



## **Hume and Collins on Miracles**

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## HUME AND COLLINS ON MIRACLES

Some portions of 18th century intellectual history seem like puzzles of which the most important pieces are missing. In some lucky instances the pieces have not been lost altogether but only misplaced in some other puzzle, so that once this is recognised it is possible to solve both puzzles at once. The following, I believe, may comprise one such case. In his erudite History of Freethought (London 1936), p.757, J. M. Robertson presents us with the first puzzle:

...seven years before the issue of Hume's Essay on Miracles, we find the thesis of that essay tersely affirmed in a note to Book II of an anonymous translation (ascribed to T. Francklin) of Cicero's De Natura Deorum.

The passage is worth comparing with Hume: "Hence we see what little credit ought to be paid to facts said to be done out of the ordinary course of nature. These miracles [cutting the whetstone, etc., related by Cicero, De Div i, c. xvii] are well attested. They were recorded in the annals of a great people, believed by many learned and otherwise sagacious persons, and received as religious truths by the populace; but the testimonies of ancient records, the credulity of some learned men, and the implicit faith of the vulgar, can never prove that to have been, which is impossible in the nature of things ever to be."

M. Tullius Cicero Of the Nature of the Gods...  
with Notes, London, 1741, p. 85.

The ascription to Thomas Francklin seems to have been drawn primarily from the "new edition" (London: T. Davies, 1775), on the title-page of which the translation and notes are said to be "By the Rev. Dr. Francklin". Also relevant to

this attribution are these two facts: (1) that Thomas Francklin's father, Richard Francklin, originally printed the book in 1741, and (2) that Thomas later translated other classical authors into English, notably Sophocles in 1759. But it is surely puzzling that Thomas, who in 1741 was barely twenty years old, and soon to be ordained and later made a Doctor of Divinity, should anticipate Hume's famous criticism of miracles.

Consider now the second puzzle. It concerns Anthony Collins, the "Goliath of Freethinking" - as T. H. Huxley called him.<sup>1</sup> In his Scheme of Literal Prophecy Considered (London, 1727) Collins promised a discourse on miracles "which is almost transcribed" (p. 439); and, indeed, it was about time, since by that date Collins had attacked nearly every other part of the Christian edifice. But no such work ever appeared in Collins's lifetime. Nor is this the only book which Collins came close to publishing. From private letters of Collins's in the British Library (MS 4282) we learn that he planned to publish an annotated translation of two of Cicero's writings. Thus in a letter of 26 September 1721 he speaks of "publishing my translation of Cicero's books of ye Nature of the Gods and of Divination" For "Nothing [he writes in the same letter] can more tend to promote good sense in the world than some of his [Cicero's] Philosophical Works; which are applicable to all sorts of folly and superstition by those who have Eyes to see and Ears to hear." The reader will now probably guess my drift: Collins was responsible for the 1741 edition of Cicero and its acute comment on miracles.

But why, it will be asked, has this connection not been made before? The obvious answer is that since Collins died in 1729 twelve years separated his name from the 1741 edition. The evidence which firmly connects him with it is to be found (a) on the last page (279) of his Historical and Critical Essay on the Thirty Nine Articles (London 1724): "Speedily will be published, Cicero's Treatises of the

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Nature of the Gods and of Divination. Translated into english [sic], with annotations. In two volumes." and (b) on the title-page. For the Historical and Critical Essay was printed by none other than R. Francklin, the very one who printed the 1741 edition of Cicero. That this is no coincidence - and Richard Francklin was to print Collins's translation - is confirmed by a passage in Collins's letter of 1 December 1724 to his friend Pierre Demaizeaux:

I find by Mr. Franklin [sic], that you are arrived in Town from Bath... When Dick returns home...we will dispose in relation to ye... publication of my translation of Cicero.  
Two books...

My conclusion is that the disposal of Collins's translation was left to 1741, when it was finally printed by (Dick) Francklin.

J. M. Robertson would have been pleased by this identification; for he was a great champion of Collins (see his Dynamics of Religion (London 1926), pp. 128-146). It would also rescue Robertson from a recent criticism by another erudite historian of freethought: Professor Günter Gawlick, who in his scholarly contribution to the Edinburgh bicentenary Hume Papers (1977) writes:

It has been noted that Hume's specific criticism of the proof from miracles was paralleled in deistic literature; see J. M. Robertson History of Freethought..., whose conclusion that Hume developed a proposition laid down before him in 1741 is, however, unwarranted because Hume himself dates his argument as early as 1734 (Letters, ii. 361).<sup>2</sup>

But if Collins was indeed responsible for the 1741 note on miracles, then the Goliath of freethinking would seem to have anticipated the "Goliath unter den Deisten" - as Hume was called by one German writer in 1783.<sup>3</sup> I am not claiming that Hume was influenced by the 1741 edition. It is fairly

clear that he did not use it when translating a passage from De Natura Deorum I.xxix in the Natural History of Religion, section XII.<sup>4</sup>

What is not so clear is the extent to which Collins's original (1724) translation and notes were altered in the 1741 edition. We know that his translation of On Divination was suppressed; and at least one of the published notes was revised, or written, after Collins's death. On page 179 the annotator speaks of "that Doctrine of the Academics, which denies our seeing any Thing without us, but makes all to be internal; a whimsical Doctrine, strongly asserted by Malbranche, and the favourite Hypothesis of the ingenious Author of the Minute Philosopher!" Now since Berkeley's Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher was first published in 1732, Collins could hardly have written this note; (also see p. 170n.) Other notes, however, show the characteristic marks of the Goliath of freethinking (pp. 4, 65, 82-3, 187-8, 215 and 263). It seems likely that the printer retained the manuscript or the proofs of Collins's edition of Cicero which he then allowed his son to revise for publication seventeen years later.

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1. Hume: with Helps to the Study of Berkeley, in Huxley's Collected Essays (London 1901), vol. vi, p. 249. In my "Anthony Collins and the question of Atheism in the Early Part of the Eighteenth Century" I argue that he was also a speculative atheist (in Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, 1975, pp. 85-102.)
2. "Hume and the Deists: a Reconsideration", p. 137 note 34.
3. Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, Geschichte der Feinde der christlichen Religion, (Dresden, ed. G. Winkler), p. 306. I owe this reference to Professor Gawlick, who commented helpfully on an earlier draft of this paper. I am grateful also to my colleague Mr. John Gaskin and to Professor Harry Bracken.

4. The easiest way of seeing this is by comparing their respective translations; Collins's translation is on the left, Hume's is on the right:

You may see a greater Regard paid by them [Egyptians, etc.] to certain Beasts than by us to the most sacred Temples and Images of the Gods; for many Shrines are rifled, and Images of the Deities are carried from their most sacred Places by us; but we never hear'd that an Egyptian offer'd any Violence to a Crocodile, an Ibis, or a Cat (p. 51)

*Notwithstanding the sanctity of our holy religion, says Tully (De nat. Deor. 1.1.), no crime is more common with us than sacrilege: But was it ever heard, that an Egyptian violated the temple of a oat, an ibis or a crocodile? (Four Dissertations (London 1757), pp. 78-9)*

Hume rarely mentions Collins. In editions of the Essays, Moral and Political published before 1764, he refers to Collins as one of our free-thinkers who opposes all revelation with moderation and good manners (4th ed. London 1753, p. 63.)