



Contrary Miracles Concluded

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Hume Studies 10th Anniversary Issue, (1984) 1 - 14.

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Decisive results are seldom expected and scarcely ever attained as a result of philosophical argument. Nevertheless, one might hope that discussion of a brief, tightly confined argument, displayed prominently to the attention of philosophers and theologians for more than two centuries, could be brought to an agreed conclusion. Such is the hope evoked by Hume's "Contrary Miracles Argument" (first Enquiry, p. 121f); but it has not been satisfied.

The first significant commentator, George Campbell, rejected the argument for reasons which (we know from a letter) Hume himself did not accept. In 1916 C.D. Broad pointed out that the argument depended upon a suppressed premise whose truth was in doubt. Ten years later A.E. Taylor rejected the argument with almost intemperate zeal. In 1961 it was partly rehabilitated by Antony Flew; but in an article of 1975 Bruce Langtry concluded, for reasons so complicated that they are unlikely to be effective with the very people for whom the directness of Hume's original argument has appeal, that none of its conclusions are acceptable. In 1978 Gaskin maintained that a restricted version of the Contrary Miracles Argument applied effectively (and destructively) to Christianity; while in 1981, in the most recent discussion known to me, R.M. Burns pointed out that Hume's argument depends upon the truth of two suppressed premises, both of which he held to be highly dubious.¹

Let us then look again at this controversial little argument and ask to what extent it is effective, and whether it is effective in any way which is of value or interest to the philosophy of religion now.

Hume's argument, in the first Enquiry, Section X, is as follows:

... let us consider, [p] that, in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary; and that it is impossible the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China should, all of them, be established on any solid foundation. [q₁] Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. [q₂] In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles, on which that system was established; so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts, and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite to each other. [r₁] According to this method of reasoning, when we believe any miracle of Mahomet or his successors, we have for our warrant the testimony of a few barbarous Arabians: And on the other hand, we are to regard the authority of Titus Livius, Plutarch, Tacitus, and, in short, of all the authors and witnesses, Grecian, Chinese, and Roman Catholic, who have related any miracle in their particular religion; I say, we are to regard their testimony in the same light as if they had mentioned that Mohametan miracle, and had in express terms contradicted it, with the same certainty as they have for the miracle they relate. [r₂] This argument may appear over subtle and refined; but is not in reality different from the reasoning of a judge, who supposes, that the credit of two witnesses, maintaining a crime against any one, is destroyed by the testimony of two others, who affirm him to have been two hundred leagues distant, at the same instant when the crime is said to have been committed.

The argument strikes one at first reading as deft, vigorous and simple. But, as so often with Hume,

second thoughts open up unexpected complexities. Using the designations I have interpolated in square brackets, p is the premise or assumption from which two conclusions follow, namely the conclusion q_1 , that a miracle wrought in one religion serves to overthrow all other religions; and the conclusion q_2 , that miracles wrought in different religions are "contrary facts". An illustration r_1 is then supplied for conclusions q_2 , while at r_2 a comparison is made with a judicial procedure: but whether the comparison is with q_1 or q_2 is less than obvious. Let us begin our examination with the premise p .

Bailey, in the 1737 edition of his Dictionary, gives (1) "CONTRARY: opposite things are said to be contrary, the natures or qualities of which are absolutely different, and which destroy one another". This is evidently closer to the use Hume is making of the term than either the second meaning Bailey gives (2) "when one thing is opposed to another, as light to darkness", or the meaning from the Square of Opposition which occurs in the 1764 edition of Bailey, and which approaches the modern use (3) in which propositions X and Y are said to be contraries if X and Y are so related that they cannot both be true. So Hume is asserting that different religions are such that if one is established on a "solid foundation" the others are destroyed, and that, in the absence of any being so established, whatever evidence tells in favour of any, tells against all the rest. But this generalization (in both its parts) holds only for religions (usually monotheistic) which make universal claims of a character which exclude the truth claims of all other religions. It does not hold for religions (usually polytheistic) which eschew such universal and exclusivist claims. The point is in effect made by

Hume himself in the Natural History of Religion, sect. ix:

The tolerating spirit of idolaters, both in ancient and modern times, is very obvious to any one, who is the least conversant in the writings of historians or travellers. When the oracle of DELPHI was asked, what rites or worship was most acceptable to the gods? Those which are legally established in each city, replied the oracle. Even priests, in those ages, could, it seems, allow salvation to those of a different communion. The ROMANS commonly adopted the gods of the conquered people; and never disputed the attributes of those local and national deities, in whose territories they resided.... The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists. (Green & Grose, 4, 337)

Hume is of course comparing monotheism and polytheism with respect to tolerance, but their tolerances derive from their claims. Worship of Asclepius at Cos was never supposed to exclude the propriety of worship of Sulis Minerva at Bath. Belief in the real existence of the members of the Roman pantheon did not exclude the possibility that the contemporaneously worshipped primitive gods of south Arabia could have real existence. Worship of Roman gods did not even preclude the reality of Jehovah as the single god of a particular area or nation; but worship of Jehovah, at least by the beginning of the Christian era, had come to exclude the reality of all Roman and other gods.

I say by the beginning of the Christian era, because although "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth", the commandment in Exodus 20:4 was not "There are no other gods save me" but "You shall have no other gods before (or beside) me"; and the question in Deuteronomy 4:7 also allows the

existence of other, less effective, gods: "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?" It is only in the sixth century B.C. that the god of Israel begins to emerge (e.g. in Isaiah ch. 2), not only as somehow the creator spoken of in Genesis and by the psalmists, but also as God alone and universal: the notion accepted into early Christianity and made absolutely explicit in the Nicene Creed "I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible".

The generalization in Hume's premise, although false in many instances involving polytheistic religions, is thus true in the instance which most concerns him and which forms the mildly obscured focus in "Of Miracles". It is indeed impossible for Christianity to admit that any polytheistic religion could be established along with it "on any solid foundation". But could Christianity admit a related monotheistic religion such as Islam? The modern Christian theologian -- pluralistic in outlook, and with enlarged liberal swallow -- would almost certainly allow that although, for example, certain descriptions of the deity in the two religions are contraries (sense 3), nevertheless the intended object of the descriptions is the same. Thus the description "three persons in one substance" could not be true along with the Muslim's claim that "Allah is One, the Eternal God. He begot none, nor was he begotten. No one is equal to Him" (The Koran, ch. 112). But some generalized principle of theism² could be shared by Christianity and Islam, and in that limited sense both could start from a solid foundation. It would, on this showing, be particular doctrines, not the basic assumption of the two religions, which would fit into Hume's premise as contraries.

So p is reduced to this: it is impossible for Christianity to be well founded along with any polytheistic religion, and it is impossible for the distinctive dogmas of Christianity to be well founded along with (sense 3) contrary doctrines in other monotheistic religions. From this observation Hume draws the conclusion q_1 : that a miracle wrought in one religion serves to overthrow all other religions, and the conclusion q_2 : that miracles wrought in different religions are "contrary facts".

The first question concerning q_1 is this. Is it in general the case that the direct scope of every miracle is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed and thus, indirectly, to overthrow other systems? The short answer is -- no. It was perfectly possible for miracles to be attributed to Asclepius (and indeed the number of plaques found at his temple at Epidauros on the Adriatic recording miraculous cures suggests a veritable pagan Lourdes), and for Vespasian to heal at Alexandria in A.D. 69 (Tacitus, Histories IV, 81) without putting out of countenance the claims of Philostratus on behalf of Apollonius of Tyana. Why? Because the agents held to be responsible did not exclude each other. But the case was quite different for Christianity. The miracles wrought by Jesus were, from the very beginning, taken to be marvels which transcended what was humanly possible, thereby showing the power of the one true God working through him, and confirming that he was the Messiah. Even Jesus himself, in as far as we can discern his view in the Synoptic gospels, seems to have viewed his ability to cast out devils in this way: "if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." The use of miracles as validating signs is even more apparent in John 2:11; and the final generalization in

John 20:30f is a short statement of much subsequent orthodoxy:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God...

The same point is made with great authority by Origen, writing against Celsus, the Pagan critic of Christianity:

Moreover ... the gospel has a proof which is peculiar to itself, and which is more divine than a Greek proof based on dialectical argument. The more divine demonstration [St. Paul] calls a "demonstration of the spirit and of power" -- of spirit because of the prophecies ... of power because of the prodigious miracles which may be proved to have happened by this argument among many others, that traces of them still remain among those who live according to the will of the Logos (Contra Celsum, I, 2, trans. by H. Chadwick).

In short, the Pagan may admit the miracles of Jesus as real events brought about by some god, and may set them along side the miracles of Asclepius, Apollonius, Vespasian etc; but the Christian may not. His belief (in one God and in Jesus Christ his only Son) precludes the possibility that other divinities exist through whom or by whom other miracles could be performed. If other signs appear, they are the works of Satan, not of gods (see 2 Thessalonians 2: 9-12). This means, in effect, that the Christian accepts what C.D. Broad identified as the suppressed premise in Hume's argument -- "that miracles only occur in connexion with true religion" -- because for the Christian there is only one true religion and only one divine agent. The Christian apologists were thus obliged to argue either that Pagan miracles did not take place, or that they were produced by wizards and demons -- those licenced

nuisances somehow tolerated by God after the Fall. Thus Eusebius, writing against Philostratus' Life of Apollonius of Tyana, having questioned the correctness of Philostratus' reports, remarks "even if we admit the author to tell the truth in his stories of miracles, he yet clearly shows that they were severally performed by Apollonius with the co-operation of a demon" (Eusebius' Treatise, ch. 31).

In his discussion of this point R.M. Burns writes "If the miracles associated with any given system were not effected for evidential purposes, then even if they can be proved to have occurred, they cannot possibly help 'to overthrow every other system' or 'destroy a rival system'" (op. cit. p. 242; see note 1). But he fails to note that in Christianity they were taken to have been effected for evidential purposes. The fact is not obscurely located in the writings of the first centuries of our era, but is a commonplace oft repeated, for example in the article on miracles in the recently published New Dictionary of Christian Theology ed. A. Richardson (London 1983): "The early apologists appeal to miracles as confirmation of the truth of the Christian faith"; and it is to be found again in Campbell's critique of Hume: "But where are the miracles (those of holy writ excepted) of which you can say with propriety, it is their direct scope to establish a particular system?" (op. cit. p. 172; see note 1. My emphasis). Burns' somewhat uncharacteristic artlessness concerning this subject is emphasized when he continues (p. 243f):

Again, in the case of the alleged miracles of Vespasian, granted their occurrence, why should God not have intervened because of the necessity in the design of Providence of having Vespasian confirmed as emperor? Or why should He have refused to heal the blind and the lame, because, as was quite understandable for them in their

historical circumstances, they had a devotion to the god Serapis?

Why indeed, when we conceive God in terms of the fairness and social evenhandedness approved by the modern liberal theologian! But God was not so conceived by the first Christians. For them, in effect, the agency of the one true God was built into the definition of what a miracle was. Such an agency could not possibly be admitted to be at work in performances within religions which the first Christians "in their historical circumstance" could only regard as false, and as opposed to their own faith. Hence their eagerness (starting in the gospels) to say that Pagan "miracles" had not really occurred, or had been misreported, or were cheats, or, in the last resort, were the production of wizards or demons somehow permitted in God's scheme of things.

The outcome of all this is that the challenging polemic of Hume's false generalization in q_1 reduces to the (still important) particular truth that the miracles attributed to Jesus were always regarded as a major part of the evidence which established Christianity and therefore, because of its claims to a unique revelation of the one true God, they also served to overthrow other religions, particularly polytheistic religions. The corollary (if real miracles occur outside Judeo-Christian religion then divine forces other than the alleged one true God must be at work) was resisted by Christian apologists on the grounds that the antecedent was false. The seeming miracles of other religions were demonic tricks etc. As Celsus rather plaintively objects -- but with some justice -- "Is it not a miserable argument to infer from the same works that He is a god while they are sorcerers?" (quoted in Contra Celsum, II, 49).

I now turn to the conclusion which Hume offers in q₂: that prodigies of different religions are contrary facts -- things which destroy one another. In addition Hume wants to say that the evidence for the contrary facts are "opposites". These are distinct matters. The first is nonsense; the second is true within certain limits. Let us consider them separately.

It is not immediately apparent what "contrary facts" would be. The apparent example given by Bailey (sense 2) is "light and darkness". This suggests existences which cannot co-exist; the intrinsic notion of one is such that it cannot (as with light and darkness) or does not (as with sodium and water) exist with the other in the same area at the same time. But no two miracles wrought in different religions are ever contrary facts in this sense. The turning of water into wine by Jesus and the raising from the dead of the daughter of "a consular family" by Apollonius of Tyana (Philostratus, Life IV, 44) are such that both events could have happened as reported. The mere events as such do not, as it were, cancel each other out.

The judicious Campbell expressed the point very nicely for Hume to see: "Many facts are related as miraculous, where we may admit the fact, without acknowledging the miracle" (op. cit. p. 173). It is thus nonsense for Hume to suggest that the facts somehow render each other incredible. That this is indeed what he is suggesting is confirmed by the paraphrase of this part of his argument in his letter to Hugh Blair in response to Campbell:

If a miracle proves a doctrine to be revealed from God, and consequently true, a miracle can never be wrought for a contrary doctrine. The facts are therefore as incompatible as the doctrines (note 1, op. cit. p. 350-1).

Facts -- events in this instance -- cannot be incompatible; they just are. The contrariety or incompatibility only arises when the report of one fact is given in such a way that it excludes the truth of something reported about the other fact.

Now if the fact (if it was a fact) that Jesus turned water into wine at Cana is reported (as it was reported) to be a sign that the God whose existence excluded all other gods had done this to glorify Jesus, then indeed this report would be contrary to a report that some other god has raised the consul's daughter to glorify Apollonius. The events, in each case, are as they are. But given the Judeo-Christian presuppositions of the writer of St. John's gospel, the accounts given (the attribution to different divine agencies) cannot both be true. We are thus again forced back to the strategic alternatives we have already met. In summary, there are three:

The Christian apologist can deal with the contrariety by questioning whether the alleged event ever took place, or was a cheat, or was the work of a diabolical spirit. The Pagan apologist can in his turn question whether the alleged Christian miracles ever took place etc. or he can resolve the contrariety by accepting that different divine agencies were operating (a resolution explicitly debarred to the Christian by his creed). The sceptical observer (which Hume undoubtedly invites us to be) can resolve the matter by concluding from "the many instances of forged miracles", from the way miracle stories "abound among ignorant and barbarous nations", and so on, that in all likelihood none of the miracles alleged by Christian or Pagan sources really took place in the manner reported.

But if this sceptical resolution of the contrariety is all that the Contrary Miracles Argument achieves, then it is a very poor thing. It has the

polemical appearance of a knock-down argument based upon universal generalizations about all religions; but the outcome is merely to restate what Hume has already (rightly) observed: that we tend to treat miracle stories with disbelief because so many religions claim them. If we press Hume's words closely, they certainly help to clarify the relative apologetic strengths of Christian and Pagan beliefs, but such clarification must surely be regarded as very marginal to Hume's main purposes in "Of Miracles".

The falsity of the generalizations q_1 and q_2 as Hume expresses them is underscored by the illustration of his argument which he supplies in r_1 . It is simply not the case that affirmation of a miracle in most of the religions he lists amounts to contradicting the possibility or the credibility of a miracle in all the others. The contradiction (the slip from "contrary" to "contradiction" does not appear to be significant) is only apparent when a miracle is defined in terms of the activity of a single divine agent whose solitary omnipotence excludes the activity of any other divine agent. And even then it need not be denied that the events improperly called miracles by the other religions took place; it can (as we have seen) just as easily be allowed that they took place but were not miracles in the sense defined (the only sense permitted in the religion specifying the definition).

Hume's final fling -- the comparison in r_2 between use of the Contrary Miracles Argument and the judge who is faced with witnesses who say the accused was at the crime and others who say he was six hundred miles away -- is completely unhelpful. It is not even clear whether the accused is supposed to represent the agent causing the miracle or those who report it, nor is it clear which part of Hume's argument the comparison is supposed to illuminate.

In Hume's text the Contrary Miracles Argument is followed by a discussion of three alleged miracles: the cures effected by Vespasian, the new leg that grew on the man at Sarogossa, and the miracles at the tomb of Abbé Paris. Some commentators take these to be applications of the Contrary Miracles Argument. I do not think they are so intended by Hume. Rather they are applications to particular instances of all his a posteriori arguments against miracles. In any event, they have already been thoroughly examined by Anthony Flew (op. cit. pp. 183-185).

As set out by Hume, far from being "over subtle and refined", the Contrary Miracles Argument thus appears to be careless and over-generalized. When qualified, it establishes the somewhat unexciting conclusions that where two religions claim mutually exclusive revelations, it is not possible for both of them to be well evidenced by the way they report their associated miracles. The conclusion has some historical interest in as much as it applied to the controversy between the early Church and those few Pagan intellectuals who noticed its claims, and it has relevance to the eighteenth century debate on miracles in as much as the biblical miracles were still taken to be actual happenings indicating the exclusive revelation of the one true God in Christianity. The conclusion has present day relevance to the extent that such an apologetic position survives. But the enduring interest of Hume's argument is, I think, as another manifestation of the sceptical impatience with the religious supernatural which informs all his thoughts on miracles: an impatience which, despite its shortcomings, now informs almost all the intellectual world Hume helped to establish.

I trust that discussion of the Contrary Miracles Argument is now concluded. But I fear it

would have been more prudent to have written the title of this paper with a question mark at its end.

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1. Sources referred to in the opening paragraph are: George Campbell, A Dissertation on Miracles (Edinburgh 1762); Hume's letters to Hugh Blair of 1761 printed in Greig's edition of the Letters, vol. I, p. 348 (Oxford 1932); C.D. Broad, "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles" in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 1916-17; A.E. Taylor, David Hume and the Miraculous (Cambridge 1927); Anthony Flew, Hume's Philosophy of Belief, pp. 180-82 (London 1961); Bruce Langtry "Hume on Miracles and Contrary Religions" in Sophia, 1975; J.C.A. Gaskin, Hume's Philosophy of Religion, pp. 117-20 (London and New York 1978); R.M. Burns, The Great Debate on Miracles (London and Toronto 1981).
Subsequent references to these works in the main text will be to pages in these editions.
2. For example, "There exists one God who is creator and sustainer of all things; who is omnipotent, omniscient and eternal; who is an agent able to act everywhere without a body, and to whom mankind is of concern." For a critical account of such a theistic God see, for example, Richard Swinburne, The Existence of God (Oxford 1979) or J.C.A. Gaskin, The Quest for Eternity (Penguin Books 1984), particularly ch. 1.