See: John Ankerberg, John Weldon, & Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Case for Jesus the Messiah: Incredible Prophecies That Prove God Exists* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, Inc., 1989); John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies* (New York: Harper Paperbacks & Zondervan, 1991); James E. Smith, *What the Bible Teaches About the Promised Messiah* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993); Robert C. Newman, "The Testimony of Messianic Prophecy," in *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question*, John W. Montgomery, ed. (Dallas: Probe Books, 1991).

Not so incidentally, Kaiser is Academic Dean and Professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield,

Granting (again for the sake of argument) the specificity of the Messianic prophecies, yet another immediate objection might be that the New Testament witnesses fudged their testimonies--i.e., they recast the life of Jesus to fit the prophecies. This objection is only *prima facie* reasonable, however. It neglects my criticism of Hume's first *a posteriori* argument. As Montgomery points out, if the witnesses were dishonest, their lies would be readily detected. Why? Because (1) hostile persons familiar with the events were present, (2) these persons "had the *means, motive, and opportunity* to expose the apostolic witness as inaccurate and deceptive if it had been such," and (3) "the fact that they did not can only be effectively explained on the ground that they *could not*."<sup>44</sup> As Montgomery also points out (quite colourfully),

Do you seriously think those Jewish religious leaders who wanted to destroy Christianity would have sat by and said nothing while the gospel writers re-did the life of Christ to fit the Old Testament? They were specialists in the Old Testament. It was the Old Testament that they felt was on their side. If the New Testament writers had messed up the life of Jesus, they would have been trampled under foot by the Jewish religious leaders who would have shown that this was a charade!<sup>45</sup>

---

Illinois; Walvoord served as President and Professor of Systematic Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary from 1952 to 1986; Smith is Chairman of the Division of Biblical Studies and Professor of Old Testament at Florida Christian College; and Newman is Professor of New Testament at Biblical Theological Seminary, Hatfield, Pennsylvania. The reason I point out the credentials of these authors is to dispel the myth that no scholars take Messianic prophecy seriously.

<sup>44</sup>Montgomery, *Human Rights & Human Dignity*, p. 148.

<sup>45</sup>John Warwick Montgomery, "The Character of the Bible," video tape 7 of the 11-part video tape series *Defending the Biblical Gospel* (Anaheim, California: The Simon Greenleaf School of Law, 1986).

So what is the interpretive strategy I envisage for solving the problem of interpreting the resurrection of Jesus? Josh McDowell, relying on a work by Peter Stoner and Robert Newman, nicely sets it out this way:

The following probabilities are taken from Peter Stoner in *Science Speaks* to show that coincidence is ruled out by the science of probability. Stoner says that by using the modern science of probability in reference to eight prophecies [concerning Jesus]... "We find that the chance that any man might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled all eight prophecies is 1 in  $10^{17}$ ." That would be 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000. In order to help us comprehend this staggering probability, Stoner illustrates it by supposing that "we take  $10^{17}$  silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote them in their own wisdom. Now these prophecies were either given by inspiration of God or the prophets just wrote them as they thought they should be. In such a case the prophets had just one chance in  $10^{17}$  of having them come true in any one man, but they all came true in Christ. This means that the fulfilment of these eight prophecies alone proves that God inspired the writing of those prophecies to a definiteness which lacks only one chance in  $10^{17}$  of being absolute." Stoner considers 48 prophecies and says, "...We find the chance that any one man fulfilled all 48 prophecies to be 1 in  $10^{157}$ ."<sup>46</sup>

In other words, if it can be shown that the Messianic prophecies are in fact fulfilled by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, then it seems that the case of the

---

<sup>46</sup>McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 167. The book McDowell cites is Peter Stoner and Robert Newman's *Science Speaks: Scientific Proof of the Accuracy of Prophecy and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968).

resurrection of Jesus can be reasonably interpreted as an act of the Deity whose nature is described in the Bible. Fulfilment of prophecy gives evidence for the existence of the Divine Mind--i.e., the God--described in the Bible.<sup>47</sup> The use of predictive prophecy, then, may be a method for providing a reasonable interpretation of a miracle.

#### V. Main conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, my aim in this chapter has not been to provide a complete assessment of the arguments in Hume's "Of Miracles"; rather, my aim has been to set out and briefly defend what strikes me as those arguments' most significant problems. Concerning Hume's first *a priori* in-principle argument, I set out a thought experiment which makes it reasonable to think that although Hume is right in holding that rational belief in testimonial evidence for an unusual event requires strong testimonial evidence, he overestimates the strength of the counter-evidence miracle testimony must overcome. Consequently, the quantitative requirements for miracle testimony

---

<sup>47</sup>On the coherence of our concept of the theistic God, see: C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking About Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985); Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991); Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983); and Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

may only need to be that of a successful probability as opposed to a proof. Concerning Hume's three *a posteriori* arguments, I showed that although the first of these three arguments has some merit from a general perspective, the arguments fail in handling the qualitative aspects of miracle testimony on the required case-by-case basis--as our miracle test-case revealed. Indeed, it turned out that our miracle test-case of the alleged resurrection of Jesus seems to satisfy the qualitative requirements of credible testimony and may even satisfy the quantitative requirements of a successful probability. Concerning Hume's Purely Anti-Apologetic Argument, (1) I showed that it is successful only in a very limited sense, (2) I pointed out that it brought to the forefront the problem of interpreting a miracle as an act of Deity, and (3) I sketched a possible solution to the interpretive problem relative to our test-case.

In view of the above, my overall conclusion concerning Hume's project has been vindicated. Because it is not clear that Hume has shown us that it is not rational to believe reports concerning the miraculous resurrection of Jesus, it is not clear that Hume is successful in showing us that Christianity is not founded on Reason.

## Appendix A

### HUME, THE INDIAN PRINCE, AND THE ICE

In this appendix, I will argue that Hume's discussion of the Indian prince's response to the reports about the never-before encountered ice is merely an aside whose importance lies not in its relation to the *a priori* in-principle argument of Part One which Hume is in the process of making but in its relation to arguments forwarded by Bishop Thomas Sherlock (1678-1761) and John Locke (1632-1704). As I will show, Hume's purpose in his discussion of the Indian prince is not to shed light onto his argument in Part One; rather, Hume seems merely to be dismantling the opposition's argument to make room for his own.

Hume's discussion concerning the Indian prince, set out very briefly in the main text of his essay and set out at length in a footnote, is, according to Gaskin, a response to Thomas Sherlock's *Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* (1729).<sup>1</sup> According to Gaskin, in the *Tryal* Sherlock "argued carefully and persuasively that the testimony of the Apostles established the Resurrection as an

---

<sup>1</sup>J.C.A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edition (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1978, 1988) p. 151.



historical fact."<sup>2</sup> Sherlock apparently put forth (*inter alia*) a *reductio ad absurdum* type of argument in favour of belief in resurrection reports. Sherlock's argument employed the falsehood or absurdity that

A Man who lives in a warm Climate [whom Hume calls "the Indian prince"], and never saw Ice, ought upon no Evidence to believe that Rivers freeze and grow hard in cold Countries; for this is improbable, contrary to the usual Course of Nature; and impossible to his Notion of Things.<sup>3</sup>

According to Sherlock, then, if one is sceptical about resurrection reports because a resurrection is so very contrary to the regularities of one's experience, then, by analogy, the Indian prince should never believe in ice. But, or so the implication goes, the Indian prince is clearly mistaken; and, hence, one *should* believe in the resurrection.

Hume, however, points out (in the sole two sentences in the main text of "Of Miracles" which concern the Indian prince) that

The Indian prince, who refused to believe the first relations concerning the effects of frost, reasoned justly; and it naturally required very strong testimony to engage his assent to facts, that arose from a state of nature, with which he was unacquainted, and which bore so little analogy to those events, of which he had had constant and uniform experience. Though they were not contrary to his experience, they were not conformable to it.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* (London and Dublin, 1729), p. 45; in the 11th edition published in 1743, reprint edition (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978), see p. 60.

<sup>4</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, pp. 113-114.

In other words, because the reports told of water turning instantaneously into ice at temperatures and weather conditions outside of the Indian prince's realm of experience, it cannot be said, *pace* Sherlock, that ice was actually contrary to the usual course of nature as experienced by the Indian prince. Indeed, as Hume points out in his footnote, all the circumstances of one's experience need to be the same for the Indian prince to experience an event that goes contrary to his experience. (Hume does not give this example, but water freezing at 95 degrees Fahrenheit would be contrary to the Indian prince's experience, because the Indian prince presumably would have only experienced warm weather conjoined with water's liquid and gaseous states.) In other words, since not all of the experienced circumstances wherein the formation of the ice occurred corresponded with the experienced circumstances of the Indian prince (i.e., when ice forms, the weather is not tropical but arctic in character), ice is, strictly speaking, *not contrary* to the Indian prince's experience. Nevertheless, according to Hume, it *could* be said that the ice was *not conformable* to the Indian prince's experience. Thus, the initial reports about water turning into ice concern "extraordinary" or infrequent events (infrequent from the perspective of the Indian prince) and are justly not to be *initially* believed because of their extraordinariness or infrequency vis-a-vis the experienced regularities of nature. But that water does in fact turn into ice may be reasonably believed by the Indian prince on the basis of "pretty strong testimony,"<sup>5</sup> given the disanalogy between the weather

---

<sup>5</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114n.

known to the Indian prince and that in which the water froze, and given that such an event is merely not conformable to one's experience as opposed to contrary and not conformable to it. Hence, because Hume makes a distinction that Sherlock did not make (i.e., the distinction between contrariness and non-conformity), Hume apparently is able to sidestep the above absurdity allegedly implied by scepticism concerning resurrection reports; and so Sherlock's argument is rebutted.<sup>6</sup>

Also, a solid case can be made that Hume's discussion concerning the Indian prince may have been also directed at--or may have been *primarily* directed at--John Locke. In *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke writes of "one born between the Tropicks" and the "King of *Siam*."<sup>7</sup> Such individuals could be loosely construed as Hume's Indian prince. ("Siam" is an old name for Thailand, which is not far from India; and much of India as well as a large portion of Thailand lie in the tropics.) According to Locke,

to a Man [such as one who has spent his life in the Tropics], whose Experience has been always quite CONTRARY [to England's weather and its effects], and has never heard of any thing like [ice], the most untainted Credit of a Witness will scarce be able to find belief. And as it happened to a *Dutch* Ambassador, who

---

<sup>6</sup>My argument in Chapter Five shows that Hume has overestimated the negative probative force of general experience on testimony concerning an event that occurs contrary to that experience.

<sup>7</sup>John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 656-657.

entertaining the King of *Siam* with the particularities of *Holland*, which he was inquisitive after, amongst other things told him, that Water in his Country, would sometimes, in cold weather, be so hard, that Men walked upon it, and that it would bear an Elephant, if he were there. To which the King replied, *Hitherto I have believed the strange Things you have told me, because I look upon you as a sober fair man, but now I am sure you lye.*<sup>8</sup>

Also, writes Locke,

Upon these grounds depends the *Probability* of any Proposition: And as the CONFORMITY of our Knowledge, as the certainty of Observations, as the frequency and constancy of Experience, and the number and credibility of Testimonies, do more or less agree, or disagree with it, so is any Proposition in it self, more or less probable.<sup>9</sup>

Hume's use of the words "contrary" and "conformable" (words I have capitalized in the passages from Locke) seem to connect Hume's discussion of the Indian prince directly with Locke: as I quoted above, in Part One of "Of Miracles" Hume wrote that "Though [the first relations concerning the first effects of frost] were not *contrary* to [the Indian prince's] experience, they were not *conformable* to it."<sup>10</sup> Hume, then, can be seen as showing that Locke was mistaken in holding that the Indian prince's experience was contrary to an experience of ice and that Locke was correct in holding that from the Indian prince's perspective the proposition that water becomes solid when frozen does not conform with the Indian prince's

---

<sup>8</sup>Locke, *Essay*, pp. 656-657; my capitalization.

<sup>9</sup>Locke, *Essay*, p. 657; my capitalization.

<sup>10</sup>Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 114; my emphasis.

knowledge.

Another piece of evidence that provides some additional substantiation to the thesis that Hume's discussion concerning the Indian prince is an afterthought to deal with the likes of Locke and Sherlock is the fact that the discussion was appended to "Of Miracles" in the second edition of *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (which was later renamed the *Enquiry*). According to Thomas Hill Green and Thomas Hodge Grose, the two sentences concerning the Indian prince which appear in the main text of "Of Miracles" was not added to the text until 1751.<sup>11</sup> Also, Green and Grose point out, referring to the footnote on the Indian prince,

This note first appears in the last page of Edition F, with the preface: The distance of the Author from the Press is the Cause, why the following Passage arriv'd not in time to be inserted in its proper Place.<sup>12</sup>

In view of the very apparent connection between Hume's discussion of the Indian prince and the writings of Sherlock and Locke; in view of the scant space

---

<sup>11</sup>David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, eds. Thomas Hill Green & Thomas Hodge Grose, reprint of the London 1882 edition (Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964), vol. 3, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup>Hume, *Philosophical Works*, Vol. 4, p. 92. In "Hume's 'Of Miracles': Probability and Irreligion" (*Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M. A. Stewart, Oxford Studies in the History of Philosophy, Vol. 1 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990]), David Wootton argues that "Of Miracles" was originally written in a French context (i.e., the works of Antoine Arnauld and Nicholas Freret) during Hume's stay in La Fleche, during the years 1735-1737, and that the modifications in 1750 were to account for the English context (i.e., Locke, Sherlock, and Butler).

in the main text of Hume's argument which is devoted to the case of the Indian prince<sup>13</sup>; in view of the fact that the Indian prince discussion appears in a later edition; and in view of the weak (if not lack of) connection between Hume's discussion of the Indian prince and the *a priori* in-principle argument Hume is forwarding in Part One of "Of Miracles"<sup>14</sup>: Hume's attention to the Indian prince can legitimately be seen to be an aside whose importance lies not with the argument of Part One which Hume is in the process of making but with the arguments forwarded by Sherlock and/or Locke. It very much seems, then, that Hume is not attempting to shed light onto his argument via his discussion of the Indian prince; rather, Hume seems merely to be dismantling the opposition's argument or view to make room for his own.

---

<sup>13</sup>In editing Hume's *Writings on Religion* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1992), Antony Flew takes the liberty of putting Hume's lengthy footnote concerning the Indian prince into the main text of Part One of "Of Miracles" (see *Writings*, pp. 67-68). Flew merely points out in a footnote that the lengthy footnote concerning the Indian prince "was originally printed as a footnote." In view of the fact that Hume himself treats the material as a footnoted aside, such a liberty on Flew's part is not warranted. Indeed, such a move by Flew may serve to misrepresent Hume's actual argument.

<sup>14</sup>The connection I make in the main text in Chapter Two of my thesis is between Hume's discussion of the Indian prince and the view that a fact's incredibility has a bearing on a testimony concerning that fact. This incredibility, however, is understood by Hume in his *a priori* in-principle argument of Part One as infrequency of occurrence, and this understanding by Hume is arrived at via previous and later argumentation. Understood solely as a part of Hume's *a priori* in-principle argument of Part One, then, the Indian prince discussion is superfluous as support in that argument.

## Appendix B

### HUME'S ARGUMENTS OF PART ONE: SUMMARIES

#### I. Summary of Hume's *a priori* in-principle argument of Part One, according to the Face Value/PAS interpretation

##### A. The argument concerning miracles in general

Premise (a): A proof *P* is constituted by uniform experience (i.e., uninterrupted experience of a very high frequency of conjoinings between two kinds of events).

Premise (b): A proof is as strong as, if not stronger than, any imaginable argument from experience.

Premise (c): A proof *P* is sufficient to establish a natural law *L*.

Premise (d): A miracle *M* is a violation or interruption of a natural law *L* (i.e., a necessary condition for an event to be a miracle is that it must be a very uncommon event relative to the uninterrupted high frequency of conjoinings which occurred prior to the miracle's occurrence to establish as law the law the miracle is alleged to interrupt).

Premise (e): The evidence *P* for those events which occur much more frequently than *M* and whose high frequency *M* interrupts weighs completely and directly against the evidence for a very rare event, such as miracle *M*.

Conclusion (f): Therefore, the proof P against a miracle M is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined (i.e., all proofs against miracles are equal in strength as well as the strongest proofs imaginable). (Justification: [a]-[e].)

B. The argument concerning a specific miracle in history

Premise (g): A specific historical miracle M' is a violation or interruption of a natural law L' (i.e., a necessary condition for M' to be a miracle is that it must be a very uncommon event relative to the uninterrupted high frequency of conjoinings which occurred prior to the occurrence of M' to establish as a law the law L' which M' interrupts). (Justification: Instantiation of [d].)

Conclusion (h): Therefore, the proof P' against M' is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (Justification: Instantiation of [f], given [g].)

C. The argument concerning the miracle of false testimony

Premise (i): Assume (for the sake of argument) that we actually have a testimonial proof P'' regarding a specific historical miracle M'.

Premise (j): If we have a testimonial proof P'' regarding a specific historical miracle M', then we have a natural law L'' which concerns miracle M' testimony. (Justification: Instantiation of [c], given [i].)

Conclusion (k): Therefore, we have a natural law L'' concerning miracle M' testimony. (Justification: [i], [j], Modus Ponens.)

Premise (l): Given that we have a natural law L'' concerning miracle M' testimony, the falsity of the miracle M' testimony is a miracle M''. (Justification: Instantiation of [d], given [k].<sup>1</sup>)

---

<sup>1</sup>In making this move, Hume confuses his necessary condition for a miracle with a sufficient condition. Recall that for the sake of his argument Hume characterizes a miracle merely by one of its necessary conditions, i.e., as a violation or interruption of a law of nature. (The other necessary condition for an event to be a miracle is that it be an act of a god or invisible agent; these two



Conclusion (m): Therefore, the falsity of the miracle M' testimony is a miracle M". (Justification: [k], [l], Modus Ponens.)

Conclusion (n): Therefore, the proof P" against miracle M" is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (Justification: Instantiation of [f], given [m].)

#### D. Hume's maxim

Premise (o): To determine what to believe concerning a miracle M' report one should weigh the miracle M" that the testimonial proof is false against the miracle M' that the aforementioned testimony purports to establish, and reject the greater miracle. (Note: Hume in effect defines the "greatness" of a miracle as follows: a miracle M' is greater than a miracle M" if and only if the law L' that M' violates is constituted by a greater frequency of conjoinings than the law L" that M" violates. In other words, the greater miracle would be that event which has the stronger proof against it.)

#### E. Main conclusion

Conclusion (p): Therefore, one should suspend judgment when confronted with a testimonial proof P" for the occurrence of a miracle M'. (There is a mutual destruction of arguments which is complete.) (Justification: [h], [n], and [o].)

---

necessary conditions constitute the sufficient condition for an event to be a miracle.) In other words, not all violations or interruptions of nature's laws need to be miracles. Yet, Hume very apparently does take all violations or interruptions of nature's laws to be miracles, since he takes the falsity of a testimony that occurs in a testimonial proof as sufficient evidence for that falsity to be a miracle. Although this confusion is of some interest for understanding how Hume's argument actually works, the significance of the confusion in terms of the argument's overall evaluation is negligible, as my main criticisms show.

II. Summary of the above summary of Hume's *a priori* in- principle argument of Part One, according to the Face Value/PAS interpretation

Because the testimonial proof P'' against miracle M'' is the testimonial proof P'' against the falsity of M' testimony (recall that M'' is the miracle of the falsity of M' testimony), and because the proof P'' *against the falsity* of M' testimony is in effect the proof P'' *for the truth* of M' testimony, we can legitimately say that the proof P'' is a proof *for* M'. Moreover, we can also legitimately say that just as the proof P'' against M'' is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined (see [1]), so too the proof P'' for the truth of M' testimony--i.e., the proof P'' *for* M'--is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined too. Hence, we have a proof P' against the specific historical miracle M', which is a proof as entire as any argument from experience can be imagined, and we have a proof P'' for the specific historical miracle M', which is a proof as entire as any argument from experience can be imagined; and we can reduce Hume's maxim to a weighing of these two equally strong proofs. Consider, then, the following summary of the above summary.

A. The (unrevised) argument concerning miracles in general

Premise (a): A proof P is constituted by uniform experience (i.e., uninterrupted experience of very high frequencies of conjoinings between two kinds of events).

Premise (b): A proof is as strong as, if not stronger than, any imaginable argument from experience.

Premise (c): A proof P is sufficient to establish a natural law L.

Premise (d): A miracle M is a violation or interruption of a natural law L (i.e., a necessary condition for an event to be a miracle is that it must be a very uncommon event relative to the uninterrupted high frequency of conjoinings which occurred prior to the miracle's occurrence to establish as law the law the miracle is alleged to interrupt).

Premise (e): The evidence P for those events which occur much more frequently than M and whose high frequency M interrupts weighs completely and directly against the evidence for a very rare event, such as miracle M.

Conclusion (f): Therefore, the proof P against a miracle M is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined (i.e., all proofs against miracles are equal in strength as well as the strongest proofs imaginable). (Justification: [a]-[e].)

#### B. The (revised) argument concerning a specific miracle in history

Premise (g): A specific historical miracle M' is a violation or interruption of a natural law L' (i.e., a necessary condition for M' to be a miracle is that it must be a very uncommon event relative to the uninterrupted high frequency of conjoinings which occurred prior to the occurrence of M' to establish as a law the law L' which M' interrupts). (Justification: Instantiation of [d].)

Conclusion (h): Therefore, the proof P' against M' is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (Justification: Instantiation of [f], given [g].)

Premise (i): Assume (for the sake of argument) that we actually have a testimonial proof P'' for a specific historical miracle M'.

Conclusion (j): Therefore, the testimonial proof P'' for a specific historical miracle M' is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. (Justification: See my argument above.)

#### C. Hume's (revised) maxim

Premise (k): To determine what to believe concerning a miracle M' report one should weigh the proof P' against miracle M' against the testimonial proof P'' for M', and accept the greater proof. (Note: the greater proof would be that proof with the greater number of constant conjoinings.)

D. Main conclusion (unrevised)

Conclusion (l): Therefore, one should suspend judgment when confronted with a testimonial proof P" for the occurrence of a miracle M'. (There is a mutual destruction of arguments which is complete.) (Justification: [h], [j], and [k].)

III. Summary of Hume's *a priori* in-principle argument, according to the Blair/ESR interpretation

A. The argument concerning miracles in general

Premise (a): A proof P is constituted by a uniform experience (i.e., uninterrupted experience of a very high frequency of conjoinings between two kinds of events).

Premise (b): Some proofs are stronger than others (i.e., one uninterrupted, very high frequency of conjoinings between two kinds of events can be greater than another because the former may have a higher number of conjoinings than the latter).

Premise (c): A proof P is sufficient to establish a natural law L.

Premise (d): A miracle M is a violation or interruption of a natural law L (i.e., a necessary condition for an event to be a miracle is that it must be a very uncommon event relative to the uninterrupted high frequency of conjoinings which occurred prior to the miracle's occurrence to establish as law the law the miracle is alleged to interrupt).

Premise (e): The evidence P for those events which occur much more frequently than M and whose high frequency M interrupts weighs completely and directly against the evidence for a very rare event, such as miracle M.

Conclusion (f): Therefore, the proof P against a miracle M is very strong and varies in strength in accordance to the degree of frequency of conjoinings which established the violated natural law L. (Justification: [a], [b], [c], and [d].)

B. The argument concerning a specific miracle in history

Premise (g): A specific historical miracle  $M'$  is a violation or interruption of a natural law  $L'$  (i.e., a necessary condition for  $M'$  to be a miracle is that it must be a very uncommon event relative to the uninterrupted high frequency of conjoinings which occurred prior to the occurrence of  $M'$  to establish as a law the law  $L'$  which  $M'$  interrupts). (Justification: Instantiation of [d].)

Conclusion (h): Therefore, the proof  $P'$  against  $M'$  is very strong and the extent of its strength depends on the degree of frequency of conjoinings which established the violated natural law  $L'$ . (Justification: Instantiation of [e], given [g].)

C. The argument concerning the miracle of false testimony

Premise (i): Assume (for the sake of argument) that we actually have a testimonial proof  $P''$  for a specific historical miracle  $M'$ .

Premise (j): If we have a testimonial proof  $P''$  for a specific historical miracle  $M'$ , then we have a natural law  $L''$  which concerns miracle  $M'$  testimony. (Justification: Instantiation of [c], given [i].)

Conclusion (k): Therefore, we have a natural law  $L''$  concerning miracle  $M'$  testimony. (Justification: [i], [j], Modus Ponens.)

Premise (l): Given that we have a natural law  $L''$  concerning miracle  $M'$  testimony, the falsity of the miracle  $M'$  testimony is a miracle  $M''$ . (Justification: Instantiation of [d], given [k].<sup>2</sup>)

Conclusion (m): Therefore, the falsity of the miracle  $M'$  testimony is a miracle  $M''$ . (Justification: [k], [l], Modus Ponens.)

Conclusion (n): Therefore, the proof  $P''$  against miracle  $M''$  is very strong and its degree of strength is in accordance to the degree of frequency of conjoinings which established the violated natural law  $L''$ . (Justification: Instantiation of [f], given [m].)

---

<sup>2</sup>See my footnote at Premise (l) for the first summary of this appendix.

## D. Hume's maxim

Premise (o): To determine what to believe concerning a miracle M' report one should weigh the miracle M" that the testimonial proof P" is false against the miracle M' that the aforementioned testimony purports to establish, and reject the greater miracle. (Note: Hume in effect defines the "greatness" of a miracle as follows: a miracle M' is greater than a miracle M" if and only if the law L' that M' violates is constituted by a greater frequency of conjoinings than the law L" that M" violates. In other words, the greater miracle would be that event which has the stronger proof against it.)

## E. Main conclusion

Conclusion (p): Therefore, one can in principle have the evidence for a miracle M' outweigh the evidence for the violated law of nature L', but the frequency of the conjoinings in the experience of constant conjunction between the specific historical miracle M' type of testimony and the miraculous objects of that testimony must be much greater than the frequency of the conjoinings in the experience of the related natural law. In other words, for a testimonial proof P" to be sufficient to establish a miracle M', it must consist of an extraordinarily strong proof--enough to outweigh the proof P' against the miracle M'. (Justification: [h], [n], and [o].)

IV. Summary of the above summary of Hume's *a priori* in-principle argument, according to the Blair/ESPR interpretation

Because the testimonial proof P" against miracle M" is the testimonial proof P" against the falsity of M' testimony (recall that M" is the miracle of the falsity of M' testimony), and because the proof P" *against the falsity* of M' testimony is in effect a proof *for the truth* of M' testimony, we can legitimately say that the proof P" is a proof *for* M'. Hence, we have a proof P' against the specific historical

miracle  $M'$  and we have a proof  $P''$  for it, and Hume's maxim translates into a weighing of these two proofs. Consider, then, the following summary of the above summary.

A. The (unrevised) argument concerning miracles in general

Premise (a): A proof  $P$  is constituted by a uniform experience (i.e., uninterrupted experience of a very high frequency of conjoinings between two kinds of events).

Premise (b): Some proofs are stronger than others (i.e., one uninterrupted, very high frequency of conjoinings between two kinds of events can be greater than another because the former may have a higher number of conjoinings than the latter).

Premise (c): A proof  $P$  is sufficient to establish a natural law  $L$ .

Premise (d): A miracle  $M$  is a violation or interruption of a natural law  $L$  (i.e., a necessary condition for an event to be a miracle is that it must be a very uncommon event relative to the uninterrupted high frequency of conjoinings which occurred prior to the miracle's occurrence to establish as law the law the miracle is alleged to interrupt).

Premise (e): The evidence  $P$  for those events which occur much more frequently than  $M$  and whose high frequency  $M$  interrupts weighs completely and directly against the evidence for a very rare event, such as miracle  $M$ .

Conclusion (f): Therefore, the proof  $P$  against a miracle  $M$  is very strong and varies in strength in accordance to the degree of frequency of conjoinings which established the violated natural law  $L$ . (Justification: [a], [b], [c], and [d].)

B. The (revised) argument concerning a specific miracle in history

Premise (g): A specific historical miracle  $M'$  is a violation or interruption of a natural law  $L'$  (i.e., a necessary condition for  $M'$  to be a miracle is that it must be a very uncommon event relative to the uninterrupted high frequency of conjoinings which occurred prior to the occurrence of  $M'$  to establish as a

law the law L' which M' interrupts). (Justification: Instantiation of [d].)

Conclusion (h): Therefore, the proof P' against M' is very strong and the extent of its strength depends on the degree of frequency of conjoinings which established the violated natural law L'. (Justification: Instantiation of [f], given [g].)

Premise (i): Assume (for the sake of argument) that we actually have a testimonial proof P'' for a specific historical miracle M'.

Conclusion (j): Therefore, the proof P'' for a specific historical miracle M' is very strong and the extent of its strength depends on the degree of frequency of conjoinings which establish proof P''. (Justification: See my argument at the introduction of this section.)

C. Hume's (revised) maxim

Premise (k): To determine what to believe concerning a miracle M' report one should weigh the testimonial proof P'' for the miracle M' against the proof P' which works against the miracle M', and accept the stronger proof. (Note: the greater proof will be that proof with the greater number of constant conjoinings.)

D. Main conclusion (unrevised)

Conclusion (l): Therefore, for a testimonial proof P'' to be sufficient to establish a miracle M', it must consist of an extraordinarily strong proof-enough to significantly outweigh the proof P' against the miracle M'.



## Appendix C

### A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF MIRACLE

If Hume's estimation--that all of the evidence for an allegedly violated natural law weighs completely and directly against the testimonial evidence for the miracle that purportedly does the violating--arises solely from his notion that a miracle is a violation of a law of nature in the sense of some sort of ontological conflict, then Hume's estimation is mistaken. Why? Because a miracle need not at all be conceptualized as in conflict with a law of nature.

As Robert A. H. Larmer points out (apparently following C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup>), "it is entirely conceivable that miracles can occur in a world which behaves, always and everywhere, completely in accordance with the laws of nature."<sup>2</sup> Larmer distinguishes between laws of nature and the "stuff" (i.e., mass or energy) whose

---

<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960), pp. 55-62.

<sup>2</sup>Robert A. H. Larmer, *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), p. 18.

behaviour the laws describe. According to Larmer, a miracle is the introduction and/or withdrawal--i.e., creation and/or annihilation--by God or an invisible rational agent of the stuff to which laws apply, and so a miracle does not violate any laws of nature. Larmer goes on to point out,

If God creates or annihilates a unit or units of mass/energy He breaks no law of nature, but He does, by the creation of new mass/energy, or by the annihilation of previously existing mass/energy, change the material conditions to which the laws of nature apply.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, says Larmer,

We do not, for example, violate the laws of motion if we toss an extra billiard ball into a group of billiard balls in motion on a billiard table. There is no moment at which the laws of motion are contravened. What we do by introducing the extra billiard ball is change the material conditions to which the laws of motion apply and hence change the result which would otherwise be expected. Similarly, by creating or annihilating a unit or units of mass/energy, God may produce in nature an event that could not otherwise occur without violating the laws of nature.<sup>4</sup>

And, says Larmer,

All physical events, including miracles, can be described in terms of a certain amount and ordering of energy. If the event can be conceived then so can that particular amount and ordering of energy. Thus, for any miracle, it would always be possible for a transcendent agent to produce it by the creation or annihilation of energy, since all that is required is that the agent bring about the

---

<sup>3</sup>Larmer, *Water into Wine?* p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>Larmer, *Water into Wine?* p. 20.

particular amount and ordering of energy necessary for the miracle.<sup>5</sup>

Larmer anticipates the objection that the creation or annihilation of mass/energy violates the First Law of Thermodynamics, i.e., the Principle of the Conservation of Energy. Larmer points out that the Principle of the Conservation of Energy has two formulations: (1) "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, although its form may change"; and (2) "In an isolated system (that is, a system not causally influenced by something other than itself) the total amount of energy remains constant, although its form may change."<sup>6</sup> Also, Larmer points out that the first formulation is stronger than the second, and that the actual evidence only supports the second. In addition, it is only the first formulation that creation or annihilation of mass/energy would violate. Now, because the first formulation is much stronger than the second and hence much stronger than the evidence warrants, and because the first formulation is the only formulation of the two that a miracle would violate, the first formulation is not a law of nature but is really an *a priori* deistic or naturalistic metaphysical principle which unjustifiably rules out theism and miracles. The second formulation, on the other hand, is a legitimately expressed law of nature. And on the second formulation whether God interferes with the system of the universe is an open question—a question that may be answered via the evidence for what appears to be a miracle.

---

<sup>5</sup>Larmer, *Water Into Wine?* p. 29.

<sup>6</sup>Larmer, *Water Into Wine?*, p. 24. Concerning the discussion that follows, see Larmer, *Water Into Wine?* pp. 24-27 & pp. 61-73.

Thus, in the words of C. Stephen Evans,

In the absence of any firm knowledge about God and his purposes, it would still be rash to claim with Hume that the probability of a miracle is vanishingly small. Rather it would appear more reasonable to conclude that it is hard, if not impossible, to estimate the a priori probability of a miracle; and therefore one should try to look at the evidence for miracles with a somewhat open, though cautiously skeptical, mind.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 113.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### I. Books and Journals

- Ahern, Dennis M. "Hume on the Evidential Impossibility of Miracles," *Studies in Epistemology*, Nicholas Rescher, editor. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975. Pp. 1-31.
- Ankerberg, John, John Weldon & Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *The Case for Jesus the Messiah: Incredible Prophecies That Prove God Exists*. Eugene, Oregon: harvest House Publishers, Inc., 1989.
- Beckwith, Francis J. *Baha'i*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1985.
- Beckwith, Francis J. *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1989.
- Blomberg, Craig. *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1987.
- Brown, Colin. *Miracles and the Critical Mind*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984.
- Bruce, F.F. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1943.
- Burns, R.M. *The Great Debate on Miracles From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume*. London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1981.
- Castagnetto, Susan. "David Hume," *History of Philosophy*, Dion Scott-Hakures et al. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993. Pp. 208-235.

- Colwell, Gary. "On Defining Away the Miraculous," in *Philosophy*. Volume 57. 1982. Pp. 327-337.
- Copleston, Frederick. *A History of Philosophy*. Volume V: Hobbes to Hume. New York: Doubleday, 1985.
- Craig, William Lane. *Apologetics: An Introduction*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1984.
- Craig, William Lane. *Knowing the Truth about the Resurrection*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1988.
- Evans, C. Stephen. *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith*. Contours of Christian Philosophy series. C. Stephen Evans, series editor. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985.
- Flew, Antony. *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961.
- France, R.T. *The Evidence for Jesus*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986.
- Gaskin, J.C.A. *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*. 2nd edition. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1988.
- Geisler, Norman L. *The Battle for the Resurrection*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989.
- Geisler, Norman L. *Miracles and Modern Thought*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982
- Greig, J.Y.T., editor. *The Letters of David Hume*. Volume 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932.
- Habermas, Gary R. *The Verdict of History: Conclusive Evidence for the Life of Jesus*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988.
- Habermas, Gary & Antony Flew. *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*. Ed. Terry L. Miethe. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.
- Habermas, Gary R. & J.P. Moreland. *Immortality: The Other Side of Death*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992.
- Hexham, Irving. *Concise Dictionary of Religion*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

- Hoover, A.J. "Apologetics," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, editor. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984. Pp. 68-70.
- Howe, Frederic R. *Challenge and Response: A Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, 1982.
- Hume, David. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge. 3rd edition. Revised by P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge. 2nd edition. Revised by P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.
- Hume, David. *Writings on Religion*. Edited by Antony Flew. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1992.
- Hume, David. *The Philosophical Works*. Volumes 3 & 4. Edited by Thomas Hill Green & Thomas Hodge Grose. Reprint of the London 1882 edition. Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964.
- Johnson, Ralph H., & J. Anthony Blair. *Logical Self-Defense*. 3rd edition. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1993.
- Kravitz, David. *Who's Who in Greek and Roman Mythology*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc./Publisher, 1975.
- Kreeft, Peter, & Ronald K. Tacelli. *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994.
- Kuehn, Manfred. "Kant's Critique of Hume's Theory of Faith," *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, M.A. Stewart & John P. Wright, editors. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994 (forthcoming).
- Larmer, Robert A.H. *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988.
- Levine, Michael P. *Hume and the Problem of Miracles: A Solution*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989.
- Lewis, C.S. *Miracles*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960.
- Locke, John. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

- MacNabb, D.G.C. "David Hume," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, editor. Volume 4. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. & The Free Press, 1967. Pp. 74-90.
- McDowell, Josh. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith*. Revised Edition. San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1979.
- McDowell, Josh. *The Resurrection Factor: Does the historical evidence support the resurrection of Jesus Christ?* San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1981.
- McDowell, Josh, & Bart Larson. *Jesus: A Biblical Defense of His Deity*. San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1983.
- Miethe, Terry L. *A Christian's Guide to Faith and Reason*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1987.
- Montgomery, John Warwick. "The Place of Reason in Christian Witness," *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978. Pp. 27-42.
- Montgomery, John Warwick. *History and Christianity*. San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1983.
- Montgomery, John Warwick. *Human Rights & Human Dignity*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1986.
- Moore, James R. "Science and Christianity: Toward Peaceful Coexistence," *Christianity For The Tough Minded*, John Warwick Montgomery, editor. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1973. Pp. 75-88.
- Moreland, J.P. *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books House, 1987.
- Morison, Frank. *Who Moved the Stone?* London: Faber & Faber, 1944.
- Morris, Thomas V. *The Logic of God Incarnate*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Morris, Thomas V. *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology*. Contours of Christian Philosophy series. C. Stephen Evans, series editor. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991.



- Nash, Ronald H. *The Concept of God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983.
- Newman, Robert C. "The Testimony of Messianic Prophecy," *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question*, John Warwick Montgomery, editor. Dallas: Probe Books, 1991. Pp. 203-214.
- Penelhum, Terence. *Religion and Rationality*. New York: Random House, 1971.
- Penelhum, Terence. *God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983.
- Pinto, Robert C., J. Anthony Blair, & Katharine E. Parr. *Reasoning: A Practical Guide for Canadian Students*. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall Canada Inc., 1993.
- Popkin, Richard H. & Avrum Stroll. *Philosophy Made Simple*. 2nd edition. New York: Doubleday, 1993.
- Reese, W.L. *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*. New Jersey: Humanities Press Inc., 1980.
- Rowe, William L. *Philosophy of Religion*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1978.
- Salmon, Wesley C. *Logic*. 3rd edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984.
- Sherlock, Thomas. *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus*. London and Dublin, 1729. Reprinted. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978.
- Smith, James E. *What the Bible Teaches About the Promised Messiah*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993.
- Stewart, M.A. "Hume's Historical View of Miracles," *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, M.A. Stewart & John P. Wright, editors. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994 (forthcoming).
- Stoner, Peter & Robert Newman. *Science Speaks: Scientific Proof of the Accuracy of Prophecy and the Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968.
- Swinburne, Richard. *The Concept of Miracle*. London & Basingstoke: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1970.

- Swinburne, Richard. *The Coherence of Theism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
- Taylor, A.E. *David Hume and the Miraculous*. Cambridge: Cambridge at the University Press, 1927.
- Van Eemeren, Frans H. & Rob Grootendorst. *Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions*. Dordrecht, Holland: Foris Publications, 1984.
- Walvoord, John F. *Major Bible Prophecies*. New York: Harper Paperbacks & Zondervan, 1991.
- Wootton, David. "Hume's 'Of Miracles': Probability and Irreligion," *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, M.A. Stewart, editor. Oxford Studies in the History of Philosophy, Volume 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. Pp. 191-229.
- Wright, John P. *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Wright, John P. "Hume's Academic Scepticism: A Reappraisal of His Philosophy of Human Understanding," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 16, Number 3, September 1986. Pp. 407-435.
- The Holy Bible*. New International Version (NIV). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978.

## II. Videos

- Montgomery, John Warwick. *Defending the Biblical Gospel*. Volume 7: The Character of the Bible. Anaheim, California: The Simon Greenleaf School of Law, 1986.

## VITA AUCTORIS

Hendrik (Hank) Johannes van der Breggen, son of Pieter and Hendrika van der Breggen, was born in 1953 in Maracaibo, Venezuela. He came to Canada in 1959 and became a Canadian citizen in 1969. He graduated in 1971 from Weyburn Collegiate Institute, Weyburn, Saskatchewan. Hendrik then spent three years in the Canadian Armed Forces (infantry), during which time he received the Commandant's Shield for best recruit (Cornwallis, Nova Scotia) and successfully completed Basic Officer Training (Chilliwack, British Columbia). After a number of years variously employed in the civilian work force (e.g., dishwasher, busboy, waiter, and assistant manager at a restaurant; accountant's assistant at an oil and exploration company; child care counsellor at a youth assessment centre; community youth worker), Hendrik entered the University of Calgary, Alberta, to obtain a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy in 1990. While at the University of Calgary, Hendrik published the book *An Enquiry Concerning Human Abortion* (Burlington, Ontario: Crown Publications, 1988). Hendrik commenced his studies in Philosophy as a Master's I student at the University of Windsor in the Fall of 1991. At the University of Windsor, he was awarded one Teaching and five Graduate Assistantships plus a Postgraduate Tuition Scholarship and a Summer Research Scholarship. He also had two papers placed in the University of Windsor Philosophy Department's Blue Ribbon Paper File. With the thesis "Hume, Miracle Reports, and Credibility," Hendrik satisfied the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in Philosophy, and he graduated from the University of Windsor in the Spring of 1994. Hendrik then received a 1994-95 Ontario Graduate Scholarship and went to the University of Waterloo to study for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Hendrik van der Breggen is the husband of Carla van der Breggen (nee Maier) and the father of two sons, Abraham (Brahm) Wolfgang and Thomas Elliot. While in Windsor, Hendrik and his family attended the Heritage Park Christian and Missionary Alliance Church.