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Robert J. Fogelin

*Hume Studies* Volume XVI, Number 1 (April, 1990) 81-87.

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# What Hume Actually Said About Miracles

Robert J. Fogelin

Two things are commonly said about Hume's treatment of miracles in the first part of Section X of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>1</sup>

I. Hume did **not** put forward an *a priori* argument intended to show that miracles are not possible.

II. Hume **did** put forward an *a priori* argument intended to show that testimony, however strong, could never make it reasonable to believe that a miracle had occurred.

In a recent article in this journal, Dorothy Coleman calls this the "traditional interpretation," and, since this characterization strikes me as correct, I shall call it that too.<sup>2</sup>

Antony Flew stands virtually alone in challenging the traditional interpretation, arguing, in particular, that Hume did not even attempt to provide an *a priori* argument showing that testimony can never establish the existence of a miracle. On Flew's reading, Hume's argument was intended to do no more than place a "check" on arguments put forward to establish the existence of miracles on the basis of testimony.<sup>3</sup> Along with others, however, Flew accepts the first part of the traditional interpretation, namely, that whatever Hume was up to, he was certainly not trying to produce a proof showing that miracles cannot exist. He endorses the first part of the traditional interpretation in these words:

What [Hume] is trying to demonstrate *a priori* in Part I is: not that, as a matter of fact, miracles do not happen; but that, from the very nature of the concept — 'from the very nature of the fact' — there must be a conflict of evidence required to show that they do.<sup>4</sup>

In opposition to these united voices, I will argue that this consensus on the first part of the traditional interpretation is unfounded, for there are clear texts — at the very heart of Hume's discussion — that go dead against it.

Two passages, which occur in the same paragraph, are particularly relevant to this discussion:

Passage I. *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.* (E 114, emphasis added)

Passage II. *There must... 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; **nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible**, but by an opposite proof, which is superior.* (E 115, emphasis added in final clause)

The clause *nor such a proof be destroyed, or miracle rendered credible* in Passage II is crucial for our purposes, for it simultaneously expresses **two** claims which, for clarity's sake, I will state separately. First, when Hume speaks of *such a proof*, he is referring to the *direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle* mentioned in the first part of the same sentence. Thus, one thing that Hume is saying is this:

C<sub>1</sub>: Nor can such a proof (against the existence of any miracle) be destroyed, but by an opposite proof which is superior.

He is also making the following claim:

C<sub>2</sub>: Nor can such a miracle be rendered credible, but by an opposite proof which is superior.

Having sorted things out, it is now possible — using only direct quotations from the immediate text — to show that, contrary to the traditional interpretation, Hume does present an *a priori* argument against the existence of miracles.

#### Argument One

1. *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 ... but by an opposite proof, which is superior.*  
(E 115, from Passage II)

2. *the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.* (E 114, emphasis added, from Passage I)

Therefore:

3. *there is ... a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.* (E 115)

The argument intended to show that the existence of a miracle can never be rendered credible has precisely the same general form.

#### Argument Two

1. *there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can ... [the] miracle be rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior.* (E 115, from Passage II)<sup>5</sup>

2. *the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.* (E 114, emphasis added, from Passage I)

Therefore:

3. *there is ... a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against ... [the possibility that the] miracle [can be] rendered credible.* (E 115)

In both versions of the argument, the strong claim in the second premise that the proof against a miracle is as **entire** as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined cancels the possibility left open in the first premise that there might be an *opposite proof, which is superior*. The conclusion then follows at once. Both arguments have equal standing in the text, so it seems to me to be wholly implausible to attribute one argument to Hume but not the other, as, indeed, the traditional interpreters have done.

Since the stated text seems transparently clear in meaning, how have commentators been able to miss its plain import? The answer, I think, is that they have been misled by concentrating on an argument that appears in the paragraph immediately following the passages I have labelled Passage I and Passage II. There, at least, Hume unambiguously puts forward the thesis traditionally attributed to him:

Passage III. *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.* (E 115-16)

This passage does not, however, support the first thesis of the traditional interpretation, namely, that Hume did not put forward an argument intended to show that no miracle can exist; indeed, read in context, this passage goes against the traditional interpretation. It is important to see that Hume describes this thesis concerning testimony as *the plain consequence* of some other thesis, and that other thesis can only be the one just stated, namely that there is *a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle*. Thus, contrary to the traditional reading, the text contains both a thesis denying the existence of miracles and a thesis denying the credibility of testimony in favour of miracles, and Hume explicitly describes the latter as a *consequence* of the former.

Flew, as noted above, distinguished himself from traditional interpreters by denying that Hume even put forward a thesis denying the credibility of testimony in favour of miracles. If it is not already clear, a very brief argument will show that he is wrong about this.

Passage III, in a way that parallels Passage II, contains the qualifying phrase, *unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish*. Now, I think that it would be altogether wrong, in fact would miss the whole drift of Hume's argument, to read this passage as leaving open the possibility that the falsehood of the testimony just might, on some occasion, be *more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish*. Hume surely expects us to remember the claim made only a paragraph earlier that *the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined*. Since on Hume's account the proof against the miracle derives from the same evidence that proves the law, he is surely inviting us to conclude that the falsehood of the testimony can never be more miraculous than the fact it endeavours to establish. Unpacked, this new argument differs from Argument Two only by making a specific reference to testimony rather than speaking more generally about credibility.

Having presented two arguments concerning miracles — one about their existence, the other about the credibility of the testimony on their behalf — Hume gives his argument one last rhetorical turn. Reflecting upon a possibility that runs **conceptually** counter to his previous commitments, he considers what consequences would follow **even if** the evidence on behalf of the miracle **were** superior to the evidence supporting the law. Concerning this possibility, he tells us,

*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.*  
(E 116)

We already know that there can be no proof of a miracle, for it is not possible for this proof to surpass the proof of the law of nature that it supposedly violates, but even if we suppose, just for the sake of argument, that the proof of a miracle did surpass the unsurpassable proof of the corresponding law, the evidence to support the existence of the miracle, Hume now tells us, could hardly have much strength once the contrary evidence that supports the law of nature is deducted from it.

What, then, did Hume actually say about miracles in Part I, Section X of the *Enquiry*? His reflections begin with the following leading premise:

*the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.* (E 114)

From this he concludes that

*there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.* (E 115)

This is Hume's first argument. He next uses this same leading premise to establish a further conclusion more narrowly focused on testimony:

*no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle.* (E 115-16)

This follows, Hume thinks, because the evidence on behalf of a miracle can never surpass the evidence in favour of the corresponding law it supposedly violates. This is Hume's second argument. Finally, to give the argument one last turn, he notes that even if the evidence on behalf of the supposed miracle were superior to that in favour of the corresponding law, there must be *a mutual destruction of arguments* (E 116) leaving as a remainder only weak evidential support in favour of the occurrence of the miracle.

The two paragraphs spanning *Enquiry* 114-16 thus contain three distinct lines of argument: one against the possibility that a miracle can **exist**, one against the possibility of **establishing** the existence of a miracle, and one against the likelihood that an argument in support of the existence of a miracle could be **compelling**.<sup>6</sup> It seems to me that

these three arguments appear in the text transparently. If so, the traditional reading of Hume's essay on miracles is wrong, and Flew, in rejecting the aspect of the traditional interpretation that is correct, is doubly wrong.

*Dartmouth College*

1. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1972). Further references ("E") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
2. Dorothy Coleman, "Hume, Miracles, and Lotteries," *Hume Studies* 14.2 (1988): 343, n. 4.
3. Antony Flew first put forward this view in "Hume's Check," *Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (1959): 1-18, and then developed it further in Chapter VIII of his *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (New York, 1961).
4. Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (above, n. 3), 176.
5. The slight change in wording here and in the conclusion is forced by the lack of grammatical parallelism in Hume's own sentence. It in no way alters the sense.
6. Flew (above, n. 3), it seems, finds only the third argument in the text.