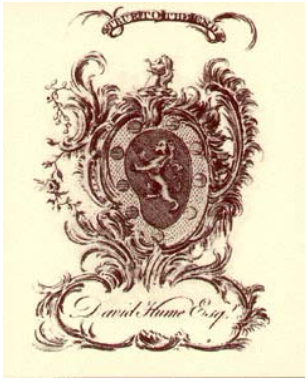

Again: Hume on Miracles

Joseph Ellin

Hume Studies Volume XIX, Number 1 (April, 1993) 203-212.

Again: Hume on Miracles

Joseph Ellin

At the risk of casting shadows where luminaries of scholarship have failed to throw enough light, I would like to add a note to the debate between Fogelin (1990) and Flew (1990) about what Hume was trying to show in the chapter on miracles (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sec. 10). Fogelin posits, and Flew with reservations acknowledges, a "traditional interpretation" consisting of two theses:

> TI.1 Hume did *not* put forward an *a priori* argument intended to show that miracles are not possible.
>
> TI.2 Hume *did* put forward an *a priori* argument intended to show that testimony, however strong, could never make it reasonable to believe that a miracle had occurred. (Fogelin 1990, 81)

The disagreement between Fogelin and Flew could not be more complete: Fogelin thinks TI.1 is false and TI.2 true; Flew thinks TI.1 is true and TI.2 false. Nonetheless, I disagree with both of them: I defend both theses of TI, and shall give a different (better) reason for each.

Fogelin argues against TI.1 by citing "clear texts ... that go dead against it" (1990, 81). These are three sentences from the last but one paragraph of part 1:

> 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. ... There must ... be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior.[1]

From these passages Fogelin constructs an argument, which I shall reconstruct as follows:

1. The proof against any miracle is direct and full unless destroyed by an opposite, superior, proof.
2. Since the proof against any miracle is as entire as any argument from experience can be imagined, there can be no opposite superior proof.

Therefore:

3. The proof against any miracle is direct and full.

Fogelin comments: "the strong claim in the second premise that the proof against a miracle is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined cancels the possibility left open in the first premise that there might be an opposite proof, which is superior. The conclusion then follows at once" (1990, 83).

This argument is certainly sound; is it Hume's? Is it a priori? Does it show that miracles are not possible?

Flew argues that it is not Hume's: "Proofs against proofs are no proofs" (1990, 142). Because a "proof" is a conclusive argument, there cannot be proofs which are opposite but superior to other proofs; hence Hume's term "proof" needs some qualification: Hume means "what would in ordinary circumstances be accounted a proof, yet in the present case may conceivably not be" (Flew 1990, 144). One support for Flew is that when Hume in the *previous* paragraph supposes "that the testimony [for the miracle] considered apart and in itself, amounts to an entire proof" (E 114), he invokes a double standard, distinguishing the kind of evidence which, in the ordinary case, would be taken as proof, from what should be so regarded in the case of an alleged miracle (if one hundred witnesses testify that Lazarus got up from his bed and danced, this would ordinarily be taken to be proof; but not if he had died first). But though Flew has the better of it with regard to the word "proof,"[2] he hasn't made out his case against Fogelin, for it is not the word "proof" but the terms "direct and full" and "entire" that seem to carry the burden of Fogelin's reconstructed argument. Hume's distinction is between proof *tout court*, which means roughly a good enough case, and proof "full" or "entire," which perhaps does mean conclusive demonstration. We could roughly put this reconstruction as follows: If you had a 'conclusive proof' of any miracle, well and good; but you don't, since there is always an 'entire, direct and full' proof against it. Putting it this way, however, makes it clear that the argument in the passage is, as Flew has called it elsewhere, "evidential" (1986, 18),[3] Hume's point being that by the nature of the case you just can't get all the evidence you need to establish the miracle, a point which in any case Hume's own words make unmistakably clear: "there is proof against proof, of which the strongest must prevail, but still with

a diminution of its force, in proportion to that of its antagonist" (E 114). Thus the passage supports TI.2 without damaging TI.1.

But even if Hume does in this passage have an argument against the reality of miracles, could it be a priori? His words ("uniform experience ... nature of the fact") suggest otherwise, and his principles require it. When you deny that a miracle has occurred, you either (a) deny that the allegedly miraculous event took place, or (b) admit that the event took place but deny that it was miraculous. Clearly Hume could not offer an a priori argument that any alleged event either did or did not take place. But to argue a priori that some extraordinary event was not miraculous, Hume would have to argue either (1) that the concept "miracle" is incoherent, or (2) that it is a necessary truth that all events obey scientific laws. Hume could not consistently defend (2) and nowhere seems to have argued (1): on the contrary, he everywhere talks as if the concept of "miracle" were not problematic. Hence, critics of TI.1 are put in a neat dilemma. If Hume does have an a priori argument, it is better (for Hume) that it not be against the reality of any miracle; if it is against the reality of any miracle, it is better if it not be a priori. Therefore, only very strong textual evidence could convince us that Fogelin is correct to conclude, "Hume does present an *a priori* argument against the existence of miracles" (1990, 82). As Fogelin has not found such evidence, TI.1 seems vindicated.

What about TI.2? Whereas Fogelin in rejecting TI.1 attributes a position to Hume which is too strong, Flew in rejecting TI.2 attributes a position which is too weak. Flew's "official position" in *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* is this: Hume's position is defensive only, "not ... capable of positively disproving any claims made ... it is supposed to serve only as a check, not as an insuperable bulwark" (1961, 174). "What he is trying to demonstrate *a priori* in Part I is: from the very nature of the concept ... there must be a conflict of evidence required to show that [miracles occur]" (ibid., 176). "[T]he position taken in Part I ... allows the theoretical possibility of establishing that a miracle has occurred" (ibid., 185). But there are other ways of serving as a bulwark than by disproving claims; in Hume's case, his arguments prove not that the miracle claims are false ("positive disproof"), nor that evidence for them must be in conflict with evidence against ("check"), but that evidence against must be overwhelmingly strong, relative to the evidence for.

To support his contention that Hume allows that miracles might be established, Flew relies on two passages (E 116, 127) in which Hume evidently acknowledges that there might be good reason ("entire proof" even) to think that a miraculous event had occurred, to argue that Hume's point cannot be that such an event can't be evidenced; this "contradicts the second contention" of TI (Flew 1990, 142). But the

passages do not support this reading. When Hume allows "that otherwise, there may possibly be miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature" (E 127), he must not be taken to refer to the truly miraculous, which by his definition violates not "the ordinary course" but the *laws* of nature, but to what he earlier called the "marvellous" (E 114), which is at best extraordinary or unprecedented. Perhaps it never snows in Edinburgh in July, but we cannot say that completely credible testimony ("entire proof"?) might not be advanced that it once had; but no degree of testimony that water had frozen at temperatures of eighty degrees Fahrenheit could possibly be credible. Hume's own example is this: suppose old books uniformly reported that in January of 1600, there had been total darkness over the earth for eight days. Hume counsels us to accept this as fact and "search for the causes" (E 128). But suppose the books report that after her death, Queen Elizabeth returned to life and reigned in England for three more years. I "should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event" (E 128), says Hume.[4]

Flew is of course correct in emphasizing Hume's "limitation," which is "that a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion" (E 127). But Hume's point is not that there are two kinds of miracles, non-provable religious ones and possibly provable non-religious ones. His point is rather that whatever can be proved in the way of the miraculous, is not a miracle, but at most a marvel, which, since it can be explained by natural causes, can never found religion. Many celebrated "miracles" no doubt fall into this category, for example, the parting of the Red Sea, and it is with regard to such, and only with regard to such, that Hume counsels us to keep an open mind and search for possible scientific explanations (E 128; cf. Flew 1990, 143).

What does Hume mean (Flew's other passage) when he says "the testimony, upon which a miracle is founded, may possibly amount to an entire proof" (E 116)? As this passage, which appears in the opening sentence of part 2, is nothing but a reference to the closing argument of part 1, it can have no special significance: we must invoke again the double-standard of "entire proof" which Hume consistently employs to distinguish the testimony sufficient to evidence both the normal and the extraordinary from that required to evidence a true miracle. The evidence that Elizabeth returned from the dead might be "entire" (read: sufficiently credible to warrant belief) for July snow in Edinburgh; but a different standard of credibility is at play.

Elsewhere Flew, who acknowledges Hume's double-standard of proof, has a different interpretation of the passage ending part 1:

> Could we ever know that a miracle has occurred? It is in response to this question that Hume goes on to argue, in the two final paragraphs of Part I, that there cannot but be a conflict, even a contradiction, within any suitably comprehensive case for saying that a miracle has actually occurred. Such a case has to show first, that the supposed laws ... do in fact obtain, and second, that the overridings have actually occurred.
>
> All evidence for the first proposition, however, is at the same time evidence against the second; and the other way about. ... Thus to show that a law of nature obtains, just is to show that the occurrence of exceptions is naturally impossible; while to show that even one 'exception' has occurred would be to show that the law ... did not obtain. (1986, 18)

There is no comparable argument in Flew 1961.

This passage, surprising given that Flew rejects TI.2 but accepts TI.1, appears to attribute to Hume an argument stronger than that of Flew's official position. If the case for a miracle must be "a conflict, even a contradiction," we would seem to have either an a priori argument that it is not rational to believe in miracles (which is what is asserted by TI.2), or (which is what is denied by TI.1) an a priori argument which suggests that the concept of the miraculous is contradictory, or at least incoherent in a special way, since a "miraculous event" would have the property that any evidence to show that it occurred would also and necessarily be evidence to show that it was not miraculous.

In attributing to Hume the argument that, for any miracle, either there is insufficient evidence that the miraculous event took place, or, if there is sufficient evidence, then the event by definition was not a miracle (and we should search for its natural causes), Flew is unfair both to Hume and to defenders of miracles. Unfair to the defender of miracles because the dilemma begs the question by making the miracle claim into a contradiction; and unfair to Hume because he attributes to him this question-begging argument. It is precisely because a miracle is an event which violates the laws of nature and therefore cannot happen by natural agency, that defenders of miracles do not claim that evidence that it **did** happen is evidence that the laws of nature are different from **what** we may have thought, but rather that the event must be attributed to supernatural intervention. What is claimed by defenders of miracles is *both* that a given law of nature obtains, *and* that there is evidence that the law has been transgressed; hence they attribute the transgression to the supernatural. By making this claim contradictory ("to show that even one exception has occurred would be to show that the law did not obtain"), Flew's dilemma begs the question

against the religious party.[5] Legend tells us that the martyr St. Denis, decapitated, washed his severed head in a well on Montmartre and then walked with it to his burial ground near the Seine. The claim that there are witnesses to this remarkable event is not *in any way* a claim that no law of nature makes these actions impossible; on the contrary, the event is regarded as "foundation for a system of religion" just because we know there is such a law. If, then, we must be reluctant to attribute to Hume this second horn (evidence that it occurred is *ipso facto* evidence that the law does not obtain), we are left with the first alternative: because we have overwhelming evidence that it is impossible, we are never warranted in believing that the miraculous event occurred (and therefore need not search for its natural causes: all that we need to explain by natural causes is the gullibility of the witnesses). But this is just TI.2.

Flew has suggested a third position, intermediate between his question-begging dilemma and his weak official position that miracles are possible provided they are not such as to found a religion. In his 1986 essay Flew says, "Hume is contending that the criteria by which we must assess historical testimony ... must inevitably rule out any possibility of establishing definitively, upon purely historical evidence, that some genuinely miraculous event has indeed occurred" (p. 21). Here Flew suggests that Hume's view is that some miracles might be established, though not "definitively" (as, by analogy, one might say that it has not been and no doubt never will be established "definitively" that President Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone).[6] This would contradict TI.2 by allowing that the case for a miracle might be persuasive or plausible, and would continue Flew's position that Hume is merely trying to "check" superstition, understood here perhaps as the belief that miracles are known with certainty to have occurred. This ingenious suggestion implies a third interpretation of Hume's "limitation," namely, that since miracles serve as a foundation for religion only when they are believed certainly to have occurred (the slightest doubt sufficing to destroy religious faith), all Hume needs to do to "check" religion based on miracles is to show that the miracle can never be established "definitively." But however ingenious, it is not clear why Hume's (and Flew's) insistence that miracles violate the laws of nature, should lead to no more than the weak conclusion that nothing more can be said against them but that they cannot be established definitively. To point out that some alleged event is impossible is to do more that to say that it's occurrence isn't definite. It is just because the law of nature, which the miracle violates, is established by overwhelming evidence, that testimony establishing the miracle, no matter how impressive "considered apart and in itself,"

will inevitably be hopelessly weak in comparison, lacking not just definitiveness but all plausibility.

Flew draws some support from Hume's word "check" (E 110): "Nor is 'check' ... a synonym for 'checkmate' " (1990, 144). But the context surely supports that Hume uses "check" in the very ordinary sense of putting a stop to something, namely, to belief in the occurrence, through supernatural agency, of events known to be naturally impossible.[7] Hence Hume's argument is just what TI.2 says it is: that although miraculous events could (logically and, one might say, supernaturally) occur, for all philosophy can say otherwise, the "wise and learned" will *always* (and necessarily) have stronger reason to think that the event did not occur, than that it did. This is an a priori argument that despite all testimony, it is never rational to believe that a miraculous event has occurred.

For Fogelin, however, TI.2 is a tag-along, depending on the rejection of TI.1. This won't do as a reason to accept TI.2 for someone who also accepts TI.1. The best reason to accept TI.2 is that it is supported by the entire tenor of Hume's argument and examples. All these, in part 2, are directed to show that the alleged miracles, no matter how well-attested, defy credibility. Flew points out that these examples are not a priori (1990, 143), which they aren't, but Hume's point is not only that (as a matter of fact) "there never was a miraculous event established" on the fullest possible evidence (E 116), but that, as all examples show, the arguments on both sides would be exactly the same even if there had been. In the long and delightful note about the miracle cures effected on the tomb of the Abbe Paris, Hume reports that to investigate one Mlle. Thibaut there was sent by the magistrate,

> the famous De Sylva ... whose evidence is very curious. The physician declares, that it was impossible she could have been so ill as was proved by witnesses; because it was impossible she could, in so short a time, have recovered so perfectly as he found her. He reasoned, like a man of sense, from natural causes; but the opposite party told him, that the whole was a miracle, and that his evidence was the very best proof of it. (E 345)

The irony in this passage is attributable precisely to the reader's understanding that the "best proof" is that such cures cannot occur, therefore it is almost certain that the testimony of her illness was mistaken. This would be the case no matter how many witnesses testified (and Hume goes out of his way to depict the credibility and quantity of witnesses to typical miracles).

On this, as on many matters, Hume himself may have the last word.

> The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), 'That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish; ...' When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. ... 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. (E 115-16)

Western Michigan University

1. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 114-15 (hereafter cited as "E").
2. Hume's use of the word "proof" is not univocal; for example: "many of the miracles [of the Abbé Paris] were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses" (E 124; and see E 344n), where the word means "put to the trial."
3. Fogelin does not deny this, but he thinks there are *two* arguments in the passage, both identical save that one has to do with the existence of any miracle, the other with the credibility of any miracle. That Hume would enclose two distinct arguments in the same set of words without any indication of so doing seems to me far-fetched.
4. Notice the significance of the word "otherwise" in the defence of TI.2: "otherwise, there may possibly be miracles" (E 127). What is being contrasted to what? Hume says there may be miracles, provided they are not such upon which a system of religion may be founded. But what kind of miracles are those? I take Hume at his word to be referring to non-violations of the laws of nature, that is, mere marvels, which as consistent with nature can be explained by science. Because such events are not strictly miracles, they cannot serve as the foundation of religion. So Hume is saying that not all alleged miracles are really such; the ones that aren't,

although they can be proved, cannot serve as the foundation of religion. This supports the contention (TI.2) that Hume holds that miracles, strictly, cannot be proved. If, like Flew, you want to reject TI.2, you should hold, as Flew does, that by "otherwise" Hume marks a contrast between, on the one hand, those miracles which can't be proved (but are the very ones upon which religion could be founded if they could be proved) and other, possibly provable, miracles, which however are not such as can serve to found religion (Flew 1961, 182). In other words, critics of TI.2 would have to hold that Hume claims: we (theoretically) may prove certain miracles, but not the ones which could be the foundation for religion. However there is nothing in the chapter to support the idea that there might be true miracles which nonetheless could not serve to found religion. In the paragraph which immediately precedes "otherwise," Hume argues that even if testimony for "any kind of miracle ... amounted to a proof" (understanding here "proof" good enough to make credible non-miraculous events), it would be not only opposed but "annihilat[ed]" (opponents of TI.2 should note the strength of Hume's word) by the contrary experience which "assures us of the laws of nature." Hume concludes: "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" (E 127). What Hume does *not* say is that testimony could not establish just the kinds of miracles which would found religion. What he does say is that testimony cannot establish *any* miracle, the suggestion being that *any* event contrary to the laws of nature could serve as foundation for religion; but no such event can be proved. And this is TI.2.

5. Flew recognizes that, "What, indisputably, Hume did not say" is "the most obvious *a priori* argument," the semantic argument that what the expression "law of nature" means is that there can be no exceptions (1990, 141). This argument would again beg the question; to it defenders of miracles need only reply that there are no laws of nature, "in that sense." Flew also repudiates a weak thesis, the "trite reminder that, because the occurrence of a miracle must be very improbable, it needs to be quite exceptionally well evidenced" (1986, 21). Clearly Flew wants to steer a course between some overly-strong reading which attributes to Hume a view according to which the concept of the miraculous, or of evidence for a miraculous event, becomes incoherent; and a too-weak reading according to which Hume in effect urges caution in assessing miracle claims. I am trying to argue that TI.2 is the most plausible solution to this problem.

6. It may be worth questioning here his concern in Flew 1986 (and to a lesser extent in Flew 1961; see p. 178) with establishing Hume as a founder of the logic of historical evidence. Historians, who certainly evaluate historical evidence according to what is known today to be probable and improbable, are however never called on to evaluate the miraculous, which is not improbable but (naturally) impossible! When the Virgin's birthing tunic was produced undamaged from the fire that destroyed Chartres cathedral in 1194, the papal legate, Cardinal Melior, immediately declared this miracle a sign that the Virgin desired the Cathedral be rebuilt. No historian considers this claim worthy of evaluation, not because it could not be true, but because it could not be history. The 'historian's claim', that credibility of past testimony must be based on what we know today to be natural and probable, is a ' boundary condition' of history, as Hume very explicitly recognizes in a passage from the *History* which Flew (1961) quotes at p. 194: "It is the business of history to distinguish between the miraculous and the marvellous; to reject the first in all narrations merely profane and human." The same is true for Biblical ' higher criticism' (see Flew 1961, 179). But were Hume to suppose such a condition in the present context, he would surely be guilty of begging the question against the religious party. Flew is on much firmer ground in drawing the analogy between the evidence for miracles and that for various parapsychic phenomena.
7. Flew draws support from the Oxford English Dictionary (quote from Smollett, 1751) for the weak meaning of "check" (1961, 177). If so, it is the only weak word in a paragraph remarkable for its vigorous expressions: "arrogant bigotry and superstition," "impertinent solicitations," "superstitious delusion," thunders Hume, which he proposes to "*silence*" (his emphasis) by a "decisive argument" (E 110).

List of Sources

Flew, Antony. 1961. *Hume's Philosophy of Belief.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

———. 1986. "The Impossibility of the Miraculous." In *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, by Antony Flew et al. Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University Press.

———. 1990. "Fogelin on Hume on Miracles." *Hume Studies* 16, no. 2 (November): 141-44.

Fogelin, Robert J. 1990. "What Hume Actually Said About Miracles." *Hume Studies* 16, no. 1 (April): 81-86.