



### **Hume's Mistake - Another Guess**

David Raynor

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## HUME'S MISTAKE -- ANOTHER GUESS

Richard Price's first biographer reports that David Hume once "candidly acknowledged that on one point Mr. Price had succeeded in convincing him that his arguments were inconclusive; but it does not appear that Mr. Hume, in consequence of this conviction, made any alteration in the subsequent edition of his Essays."<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested<sup>2</sup> that Hume's avowed mistake is to be found in his 'Of Miracles', a section of An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding which is severely criticized in the fourth of Price's Four Dissertations.<sup>3</sup> This suggestion receives some support from Hume's generous response to Price's criticism:

*I own to you, that the Light in which you have put this Controversy, is new and plausible and ingenious, and perhaps solid. But I must have some more time to weigh it, before I can pronounce this Judgment with Satisfaction to myself. My present Occupations shall not deprive me of the Leisure requisite for that Purpose; as no Object can possibly have equal Importance.*<sup>4</sup>

However, there is no evidence that after studying Price's arguments Hume came to regard them as "solid" and his own as inconclusive or mistaken. The fact that Hume never revised his essay on miracles in order to accommodate Price's criticisms seems good evidence that that work does not contain Hume's mistake.

Most fortunately there is another plausible candidate. In A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals Price criticized several of Hume's philosophical conclusions and arguments, including the central argument of A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I Part IV Section I ('Of scepticism with regard to reason'). This very complicated argument is a novel application of John Craig's "celebrated argument against the Christian Religion."<sup>5</sup> Price summarizes and then criticizes Hume's argument as follows:

In every judgment we can form, besides the uncertainty attending the original consideration of the subject itself; there is another derived from the consideration of the fallibility of our faculties, and the past instances in which we have been mistaken; to which must be added a third uncertainty, derived from the possibility of error in this estimation we make of the fidelity of our faculties; and to this a fourth of the same kind, and so on in infinitum; till at last the first evidence, by a constant diminution of it, must be reduced to nothing. See Mr. Hume's Treatise of Human Nature, Vol. I. p.315, & c. As much of this strange reasoning as is not above my comprehension, proves just the reverse of what was intended by it. For let it be acknowledged, that the consideration of the fallibility of our understandings, and the instances in which they have deceived us, necessarily diminishes our assurance of the rectitude of our sentiments; the subsequent reflection on the uncertainty attending this judgment which we make of our faculties, diminishes not, but contributes to restore to its first strength, our original assurance; because the more precarious a judgment or probability unfavourable to another appears, the less must be its effect in weakening it.<sup>6</sup>

Hume's argument has been described as "one of the worst arguments ever to impose itself on a man of genius."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Hume himself may have become dissatisfied with it,

for it appears to be the only major argument of Treatise I which he did not recast in some form in his post-Treatise writings.<sup>8</sup> If Price's criticism is telling, then Hume probably would have readily acknowledged that his juvenile argument in '*Of scepticism with regard to reason*' was mistaken.

David Raynor  
Mount Allison University

1. William Morgan, Memoirs of the Life of The Rev. Richard Price, D.D., F.R.S. (London, 1815) 16f.
2. Bernard Peach, "Hume's Mistake", Journal of the History of Ideas XLI (1980), 331-334. See also Price-Priestly Newsletter, No. 2 (1978), 76-81.
3. Four Dissertations. (London, 1767). For a brief account of Price's Bayesian critique of Hume's views on miracles see Bernard Peach, "Miracles, Methodology, and Metaphysical Rationalism", International Journal for Philosophy of Religion IX (1978), 69-74.
4. Hume to Price, 18 March 1767: New Letters of David Hume, ed. Klubansky and Mossner (Oxford, 1954), 234.
5. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. Selby-Bigge and Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), 145f., 181ff. The reference is to John Craig, Theologiae Christianae Principia Mathematica (London, 1699); an English translation of this tract has been published in History and Theory Beiheft 4 (1964).
6. Richard Price, A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals, ed. D. D. Raphael (Oxford, 1974), 96n. Cf. Thomas Reid, Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man (Edinburgh, 1785), VII §4; D. G. C. MacNabb, David Hume: His Theory of Knowledge and Morality. Second Edition (Oxford, 1966), 100f.
7. D. C. Stove, Probability and Hume's Inductive Scepticism (Oxford, 1973), 132.
8. John Immerwahr, "A Sceptic's Progress: Hume's Preference for the First Enquiry", McGill Hume Studies, ed. D. F. Norton, N. Capaldi, and W. L. Robison (San Diego 1979), 234.