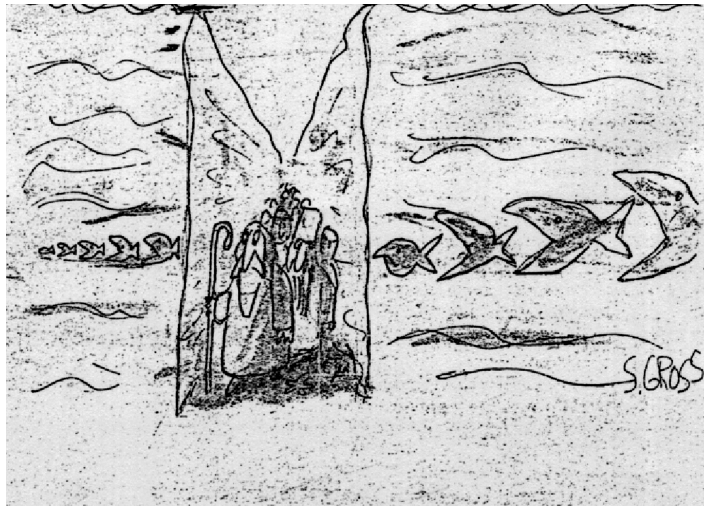


## Hume on Miracles and Immortality

MICHAEL P. LEVINE



### Context: Irrelevant and Relevant

A great deal of scholarship has gone in to situating Hume's writings on religion in various contexts – historical, cultural, religious, and personal. As interesting as this may be, none of it is necessary for understanding Hume's argument in part 1 "Of Miracles" against justified belief in miracles. The substance of Hume's argument is independent of contexts that many have claimed essential to its understanding. Nevertheless, one cannot read Hume's essay like you are reading the morning paper and hope to understand it. The context essential to its interpretation is Hume's own metaphysics – his account of *a posteriori* reasoning, which ultimately rests on his empiricism. The following explanation of Hume's argument supports these views.

Instead of reiterating historicist scholarship, I begin by locating Hume's writings on religion in what is in my view the context of *most* contemporary western analytic philosophy of religion. This will not help in interpreting Hume's argument, but it does heighten the contrast between Hume's achievements and contemporary ones, as well as between Hume's understanding of natural as opposed to revealed theology, and

contemporary views where the two are purposefully, sometimes artfully, jumbled for religious, even evangelical, purposes. It is worth noting that contemporary Christian analytic philosophers of religion not only believe that we can justifiably believe in miracles – so do I, *in principle* – but they also believe miracles have occurred.

Philosophy of religion is now dominated by Christian fundamentalists (or close to it) like Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, R. M. Adams, William Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Haldane, and Peter van Inwagen. Such philosophy of religion rejects views central to contemporary biblical hermeneutics and religious studies. They are mostly at odds with non-fundamentalist theologians. Haldane and Van Inwagen are *creationists*, though neither explicitly acknowledges this. Wolterstorff defends the acceptability of the belief that God literally speaks through scripture. Van Inwagen (1995: 100, n. 4, 106; Levine 2000) believes in our descent from Adam and Eve. And Haldane has a view of how scripture came to be in its current form that was repudiated by biblical scholars in the nineteenth century, and is utterly at odds with contemporary biblical scholarship – a fact he does not acknowledge. He thinks the New Testament was written shortly after the time of Jesus by those who received the stories from eyewitnesses who relayed them (more or less) truthfully and accurately for no other purpose than to tell it like it was. Incidentally, comparative philosophy of religion is no antidote to such philosophy of religion since it too is engaged in apologetics.

While Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* is often regarded as the single greatest work in natural theology, the distinction between natural theology or religion (enquiry into religion based on reason apart from revelation) and revealed religion (enquiry into religion based in part on revelation), is a distinction that contemporary philosophers of religion seek to undermine on philosophical grounds. However, the most general way in which they undermine it is to hold firm – *no matter what* – to “revealed truths,” and then construct intricate, sometimes fanciful, and at times intriguing arguments that could *possibly* be true given their inviolable premises. Thus, Van Inwagen will allow no evil, no matter what kind or how much of it, to count in any way whatsoever in any degree against the claim that God exists, or if he exists, is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good. For Van Inwagen, Plantinga, Swinburne, etc., there really is no problem of evil, whether logical, empirical, or existential – just a bit of a puzzle.

Anthony Flew (1955) was on to something when he noticed the tendency on the part of some believers not to allow anything to count against certain assertions about God, and therefore claimed that their assertions about God “died the death of a thousand qualifications.” In arguing their case with regards to the problem of evil the new fundamentalists seem unaware that their position is in contrast to classical religious (Christian, Jewish, Islam, Hindu) positions on the matter – that the existence of evil is a *mystery* given the nature of God. It is incomprehensible, at least in this world, why God allows the kinds and amounts of evil undeniably present in the world. *Job*, and also Dostoyevski, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Hume, all see evil as a problem *for the believer as a believer*. It is not something solvable by asserting the omniscience of God or value of human freedom. It is in the context of contemporary philosophy of religion that Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, “Of Miracles,” and “Of the Immortality of the Soul” should be read. The juxtaposition is stark. Whereas contemporary philosophy of religion, as described above, relies on revelation, Hume was a natural theologian through and through.

## Hume's Argument against Justified Belief in Miracles Explained

The *locus classicus* for modern and contemporary philosophical discussion of miracles is chapter 10 ("Of Miracles") of David Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748). He says "A miracle may accurately be defined, *a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent*" (EHU 10.12n23). His slightly different definition of a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature" is central to his argument against justified belief in miracles. "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" (EHU 10.12).

"Of Miracles" is probably the most widely discussed essay ever in philosophy of religion, and the vast majority of that discussion is critical. Many commentators claim that the essay is ambiguous at key points. Thus, the most straightforward question as to whether or not Hume concludes that one could ever be justified in believing in a miracle on the basis of testimony is subject to dispute. I find Hume's essay neither ambiguous nor successful. In part 1 of the essay he is indeed arguing, *a priori*, that one can never be so justified. Hume's position on miracles cannot be understood apart from his account of causation, *a posteriori* reasoning, and the most fundamental elements of his empiricism – his analysis of "impressions" and "ideas" (T 1.1.1). Hume's essay has been contextualized in various ways, but never in the most important way – in the context of the *Treatise* – apart from which it is virtually unintelligible. (I draw on my previous interpretations of Hume [Levine 2002; 1996; 1989; 1988a; 1988b; 1984].)

Gaskin (1993: 317) says that Hume "excised . . . some version of 'Of Miracles' . . . and possibly some version of 'Of the Immortality of the Soul'" from the *Treatise* (1739–40) before publication. See Wootton (1990: 199). R. M. Burns (1981: 133) cites a passage from a letter of Hume's to George Campbell (1762) whose *Dissertation on Miracles* was a reply to Hume. It shows that Hume took his argument against miracles to be integrally connected with the *Treatise*. Hume writes:

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 at La Fleche . . . engaged in conversation with a Jesuit . . . 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.

Burns (1981: 140–1) sees Hume's argument as not especially original – the same argument occurring in earlier writers Hume may have read. If the thesis that Hume's essay *must* be interpreted in the context of his theory of *a posteriori* reasoning is correct, then his argument in part 1 is highly – *completely* – original.

Burns argues that some allegedly problematic passages in Hume's essay, should be interpreted as ironic or sarcastic (chs. 6–7); most notably where Hume (EHU 10.13) says "If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion." He also argues (ch. 7), contrary to Flew (1967), that Hume's argument in part 1 is a

*priori*; and contrary to Gaskin (1978), that Hume intended his argument to apply to cases of seeing a miracle as well as to belief based on testimony (295, n.120). On all of these points I agree. Burns is the only author I know of who also contends that Hume's argument against miracles is, in a sense, superfluous given his view that divine activity is impossible to know. However, he does not see how this view, aside from logically pre-empting Hume's *a priori* argument, also plays a crucial role in it. If, contrary to Hume's empiricism, it were possible to know divine activity as such, then it would be possible to justifiably believe a miracle.

### *Miracles and laws of nature*

Hume's argument against miracles, as well as much subsequent discussion, depends heavily on the premise that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature." However, the role such a premise plays in Hume's argument, and whether he meant to define a miracle as a violation of a law of nature, or merely to characterize it, in some epistemologically relevant sense, as "contrary" to the ordinary course of nature, is controversial. It is clear, however, that on most commonsense or "scientific" accounts of what a law of nature is, miracles are not violations of laws but are instead positive instances of them. This is because laws of nature do not, and are not meant to, account for or describe events with supernatural causes – but only those with natural causes. If an event is assumed to have a supernatural cause, it is, by that very fact, outside the scope of laws of nature and so cannot violate them. Only if one disregards the possibility of supernatural causes can exceptions to laws be regarded as violations of laws (Levine 1989: ch. 6; 1996). However, in such a case, and this is relevant to Hume's argument in part 1, there might be better reason to suppose that the exception shows that what was taken to be a law is not really a law, rather than that the exception is a violation of a genuine law of nature. A miracle should not be understood as a violation of the laws of nature in a technical sense. But this does not undermine the possibility of a miracle, since the crucial element in the notion of a miracle of "a supernatural interference with the natural order" is not ruled out in showing that a miracle cannot, strictly speaking, be a violation of a law of nature.

If "violation" is not being used in a technical sense, then a miracle can still be described as a violation of a law of nature – where "violation" would mean "contrary to what could have happened had nature been the only force operative." An event may be contrary to a law of nature without invalidating it if it is caused by non-natural forces, or in epistemic terms, if its occurrence can only be correctly explained in terms of non-natural forces. Even if the laws of nature were logically necessary, there could be events contrary to those laws once it is assumed that the scope of those laws is limited.

A violation of a law of nature by *natural* means is what should be taken, normatively, as a contradiction in terms – assuming insistence on generality (i.e., non-local empirical terms) in the statement of the law. One does not want to hold the occurrence of an event contrary to a law of nature due to non-natural means as a contradiction – at least not on the basis of an analysis of laws of nature. To hold this position, an analysis of laws would have to be combined with an argument against the possibility of non-naturally caused events. (This is more or less what occurs in Hume's argument in part 1. His empiricism and theory of meaning are the basis of his implicit rejection of the



possibility of an event being supernaturally caused.) To say that miracles are impossible *because* violations of laws of nature are impossible is to improperly assume either: (1) that a miracle must involve a violation of a law; or (2) that nothing contrary to a law of nature can occur because laws of nature circumscribe what is possible. But apart from distinct arguments to the contrary – for example, an argument against the possibility of non-natural interference – neither assumption is *prima facie* warranted.

Belief in a miracle assumes that God caused an event that is not the sort of occurrence that can be satisfactorily explained in terms of laws of nature. I am here supposing supernatural explanation to be a viable alternative, and one that might plausibly be chosen in a case like the Red Sea parting as depicted in the movie *The Ten Commandments* (i.e., not simply a low tide). If causal statements did require reference to laws of nature, then this would appear to rule out the possibility of miracles, since a miracle refers to a type of causal statement whose nature rules out reference to laws of nature taken as generalized cases of which they are instances. (John Locke [1706] denies that miracles are not instances of laws. They are not, however, instances of laws of nature according to Locke. He thinks that to say they are not instances of any laws whatsoever [e.g., not even of supernatural laws] is to say that they are random occurrences, and he thinks that this is absurd.) Miracles are contrary to laws of nature, *not* “violations” of them and *not* instances of them. Actually, miracles are *vacuous* instances of true laws of nature (Levine 1989: 72–5). Note that it is not simply a miracle’s *uniqueness* that rules out reference to laws, since even repeatable miracles, such as raising one from the dead, cannot in principle refer to laws of nature for a complete explanation. They must also refer to divine intervention. Flew (1967: 349) may be right in his claim that “it be neither arbitrary nor irrational to insist on a definition of a law of nature such that the idea of a miracle as an exception to a law of nature is ruled out as self-contradictory.” But this has nothing – nothing at all – to do with Hume’s argument. A miracle is not self-contradictory according to Hume, nor should it be understood technically as a violation of a law.

If the explanation (below) of Hume’s argument against belief in miracles is correct, then the premise that “a miracle is a violation of a law of nature” plays no significant role in his argument. The premise is a gloss for the underlying supposition that one cannot have an “impression” of a supernatural event. Because no such impression can be had, any allegedly miraculous event, simply because it is allegedly miraculous, cannot *ex hypothesi* be judged relevantly similar to any other event in experience. And *any* event that cannot be judged relevantly similar to others in our collective experience cannot *justifiably* be believed to have occurred in accordance with Hume’s principles of *a posteriori* reasoning. Nor can one justifiably believe, with any degree of probability whatsoever, that such an event will occur.

### *Hume’s argument against justified belief in miracles*

Remarkably, the philosophical discussion of Hume on miracles has not been principally concerned with whether Hume was correct. It has focused instead on exegetical issues. There is, for example, no generally accepted view on whether his argument (in part 1) against justified belief in miracles is (1) an *a priori* or *a posteriori* argument; or (2) if that argument can be, or is meant to be, generalized to include first-hand

experience of an alleged miracle. (For a defense of the view that Hume's argument in part 1 is meant to be *a priori* see Levine [1989: 13–14]. If the argument in part 1 is meant to be *a priori*, then part 2 of the essay appears to be superfluous. But the reasons against belief in miracles Hume gives in part 2 can be seen as additional arguments – though they also support some of his reasoning in part 1.) Hume does not appear to claim that miracles are impossible. In fact he explicitly denies this. However, some interpreters have sought to show that miracles are impossible according to Hume, given what he says in his essay in relation to his wider empiricist views. These conundrums must be dealt with in the context of an explanation of his argument in part 1.

Hume's position on miracles cannot be properly understood apart from his analysis of causation, *a posteriori* reasoning, and the most fundamental element of his empiricism – his analysis of “impressions” and “ideas” (T 1.1.1). The argument hinges on making these connections explicit, and to understand it the following question must be answered. Why did Hume think that under certain circumstances one could justifiably believe that an extraordinary event had occurred, but that under identical circumstances one could never justifiably believe a miracle had occurred? The proposed interpretation of Hume's argument in relation to his account of causation and empiricism yields the only plausible answer. It also shows why it makes no substantial difference whether we interpret Hume's argument in part 1, against justified belief in the miraculous based on testimony, as an *a priori* or *a posteriori* argument since the arguments essentially coalesce.

Hume (EHU 10.36) gives the following example of an extraordinary event he thinks could be rendered credible on the basis of testimony.

suppose, all authors, in all languages, agree, that from the first day of JANUARY 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days: Suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: That all travellers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction: It is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived. The decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature, is an event rendered probable by so many analogies, that any phaenomenon, which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform.

Not only is testimony to the alleged event “very extensive and uniform,” but also to justifiably believe it Hume thinks it necessary that our past experience must not render the event completely improbable. Assuming it is testified to extensively and uniformly, he claims the eight-day darkness can be “rendered probable by so many analogies.” In such a case Hume assumes that the event is natural and that “we ought to search for the causes.” Hume immediately compares this with another imaginary case (EHU 10.37).

suppose, that all historians who treat of ENGLAND, should agree, that, on the first of JANUARY 1600, QUEEN ELIZABETH died . . . and that, after being interred a month, she again appeared, resumed the throne, and governed ENGLAND for three years: I must confess that I should be surprized at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances, but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event.

Since both events are assumed to be more or less equally well testified to, the reason Hume thinks the former can be judged credible, *but not the latter*, is that the former “event is rendered probable by so many analogies.” (Some claim that Hume does not see this later event is not as equally well testified to. If that were the case, Hume would have said so in no uncertain terms. But the supposition that they are equally well testified to is also supported by my interpretation of Hume’s argument.) Perhaps this appears to be little more than a subjective judgment by Hume. His experience suggests analogies for the former type of event but not the latter. The eight-day darkness “sufficiently resembles” events Hume has experienced, or believes in on the basis of experience, to warrant belief in it given that the event is particularly well attested to. In the latter case (Elizabeth), Hume can find no analogies to draw upon from experience. Given the similarity in relevant respects of most people’s experience, Hume thinks that if people base their judgments on their experience (in accordance with his principles of *a posteriori* reasoning [Levine 1989: 5–12] extrapolated from his analysis of causation), they will agree that the former *extraordinary* alleged event can be judged credible, but not what would be the *miraculous* latter event. Hume would agree that if an individual’s experience were very different from his own in relevant respects, then that individual could justifiably believe things that he himself could not.

So Hume claims that evidence may justify belief in the occurrence of an extraordinary event as long as we have experienced events analogous in type. However, an extraordinary event is not necessarily a miraculous one. In the case of extraordinary events that are well attested to and for which we have suitable experiential analogies, Hume thinks that the most we are justified in believing is that the event did occur – but *not* that the event is a miracle. We are to “search for the [natural] causes whence it might be derived.” Such cases may require us to reassess our estimation of what nature is capable of. Sometimes laws of nature must be reassessed and altered in light of new experience. Also, we must be careful not to extend our judgments as to what to believe or expect of nature to situations where the relevant circumstances are not the same. This requires explanation.

Hume relates the case of the Indian who refused to believe that water turned to ice. According to Hume, the Indian “reasoned justly” on the basis of his past experience. He refused, at first, to believe that water turned to ice, despite the fact that it was well attested to, because the event had the Indian’s “constant and uniform experience to count against it, and it also “bore so little analogy to that experience (EHU 10.10). The Indian “reasoned justly” but he extended his judgments about water to cases where all the circumstances were not the same, the relevant circumstance here being temperature. In certain situations in which we hear testimony to extraordinary events we may be in situations similar to that of the Indian. Indeed, according to Hume, if we justifiably believe that an extraordinary event did occur, then we *should* assume that we are in a situation like that of the Indian. We should assume this because, as I shall show, there are compelling reasons why the consistent Humean, in accordance with his principles of *a posteriori* reasoning, his analysis of causation, and his empiricism, can do nothing else. The extraordinary event should be judged “[not] contrary to uniform experience of the course of nature in cases where all the circumstances are the same” (EHU 10.10n22).

Why should we judge our situation to be like that of the Indian's? Hume does not explicitly say, but it must be because our experience has shown us that situations like the Indian's arise. On the basis of *experience*, when we are justified in believing in the occurrence of an extraordinary event, we should liken ourselves to the Indian. That is why, in a case like the eight days of darkness, "we ought to search for the [*natural*] causes whence it might be derived." Experience demands it. According to Hume, when an extraordinary event is extraordinarily well attested to we have two options. One is to accept the testimony and look for the event's natural causes. The other is to reject the testimony on the grounds that the event testified to bears no *significant* analogy to events experienced.

If we reason in accordance with the principles of *a posteriori* reasoning – a type of causal reasoning, according to Hume, he thinks that testimony, no matter how reliable, *can never* warrant belief in a miracle. He says (EHU 10.5), "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." Thus, Hume thinks that if we justifiably accept testimony to an extraordinary event, then on the basis of past experience, we must liken ourselves to the Indian and search for its natural causes. This would be for us the equivalent of the Indian moving north to "Muscovy during the winter" (EHU 10.10n22). Underlying Hume's argument is his insistence that his principles of reasoning about empirical matters, and his philosophical empiricism – based in turn on his theory of "impressions" and "ideas" – show that supernatural explanation cannot be justified experientially.

We need to ask: What is it about experience, in the sense of expectations about future events, or judgments about past ones, that could justify the positing of a supernatural cause? Positing such a cause is necessary if one is to justifiably believe an event to be a miracle. For Hume, positing such a cause is speculative and can have no basis in experience. Even if some event really were a miracle, whether a resurrection, or "the raising of a feather, when the wind wants ever so little of a force requisite for that purpose" (EHU 10.12n23), we would not be justified in believing that it was anything more than an extraordinary event. Extraordinary events are at the limits of our experience, the supernatural beyond it. Hume (EHU 10.38) says:

Though the Being, to whom the miracle is ascribed, be . . . Almighty, it [the miracle] does not, upon that account, become a whit more probable, since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being, otherwise than from the experience of his productions, in the usual course of nature. This still reduces us to repeat observations, and obliges us to compare the instances of the violation of truth in the testimony of men with those of the violations of the laws of nature by miracles, in order to judge which of them is most likely and probable.

For Hume, a "cause," insofar as it can be used as an item in reasoning from experience, can only be something that we can have an "impression" of. The cause of a miracle would have to be identified as something we could perceive, even if we were to attribute it speculatively (nonempirically) to God. The "cause" of Lazarus's coming



forth from the grave would have to be identified with Christ's beckoning – either his voice or some physical gesture – both of which we have “impressions” of and both of which are events “in the usual course of nature.”

If a resurrection were well enough attested to warrant belief, then that event could still only be assigned status as an extraordinary event with a natural explanation. Hume is thus constrained by his empiricism. He is constrained in such a way that had he been at the shore of the Red Sea with Moses when they were being chased (as in the C. B. De Mille movie version); and had Moses raised his staff and the Red Sea split up the middle (no low tide but raging waters on both sides); and had the Red Sea crashed to a close the moment the last Israelite was safe – killing those in pursuit – and had Hume lacked grounds for assuming he was hallucinating or perceiving events in any way other than as they were actually happening, Hume would still be constrained by his principles to deny that what he was witnessing was a miracle. This example suffices to show the unacceptability of Hume's argument. Indeed, assuming Hume would have agreed that had he been there with Moses, and had events transpired in a manner suitably similar to the way they are depicted in the film, then he would have (readily) agreed that he was justified in believing a miracle occurred; then his argument against justified belief in miracles can be used as a *reductio ad absurdum*.

A resurrection could only be well enough attested to be justifiably believed if it could be judged somehow analogous with something in past experience. If it is, then it must be considered a natural event because, for Hume, anything analogous to our experience is at least analogous in the sense of suggesting that it too has a natural cause. We experience only what occurs in nature and judgments based on that experience cannot warrant positing causes outside of that experience. Suppose some event actually was supernaturally caused. (Let us suppose Hume recognizes this as a logical possibility in his essay, though I do not think it is given his analysis of causation and his empiricism.) Hume would say that we could not, on the basis of experience, attribute a supernatural cause to the event because we experience only natural causes (i.e., events occurring in the usual course of nature). If an event were supernaturally caused we could legitimately say that we “experienced” some supernatural event, but the sense of experience used here would be an equivocation on Hume's usage. This “cause,” being transcendent, and not discernible by means of “sense impressions,” “internal impressions,” or “impressions of reflexion” could not be an item of experience at all as Hume sees it. Thus, because Hume thinks that every cause must be regarded as natural, he is committed to the view that one *could* justifiably believe that an extraordinary event had occurred, but *never* a miracle.

Hume's *a priori* argument against justified belief in miracles actually coalesces with his *a posteriori* argument. On *a posteriori* grounds we could never justifiably believe testimony to the miraculous because we could never judge the occurrence of such an event to be similar, in relevant respects, to anything we have experienced. However, that a miraculous occurrence could never be judged relevantly similar to anything in experience (i.e., that there must be “a firm and unalterable experience” counting against belief in it) is something we can know *a priori*, since *a priori* we know that we cannot have an “impression” of a supernatural cause. It follows from this that, for Hume, we can also rule out the possibility of justified belief in the miraculous, either from testimony or from first hand experience, on *a priori* grounds.

It follows from what has been said that unless one accepts Hume's analysis of *a posteriori* reasoning as a type of causal reasoning, and also accepts his analysis of causation that ultimately rests on his theory of impressions and ideas – a theory that even staunch empiricists should reject as simplistic – there is no reason to accept *his* argument against the possibility of justified belief in miracles.

Of course, nothing in this critique of Hume's argument should be taken to suggest that miracles have ever occurred, or that we are justified in believing that any have occurred. Some of Hume's arguments in part 2 of his essay are problematic, but the reasons he gives for rejecting reports of miracles are more or less sound and more or less common sense. The arguments he gives here are the kinds of reasons, based on experience, why people do reject reports of miracles. But it would be surprising if some people at some time and in certain circumstances have not been, and will not again be, justified in believing in the occurrence of a miracle. However, nothing I have said suggests that the evidence available for the occurrence of any alleged miracle warrants justified belief in miracles for most people – including those who believe in them.

#### *Bayesian analyses of Hume's argument concerning miracles*

Bayesian analyses are prominent among recent and allegedly novel interpretations of Hume's argument. Bayes's theorem is a formula that allows us to calculate a conditional probability – that is, in its basic form, it allows us to calculate the probability of one event given another if we know the probability of the second given the first and the probabilities of each event alone. There are various versions of Bayes's theorem. Earman (2000: 27) employs the following:

$$\Pr(H/E\&K) = \frac{\Pr(H/K) \times \Pr(E/H\&K)}{\Pr(E/K)}$$

He says (2000: 27; cf. Earman 1993):

It is helpful to think of *H* as a hypothesis at issue, *K* as the background knowledge, and *E* as the new evidence.  $\Pr(H/K\&E)$  and  $\Pr(H/K)$  are called, respectively, the *posterior* and *prior probability* of *H*.  $\Pr(E/K\&H)$  is called the *likelihood* of *H*; it is a measure of how well *H* explains *E*.  $\Pr(E/K)$  is variously called the *prior likelihood* or the *expectancy* of *E*; it is a measure of how surprising the new evidence *E* is.

However, since there is no consensus on what Hume's argument is, or exactly what he is trying to establish, it is impossible that any Bayesian analysis, or recasting of the argument in terms of Bayes's theorem, will not beg crucial issues of interpretation. In so doing, such analyses will also beg epistemological issues concerning, for example, evidence. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how recasting Hume's argument in a Bayesian form can clarify the structure or substance of the argument, as Earman claims, without presupposing what the argument is. There may be many useful applications of Bayesian analyses of probability, but they are not useful to figuring out what is going on in Hume's essay.

The balancing of probabilities is useless until it is decided what goes into the balance; that is, what constitutes the evidence that is to be subject to the balancing of probabilities. Hume's argument is all about what constitutes the evidence – what we can and cannot legitimately count as evidence, and how to figure out the probability of what is testified to *given* his theory of *a posteriori* reasoning. Bayesian analyses beg the question by *ignoring* Hume's account of *a posteriori* reasoning in favor of accounts of their own. The Humean will not agree with the Bayesian as to what  $Pr(H/K\&E)$  and  $Pr(H/K)$ , or  $Pr(E/K)$  is. So casting the argument in Bayesian terms only obfuscates it. Bayesian analyses are of no use in disputing Hume on miracles because they ignore Hume's entire argument in part 1. Apart from independent philosophical arguments – arguments that would in effect undermine the relevance of a Bayesian analysis to the question of the credibility of reports of the miraculous – no such analysis can, in principle, prove that testimony can (or cannot) establish the credibility of a miracle.

### Immortality

Hume's essay, "Of the Immortality of the Soul" contains none of the interpretive problems that "Of Miracles" does, nor is it intrinsically linked to his more basic metaphysical positions to the extent that "Of Miracles" is. ("Of the Immortality of the Soul" and "Of Suicide" were not published, though they were printed, in Hume's lifetime. He decided not to publish them out of "abundant prudence" [*Letters*, II, 253].) To be sure, Hume still employs his empiricism and principles of *a posteriori* reasoning at various points in the essay, and near the end of it he cites an argument similar to the one he used against justified belief in miracles. He says ("Of the Immortality of the Soul," 1783, in Paul Edwards, ed., 1997: 140): "By what arguments or analogies can we prove any state of existence, which no one ever saw, and which no way resembles any that ever was seen? Who will repose such trust in any pretended philosophy, as to admit upon its testimony the reality of so marvelous a scene?" However, neither his empiricism nor his principles of *a posteriori* reasoning are used to construct any *a priori* argument against belief in immortality. His *a posteriori* reasoning is employed in the service of his analogies.

There is another important difference between miracles and immortality that Hume either overlooked or simply did not mention. One might believe in a miracle on the basis of testimony (even though its source is in scripture and so based on revelation), or first hand experience. But belief in immortality is more closely linked to the acceptance of a revelatory promise rather than to testimony (even though accepting revelation is itself accepting testimony), first hand experience or reliance on analogical reasoning, as with belief based on the argument from design. Some might believe in immortality on account of testimony or alleged encounters with ghosts and spirits, but that is rare. So in a sense, part of Hume's essay misses its mark by missing its audience. It seems to regard grounds for belief in immortality as experiential or analogical when, as Hume acknowledges later in the essay, they are not.

Nevertheless, in the essay Hume does what he does best. He argues more or less successfully as a natural theologian and largely from analogy and on moral grounds,

against justified belief in immortality. Even though the essay on immortality is straightforward and unencumbered, it is perhaps more philosophically interesting than “Of Miracles.” Whereas Hume’s argument in part 1 “Of Miracles” fails but is of considerable interest, “Of the Immortality of the Soul” largely succeeds. It is a mistake to regard Hume’s essay on immortality as simply drawing analogies that are open to the charge of being weak. Like Russell, Sartre, Camus, and others who followed, Hume recognized that one’s views about immortality could be crucial to the way in which one lives; not in the sense that denying immortality gives one license to act immorally, but that how one lives is informed by such a denial (Levine 1988c; 1987). One’s pursuit of goals, relationships, and the manner in which one lives may be affected by assuming annihilation. Hume thought that *whether or not* one believes in immortality is not without its ramifications in life.

Hume’s first argument against immortality suggests that processes like consciousness and thought which are often taken to be properties of the immaterial soul might, for all we know, actually be material properties. He says (Hume in Edwards, ed.: 135): “Matter . . . and spirit, are at bottom equally unknown; we cannot determine what qualities inhere in the one or the other . . . nothing can be decided a priori concerning any cause or effect; and the experience, being the only source of our judgments of this nature, we cannot know from any other principle, whether matter, by its structure or arrangement, may not be the cause of thought.” The suggestion seems to be that since the only thinking things we experience are linked to material bodies, we should conclude that whatever the nature of the mental may be, we have no reason to suppose, experientially, that they can exist apart from material substance or embodiment. He makes this explicit later in the essay. He says (138–9):

Where any two objects are so closely connected, that all alterations which we have ever seen in the one, are attended with proportionable alterations in the other: we ought to conclude, by all rules of analogy, that, when there are still greater alterations produced in the former, and it is totally dissolved, there follows a total dissolution of the latter . . . Judging by the usual analogy of nature, no form can continue when transferred to a condition of life very differ from the original one in which it was placed. Trees perish in the water; fishes in the air; animals in the earth. Even so small a difference as that of climate is often fatal. What reason then to imagine, that an immense alteration, such is made on the soul by the dissolution of its body, and all organs of thought and sensation, can be effected without dissolution of the whole? . . . Our insensibility, before the composition of the body, seems to natural reason a proof of a like state after dissolution.

Given the close relation between soul (or consciousness) and body, Hume (139) thinks that on experiential grounds, a stronger case can be made for metempsychosis – the passing of the soul at death into another body either human or animal – than for the immortality of a bodiless soul.

Furthermore, suppose we grant (1) there is an immaterial substance in which the mental inheres and (2) the immortality of such a substance if it exists. If we reason in accordance with experience we still cannot justifiably believe in personal immortality – where the notion of personal immortality is connected to memory. Hume says (135):

Abstract reasonings cannot decide any question fact or existence. But admitting a spiritual substance to dispersed throughout the universe . . . and to be the only inherent subject of thought, we have reason to conclude from *analogy*, that nature uses it after the manner she does the other substance, *matter* . . . As the same material substance may successively compose the bodies all animals, the same spiritual substance may compose their minds: their consciousness . . . may be continually dissolved by death, and nothing interests them in the new modification. The most positive assertors of the mortality of the soul never denied the immortality of its substance; and that an immaterial substance, as well as a material, may lose its memory or consciousness, appears in part from experience, if the soul be immaterial.

Thus, even allowing for the existence of an immaterial and immortal substance in which the mental inheres, if we reason in accordance with experience we cannot justifiably believe in personal immortality.

Hume is most forceful in his attack on the moral arguments for immortality – “those derived from the justice of God, which is supposed to be further interested in the further punishment of the vicious and the reward of the virtuous” (136). These same or similar arguments are also moral arguments for the existence of God and are directly concerned with the problem of evil. In fact, Hume is less concerned about the immortality issue than about evil, and his real concern (like Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*) is to reject the facile notion that after death God is somehow going to make everything all right in terms of the evil we have endured. Heaven and hell will take care of it even if we do not quite know how – a view prominent, if not prevalent, among Christian analytic philosophers. Like Russell after him, Hume is concerned to show that such views are not so much or merely conceptually flawed as they are morally flawed. Hume regarded these arguments as easy targets. Despite the principal focus of contemporary analytic philosophy on the problem of evil, not only has there has been no serious conceptual advance in analytic philosophy of religion on the problem of evil since Hume, but in my view, most efforts in theodicy (for example, Van Inwagen, Swinburne, etc.) are regressive. The interesting philosophical work, conceptually and morally, on the problem of evil has been in literature and continental philosophy.

He attacks the notion of heaven and hell as places where one gets one’s just deserts conceptually and morally. In doing so, Hume is again fundamentally at odds with contemporary Christian philosophers like Swinburne. (See Levine 1993; Swinburne 1995.) Consider, for example, the question of who gets to go to heaven and hell. Hume (137) says “Heaven and hell suppose two distinct species of men, the good and the bad. But the greatest part of mankind float betwixt vice and virtue. Were one to go round the world with an intention of giving a good supper to the righteous and a sound drubbing to the wicked, he would frequently be embarrassed in his choice, and would find, that the merits and demerits of most men and women scarcely amount to the value of either.” This is, in many ways, a profound attack on the alleged criteria as traditionally understood for separating good people from bad, and also on the cogency of the idea of a heaven and hell. What sense can be made of heaven as a place where the good go, and hell as a place for the bad if most people are good and bad? Arguing on moral grounds alone against the notion of both eternal and retributive punishment Hume says (137) “Punishment, without any proper end or purpose, is inconsistent with



*our* ideas of goodness and justice; and no end can be served by it after the whole scene is closed. Punishment, according to *our* conception, should bear some proportion to the offence. Why then eternal punishment for the temporary offences of so frail a creature as man?"

Preceding these remarks on the injustice of eternal punishment Hume (137) says, "By what rule are punishment and rewards distributed? What is the Divine standard of merit and demerit? Shall we suppose that human sentiments have place in the Deity? How bold that hypothesis! We have no conception of any other sentiments. . . . To suppose measures of approbation and blame, different from the human, confounds every thing. Whence do we learn, that there is such a thing as moral distinctions, but from our own sentiments." Hume is making essentially the same point made later by J. S. Mill (1865; 1874). If we are to attribute moral predicates of God, then we must suppose that such predicates mean much the same as when applied to people. "Good" as applied to God must mean more or less what it means as applied to anyone else. Otherwise the term "good" would be completely equivocated upon. We might as well invent another term entirely.

In addition, Hume (137) rejects the "one size fits all" conception of reward and punishment. "According to human sentiments, sense, courage, good manners, industry, prudence, genius, etc., are essential parts of personal merits. Shall we therefore erect an elysium for poets and heroes like that of ancient mythology? Why confine all rewards to one species of virtue?" It is worth comparing this view with Swinburne's, who regards it as virtually self-evident that certain pleasures are higher and better than others no matter who you are – that, for example, it is fundamentally – even *morally* – better to drink with company than to drink alone (Levine 1993).

Hume also raises what is perhaps the most pointed of all questions in regard to evil. He says, "As every effect implies a cause, and another, till we reach the first cause of all, which is the *Deity*; every thing that happens is ordained by him, nothing can be the object of his punishment or vengeance." In other words, since God is ultimately responsible for this world, he is also ultimately responsible for the evil in it and his punishing others for what he is responsible for makes no sense. God's responsibility mitigates our own moral responsibility – even for acting immorally. It renders the notions of just punishment and vengeance problematic on the part of a deity responsible for how we are constituted. If God created things as they are, then it is God who is fundamentally responsible – free will (though Hume does not say so) notwithstanding. See, Mackie (1982), Plantinga (1967), and the literature on whether God could have created us so as to always freely choose the good.

Many problems related to immortality and evil that Hume briefly addresses in his essay, he does not go on at length about any of them, have generated a contemporary literature of their own. One such problem, taken without acknowledgment from Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, has to do with our asymmetrical attitude toward pre-natal and post-mortem non-existence. The latter but not the former is a cause of concern. But if the former is of no concern, why is the latter? Hume says (135–6)

Reasoning from the common course of nature and without supposing any new interposition of the Supreme Cause, which ought always to be excluded from philosophy; what is incorruptible must also be ingenerable. The soul, therefore, if immortal, existed

before our birth; and if the former existence noways concerned us, neither will the latter. Animals undoubtedly feel, think, love, hate, will, and even reason, though in a more imperfect manner than men: are their souls also immaterial and immortal?

Hume, of course, is not suggesting that a lack of concern with pre-natal non-existence is mistaken or that the asymmetry in our attitudes in any way supports the view that there is no immortality of the soul. He is claiming what some recent philosophers have taken issue with, namely that the asymmetry in attitudes is unwarranted (Fischer 1993). He thinks that if we are unconcerned with our non-existence before we were born, then we should be unconcerned with our non-existence after we are dead. This view is at least problematic, and it is uncharacteristic of Hume not to see it as such and pursue the difficulties.

The capacities that people share with animals may be sufficient reason for supposing that animals ought to be treated differently than they are treated. But not many who believe in human immortality are inclined to believe in the immortality of animal souls on the basis of shared capacities. Hume denies that the capacity to feel or reason is sufficient grounds for believing the soul to be immortal since if it was, then at least some animals too would have immortal souls.

Even when Hume is most polemical, there is truth in what he says. “There arise indeed in some minds some unaccountable terrors with regard to futurity; but these would quickly vanish were they not artificially fostered by precept and education. And those who foster them, what is their motive? Only to gain a livelihood, and to acquire power and riches in this world. Their very zeal and industry, therefore, are an argument against them.” This is not *always* true. Hume did not say it was. But the gross criminal activity and corruption endemic in the Catholic Church (and others) would come as no surprise to Hume. (See the footnote on the hypocrisy of the clergy in Hume’s essay “Of National Characters” [1748].) It didn’t come as a surprise to many.

The strangest of Hume’s arguments for mortality of the soul is the one from the inferiority of women. He says (137) “On the theory of the soul’s mortality, the inferiority of women’s capacity is easily accounted for. Their domestic life requires no higher faculties either of mind or body. This circumstance vanishes and becomes absolutely insignificant on the religious theory: the one sex has an equal task to perform as the other: their powers of reason and resolution ought to have been equal, and both of them infinitely greater than at present.” The argument is archaic. As with Hume’s (or Kant’s, or Aristotle’s) sexist and racist remarks elsewhere, one is left wondering why he (or Kant, or Aristotle), of all people, could not see through the prejudices of his age, or how difficult it might be to see through the prejudices, no matter how stupid, of any age – of our own age. Religious fundamentalism – Christian, Islamic, Jewish, or Hindu – is by far the most dangerous prejudice of our age. To interpret this as anti-religious is indicative of the orectic (desiderative or wishful), Manichaeic way fundamentalists think.

Hume thinks that when all is said and done, the reasons people believe in immortality has nothing to do with rational argument or experience. It has to do with wish fulfillment – with wanting and needing to believe. He says (140) “All doctrines are to be suspected which are favored by our passions. And the hopes and fears which gave rise to this doctrine [immortality] are very obvious.” (See Hume’s essay, “Of

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Superstition and Enthusiasm" [1741].) It should not have to be pointed out that Hume is being sarcastic and protecting himself when he closes his essay with this: "Nothing could set in a fuller light the infinite obligations which mankind have to Divine revelation, since we find that no other medium could ascertain this great and import truth."

See also 5 "Hume on the Relation of Cause and Effect"; 17 "Hume's Views on Religion: Intellectual and Cultural Influences"; 18 "Hume on the Nature and Existence of God"

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