

Hume's letters on miracles

The Letters of David Hume

1. To HENRY HOME

London, December 2 1737.

Dear Sir,

I am sorry I am not able to satisfy your curiosity, by giving you some general notion of the plan upon which I proceed. But my opinions are so new, and even some terms I am obliged to make use of, that I could not propose, by any abridgement, to give my system an air of likelihood, or so much as make it intelligible. 'Tis a thing I have in vain attempted already, at a gentleman's request in this place, who thought it would help him to comprehend and judge of my notions, if he saw them all at once before him. I have had a greater desire of communicating to you the plan of the whole, that I believe it will not appear in public before the beginning of next winter. For, besides that it would be difficult to have it printed before the rising of the Parliament, I must confess, I am not ill pleased with a little delay, that it may appear with as few imperfections as possible. I have been here near three months, always within a week of agreeing with my printers; and you may imagine I did not forget the work itself during that time, where I began to feel some passages weaker for the style and diction than I could have wisht. The nearness and greatness of the event roused up my attention, and made me more difficult to please, than when I was alone in perfect tranquillity in France. But here I must tell you one of my foibles. I have a great inclination to go down to Scotland this spring to see my friends, and have your advice concerning my philosophical discoveries; but cannot overcome a certain shamefacedness I have to appear among you at my years, without having yet a settlement, or so much as attempted any. How happens it, that we philosophers cannot as heartily despise the world, as it despises us? I think in my conscience the contempt were as well founded on our side, as on the other.

Having a frankt letter, I was resolved to make use of it; and accordingly inclose some *Reasonings concerning Miracles*, which I once thought of publishing with the rest, but which I am afraid will give too much offence, even as the world is disposed at present. There is something in the turn of thought, and a good deal in the turn of expression, which will not perhaps appear so proper, for want of knowing the context: but the force of the argument you'll be judge of, as it stands. Tell me your thoughts of it. Is not the style too diffuse? though, as that was a popular argument, I have spread it out much more than the other parts of the work. I beg of

you to show it to nobody, except to Mr Hamilton, if he pleases; and let me know at your leisure that you have received it, read it, and burnt it. Your thoughts and mine agree with respect to Dr Butler, and I would be glad to be introduced to him. I am at present castrating my work, that is, cutting off its nobler parts; that is, endeavouring it shall give as little offence as possible, before which, I could not pretend to put it into the Doctor's hands. This is a piece of cowardice, for which I blame myself, though I believe none of my friends will blame me. But I was resolved not to be an enthusiast in philosophy, while I was blaming other enthusiasms. If ever I indulge myself in any, 'twill be when I tell that I am, Dear Sir, yours,

DAVID HUME.

2. To the REV. HUGH BLAIR

[1761]

Sir,

I have perused the ingenious performance,¹ which you was so obliging as to put into my hands, with all the attention possible; tho not perhaps with all the seriousness and gravity which you have so frequently recommended to me. But the fault lies not in the piece, which is certainly very acute; but in the subject. I know you will say, it lies in neither, but in myself alone. If that be so, I am sorry to say that I believe it is incurable.

I could wish that your friend had not chosen to appear as a controversial writer, but had endeavoured to establish his principles in general, without any reference to a particular book or person; tho I own he does me a great deal of honour, in thinking that any thing I have wrote deserves his attention. For besides many inconveniences, which attend that kind of writing, I see it is almost impossible to preserve decency and good manners in it. This author, for instance, says sometimes obliging things of me much beyond what I can presume to deserve; and I thence conclude that in general he did not mean to insult me: yet I meet with some other passages more worthy of Warburton and his followers than of so ingenious an author.

But as I am not apt to lose my temper, and would still less incline to do so with a friend of yours, I shall calmly communicate to you some remarks on the argument, since you seem to desire it. I shall employ very few words; since a hint will suffice to a gentleman of this author's penetration.

¹ The MS. of George Campbell's *Dissertation on Miracles*, published the following year.

Sect. I. I would desire the author to consider, whether the medium by which we reason concerning human testimony be different from that which leads us to draw any inferences concerning other human actions; that is, our knowledge of human nature from experience? Or why is it different? I suppose we conclude an honest man will not lie to us, in the same manner as we conclude that he will not cheat us. As to the youthful propensity to believe, which is corrected by experience; it seems obvious, that children adopt blindfold all the opinions, principles, sentiments, and passions, of their elders, as well as credit their testimony; nor is this more strange, than that a hammer should make an impression on clay.

Sect. II. No man can have any other experience but his own. The experience of others becomes his only by the credit which he gives to their testimony; which proceeds from his own experience of human nature.

Sect. III. There is no contradiction in saying, that all the testimony which ever was really given for any miracle, or ever will be given, is a subject of derision; and yet forming a fiction or supposition of a testimony for a particular miracle, which might not only merit attention, but amount to a full proof of it. For instance, the absence of the sun during 48 hours; but reasonable men would only conclude from this fact, that the machine of the globe was disordered during the time.

Page 28. I find no difficulty to explain my meaning, and yet shall not probably do it in any future edition. 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.

Page 29. There is very little more delicacy in telling a man he speaks nonsense by implication, than in saying so directly.

Sect. IV. Does a man of sense run after every silly tale of witches or hobgoblins or fairies, and canvass particularly the evidence? I never knew any one, that examined and deliberated about nonsense who did not believe it before the end of his inquiries.

Sect. V. I wonder the author does not perceive the reason why Mr John Knox and Mr Alexander Henderson² did not work as many miracles as their brethren in other churches. Miracle-working was a Popish trick, and discarded with the other parts of that religion. Men must have new and opposite ways of establishing new and opposite follies. The same rea-

son extends to Mahomet. The Greek priests, who were in the neighbourhood of Arabia, and many of them in it, were as great miracle-workers as the Romish; and Mahomet would have been laughed at for so stale and simple a device. To cast out devils, and cure the blind, where every one almost can do as much, is not the way to get any extraordinary ascendant over men. I never read of a miracle in my life, that was not meant to establish some new point of religion. There are no miracles wrought in Spain to prove the Gospel, but St Francis Xavier wrought a thousand well attested ones for that purpose in the Indies. The miracles in Spain, which are also fully and completely attested, are wrought to prove the efficacy of a particular crucifix or relict, which is always a new point, or, at least, not universally received.

Sect. VI. 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.

I could wish your friend had not denominated me an infidel writer, on account of ten or twelve pages which seem to him to have that tendency: while I have wrote so many volumes on history, literature, politics, trade, morals, which, in that particular at least, are entirely inoffensive. Is a man to be called a drunkard, because he has been seen fuddled once in his lifetime?

Having said so much to your friend, who is certainly a very ingenious man, tho a little too zealous for a philosopher; permit me also the freedom of saying a word to yourself. Whenever I have had the pleasure to be in your company, if the discourse turned upon any common subject of literature or reasoning, I always parted from you both entertained and instructed. But when the conversation was diverted by you from this channel towards the subject of your profession; tho I doubt not but your intentions were very friendly towards me, I own I never received the same satisfaction: I was apt to be tired, and you to be angry. I would therefore wish for the future, wherever my good fortune throws me in your way, that these topics should be forborne between us. I have, long since, done with all inquiries on such subjects, and am become incapable of instruction; tho I own no one is more capable of conveying it than yourself.

After having given you the liberty of communicating to your friend what part of this letter you think proper,

I remain, Sir,

Your most obedient humble servant,

DAVID HUME

² Alexander Henderson (? 1583–1646), Scottish Presbyterian divine, Covenanter, and diplomatist. For some years he was in effect the leader of the Covenanters against Charles I.

7 June, 1962

Dear Sir,

It has so seldom happened that controversies in philosophy, much more in theology, have been carried on without producing a personal quarrel between the parties, that I must regard my present situation as somewhat extraordinary, who have reason to give you thanks for the civil and obliging manner in which you have conducted the dispute against me, on so interesting a subject as that of miracles. Any little symptoms of vehemence, of which I formerly used the freedom to complain, when you favoured me with a sight of the manuscript, are either removed or explained away, or atoned for by civilities, which are far beyond what I have any title to pretend to. It will be natural for you to imagine, that I will fall upon some shift to evade the force of your arguments, and to retain my former opinion in the point controverted between us; but it is impossible for me not to see the ingenuity of your performance, and the great learning which you have displayed against me.

I consider myself as very much honoured in being thought worthy of an answer by a person of so much merit; and as I find that the public does you justice with regard to the ingenuity and good composition of your piece, I hope you will have no reason to repent engaging with an antagonist, whom, perhaps in strictness, you might have ventured to neglect. I own to you, that I never felt so violent an inclination to defend myself as at present, when I am thus fairly challenged by you, and I think I could find something specious at least to urge in my defence; but as I had fixed a resolution, in the beginning of my life, always to leave the public to judge between my adversaries and me, without making any reply. I must adhere inviolably to this resolution, otherways my silence on any future occasion would be construed an inability to answer, and would be matter of triumph against me.

It may perhaps amuse you to learn the first hint, which suggested to me that argument which you have so strenuously attacked. I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits' College of La Flèche, a town in which I passed two years of my youth, and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent, when I was tempted to dispute against him; and as my head was full of the topics of my *Treatise of Human Nature*, which I was at that time composing, this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gruelled my companion; but at last he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles;—which observation I thought proper to

admit as a sufficient answer. I believe you will allow, that the freedom at least of this reasoning makes it somewhat extraordinary to have been the produce of a convent of Jesuits, tho perhaps you may think the sophistry of it savours plainly of the place of its birth.