



### **The Red Queen at Substraction?**

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## THE RED QUEEN AT SUBSTRACTION?

A wise man, Hume writes at the beginning of Part I of Section X of the first Inquiry, *proportions his belief to the evidence* (EHU 110). Towards the end of the second part of the same section he begins to sum up his conclusions:

*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...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 substract 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 substraction, 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 (EHU 127).*

What kind of principle can this be which so remarkably ensures that subtractions of the lesser quantity from the greater, neither diminishes the greater by the amount subtracted, nor even leaves it undiminished, but somehow instead always results in a zero remainder? It is, presumably, the sum of all the reasons which Hume has been giving for thinking that the evidence for the occurrence of miracles *In the infancy of new religions* is peculiarly feeble and corrupt (EHU 126). But of course *the principle here explained*, however true and important it may be, cannot validate this piece of Wonderland arithmetic.

It is obvious that what Hume meant, and should have said yet did not say, is that it is the evidence for the miraculous which is annihilated by *the principle here explained*; and hence that there is nothing whatever to 'substract' from the massive contrary evidence that

whatever putative laws of nature are in question do in fact hold universally. So why did Hume, instead of writing what it is perfectly obvious that he really meant, write something which is as it stands incoherent and absurd? For much the same reason, I suggest, as that for which I and so many other sympathetic readers have in the past failed to notice anything wrong in what the text actually says. We have all of us, Hume included, been tolerably clear on what he ought to be saying. We have then too generously mistaken it that that is what he is saying. *This change, as he remarked on another occasion, is imperceptible; even if here it is scarcely of the last consequence* (T469).

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