illness, survival of accidents, and the building of a career in ways not anticipated in advance. On the corporate level we have the rise and fall of nations, the preservation of a people from destruction, and the growth of the Church. In all these cases what is taken to be "specially significant" is the nature of the outcome, not merely as happening somehow or other but as a carrying out of God's purposes. We may believe in some or all such cases that God has brought about the outcome apart from natural causes, but that belief is not essential for our singling out these occurrences in the way we do. What we take to be special about them is simply that God has acted in such a way as to effect this result; that this is something that God intended to bring about. How God chose to do this is not the heart of the matter; it will be special in the relevant way whatever that choice. In these cases we are centrally interested in the character of the result whereas in the "authentication" cases the result could be, and often was, quite indifferent in itself, its significance residing in its being a sign of divine favor.

Many people think, and I myself at one time thought, that the belief that God enters into active interaction with His creatures, a belief crucial to the Judeo-Christian tradition, requires us to suppose that God directly intervenes in the world, acting outside the course of nature. But the considerations of this essay clearly indicate otherwise. Just by virtue of creating and sustaining the natural order God is in an active contact with his creatures as one could wish. Merely by the use of natural causes God carries out his purposes and intentions with respect to creatures, and this surely counts as genuine action toward them. If God speaks to me, or guides me, or enlightens me by the use of natural causes, He is as surely in active contact with me as if He had produced the relevant effects by a direct fiat. Indeed, as I supposed above, we do not even need the doctrine of continuous divine preservation in order to achieve that result; although if God is actively sustaining everything in being at every moment, this does, so to speak, make God's instrumental actions more immediate even without that, God is still intentionally making everything done by the natural order happen all, when one human being being directly interacted another, by speaking to or embracing the other, agent is making use of aspects of the nature of exploiting physical and psychological capacities, we do not know how to do it otherwise. And this does not imply that we are not in active contact with each other in such transactions. However, essay direct intervention may be for the authentication of messengers, it is not required for genuine divine-human interaction. Thus we can think of God's action in the world as pervasive, if not pervasive, whether or not anything ever happens outside the ordinary course of nature.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What is meant by omnipresence? What philosophers adopt it?
2. According to Alston, why is omniscience compatible with—indeed, on theistic premises—follows from—causal determinism?
3. What does Alston say concerning events that are not strictly determined—can God be the agent of those?
4. What is Molina's doctrine of divine knowledge? How does the doctrine purport to reconcile omnipresence by God with human free will?
5. What reason does Alston give for rejecting Molinism?
6. "Do you think Alston has made a plausible case for having divine agency in the framework of a natural order? Why or why not?"

**PART 1.**

There is, in Dr. Tillottson's writings, an argument against the real presence which is as concise and elegant and strong as any argument can possibly be supposed against a doctrine so little worthy of a serious refutation. It is acknowledged on all hands, says that learned prelate, that the authority either of the Scripture, or of tradition is founded merely in the testimony of the Apostles who were eyewitnesses to these miracles of our Savior by which he proved his divine mission. Our evidence, then, for the truth of the Christian religion is less than the evidence for the truth of our senses, because even in the first authors of our religion it was no greater; and it is evident it must diminish in passing from them to their disciples, nor can anyone rest such confidence in their testimony as in the immediate object of his senses. But a weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger; and, therefore, were the doctrine of the real presence ever so clearly revealed in scripture, it would be directly contrary to the rules of just reasoning to give our assent to it. It contradicts sense, though both the Scripture and tradition, on which it is supposed to be built, do not carry such evidence with them as sense, when they are considered merely as external evidences and are not brought home to everyone's breast by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit.

Nothing is so convenient as a decisive argument of this kind, which must at least silence the most arrogant bigotry and superstition and free us from their impertinent solicitations. I flatter myself that I have discovered an argument of a like nature which, if it just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion and consequently will be useful as long as the world endures. For so long, I presume, will the accounts of miracles and prodigies be found in all history, sacred and profane.

Though experience is our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact, it must be acknowledged that this guide is not altogether infallible, but in some cases is apt to lead us into errors. One who in our climate should expect better weather in any week of June than in one of December would reason...

Incredibility of a fact, it was allowed, might invalidate so great an authority. The Indian prince who refused to believe the first relations concerning the effects of frost reasoned justly, and it naturally required very strong testimony to engage his assent to facts that arose from a state of nature with which he was unacquainted and which bore so little analogy to those events of which he had had constant and uniform experience. Though they were not contrary to his experience, they were not conformable to it.

In order to increase the probability against the testimony of witnesses, let it be supposed that the fact which they affirm, instead of being only marvellous, is really marvelous, and suppose also that the testimony, considered apart and in itself, amounts to an entire proof—in that case, 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. 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. Why is it more than probable that all men must die, that lead cannot of itself remain suspended in the air, that fire consumes wood, and is it supposed that these events are found agreeable to the laws of nature and there is required a violation of these laws or, in other words, a miracle to prevent them? Nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happen in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die all of a sudden, because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been

No Indian, it is evident, could have experience that water did not freeze in cold climates. This is placing nature in a situation quite unknown to him; and it is impossible for him to tell us what will result from it. It is making a new experiment, the consequence of which is always uncertain. One may sometimes conjecture from analogy what will follow; but still this is but conjecture. And it must be confessed, that, in the present case of freezing, the event follows contrary to the rules of analogy, and is such as a rational Indian would not look for. The operations of cold upon water are not gradual, according to the degrees of cold, but whatever it comes to the freezing point, the water passes in a moment, from the utmost latency to perfect hardness. Such an event, therefore, may be denominated extraordinary, and requires a pretty strong testimony, to render it credible to people in a warm climate. But still it is not miraculous, nor contrary to uniform experience of the course of nature in cases where all the circumstances are the same. The inhabitants of Sumatra have always seen water liquid in their own climate, and the freezing of their rivers ought to be deemed a prodigy. But they never saw water in Moscow during the winter, and therefore they cannot reasonably be positive what would there be the consequence.
frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life, because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, 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.2

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 is of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force which remains after deducting the inferior. When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it is more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived or that the fact which he relates should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other and, according to the superiority I discover, I pronounce my decision and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates, then, and not until then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

PART II.

In the foregoing reasoning we have supposed that the testimony upon which a miracle is founded may possibly amount to an entire proof and that the falsehood of that testimony would be a real prodigy. But it is easy to show that we have been a great deal too liberal in our concession and that there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence.

For first, there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such unobtruded integrity as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood, and at the same time attesting facts performed in such a public manner and in so celebrated a part of the world as to render the detection unavoidable—all which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men.

Secondly, we may observe in human nature a principle which, if strictly examined, will be found to diminish extremely the assurance which we might, from human testimony, have in any kind of prodigy. The maxim by which we commonly conduct ourselves in our reasonings is that these objects of which we have no experience, resemble those of which we have; that what we have found to be most usual is always most probable; and that where there is an opposition of arguments, we ought to give the preference to such as are founded on the greatest number of past observations. But though, in proceeding by this rule, we readily reject any fact which is unusual and incredible in an ordinary degree, yet in advancing further, the mind does not observe always the same rule; but when anything is affirmed utterly absurd and miraculous, it rather the more readily admits of such a fact upon account of that very circumstance which ought to destroy all its authority.

2Sometimes an event may not, in itself, seem to be contrary to the laws of nature, and yet, if it were real, it might, by reason of some circumstances, be demonstratively a miracle; because, in fact, it is contrary to these laws. Thus, if a person, claiming a divine authority, should command a sick person to be well, a beautiful man to fall down dead, the clouds to pour rain, the winds to blow, in short, should order many natural events, which immediately follow upon his command; these might justly be considered miracles, because they are real, in this case, contrary to the laws of nature. For if any suspicion remains, that the event and command conceived by accident, there is no miracle, and a transgression of these laws; because nothing can be more contrary to nature than that the voice or command of a man should have such an influence. A miracle may be accurately defined, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular action of the Deity; or, in the interpretation of some invisible agent. A miracle may either be discovered by men or act. This abates not its nature and essence. The raising of a horse or ship into the air is a visible miracle; the raising of a feather, when the wind waxes ever so little from a force requisite for that purpose, is as real a miracle, though not so sensible with regard to us.

The passion of surprise and wonder, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events from which it is derived. And this goes so far that even when they are not observed immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others.

With what greediness are the miraculous accounts of travelers received, their descriptions of sea and land monsters, their relations of wonderful adventures, strange men, and uncouth manners? But if the spirit of religion joins itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense and human testimony in these circumstances loses all pretensions to authority. A religionist may be an enthusiast and imagine he sees what has no reality. He may know his narrative to be false and yet persever in it with the best intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting so holy a cause. Or even where this delusion does not have place, vanity, excited by so strong a temptation, operates on him more powerfully than on the rest of mankind in any other circumstances, and self-interest with equal force. His auditors may not have and commonly do not have sufficient judgment to canvass his evidence. What judgment they have, they renounce by principle in these sublime and mysterious subjects. And if they were ever so willing to employ it, passion and a heated imagination disturb the regularity of its operations. Their credulity increases his impudence and his impudence overpowers their credulity.

The many instances of forged miracles and prophecies and supernatural events, which, in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence or which detect themselves by their absurdity, prove sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvelous and ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind.

Thirdly, it forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with that inviolable sanction and authority which always attended received opinions. When we pursue the first histories of all nations, we are apt to imagine ourselves transported into some new world where the whole frame of nature is disjointed and every element performs its operations in a different manner from what it does at present. Battles, revolutions, pestilence, famine, and death are never the effect of those natural causes which we experience. Prodigies, omens, oracles, judgments quite obscure the few natural events that are intermingled with them. But as the former grow thinner every page, in proportion as we advance nearer the enlightened ages, we soon learn that there is nothing mysterious or supernatural in the case, but that all proceeds from the usual propensity of mankind towards the marvelous, and that, though this inclination may at intervals receive a check from sense and learning, it can never be thoroughly extinguished from human nature . . .

I may add, as a fourth reason which diminishes the authority of prodigies, that there is no testimony for any, even those which have not been expressly detected, that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses, so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of testimony, but the testimony destroys itself. To make this the better understood, I consider 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. 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 it has the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. 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. 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 Arabsians. And, on the other hand, we
are to regard the authority of Titus Livius [Livy], Plutarch, Tacitus, and, in short, of all the authors and witnesses, Greek, 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 Mahometan miracle and had in express terms contradicted it with the same certainty as they have for the miracle they relate. This argument may appear over subtle and refined, but is not in reason different from the reasoning of a judge who supposes that the credit of two witnesses maintaining a crime against anyone is destroyed by the testimony of two others who affirm to have been two hundred leagues distant at the same instant when the crime is said to have been committed. . . .

There surely never was a greater number of miracles ascribed to one person than those which were lately said to have been wrought in France upon the tomb of Abbe Paris, the famous Jansenist, with whose sanctity the people were so long deluded. The curing of the sick, giving hearing to the deaf and sight to the blind, were everywhere talked of as the usual effects of that holy sepulcher. But what is more extraordinary, many of the miracles were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, assisted by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age, and on the most eminent theater that is now in the world. Nor is this all: A relation of them was published and dispersed everywhere, nor were the Jesuits, though a learned body, surprised by the civil magistrate and determined enemies to those opinions in whose favor the miracles were said to have been wrought, ever able distinctly to refute or detect them. Where shall we find such a number of circumstances agreeing to the corroboration of one fact? And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events which they relate? And this, surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation. . . .

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; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof derived from the very nature of the fact which it would endeavor to establish. 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 subtract 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 subtraction 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.

I beg the limitations here made may be remarked, when I say that a miracle can never be proved so as to be the foundation of a system of religion. For I admit that otherwise there may possibly be miracles or violations of the usual course of nature of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony; though perhaps it will be impossible to find any such in all the records of history. Thus, suppose all authors, in all languages, agree that from the first of January 1600 there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days; suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people—that all travelers who return from foreign countries bring us accounts of the same tradition without the least variation or contradiction—it is evident that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain and ought to search for the causes from which it might be derived. The decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature is an event rendered probable by so many analogies that any phenomenon which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony is very extensive and uniform.

But suppose that all the historians who treat of England should agree that on the first of January 1600, Queen Elizabeth died; that both before and after her death she was seen by her physicians and the whole court, as is usual with persons of her rank; that her successor was acknowledged and proclaimed by the parliament; and that, after being inquired a month, she again appeared, resumed the throne, and governed England for three years—I must confess that I should be surprised at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances, but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. I should not doubt of her pretended death and of those other public circumstances which followed it; I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was nor possibly could be real. You would in vain object to me the difficulty and almost impossibility of deceiving the world in an affair of such consequence; the weight and solid judgment of that renowned queen, with the little or no advantage which she could reap from so poor an artifice—all this might astonish me, but I would still reply that the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature.

But should this miracle be ascribed to any new system of religion, men in all ages have been so much imposed on by ridiculous stories of that kind that this very circumstance would be a full proof of a cheat and sufficient, with all men of sense, not only to make them reject the fact, but even reject it without further examination. Though I am not able to judge to whom the miracle is ascribed in this case Almighty, it does not, upon that account, become a whit more probable, since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being otherwise than from the experience which we have of his productions in the usual course of nature. This still reduces us to past observation and obliges us to compare the instances of the violation of truth in the testimony of men with those of the violation of the laws of nature by miracles, in order to judge which of them is most likely and probable. As the violations of truth are more common in the testimony concerning religious miracles than in that concerning any other matter of fact, this must diminish very much the authority of the former testimony and make us form a general resolution, never to lend any attention to it, with whatever specious pretense it may be covered. . . .

What we have said of miracles may be applied without any variation to prophecies; and, indeed, all prophecies are real miracles and as such only can be admitted as proofs of any revelation. If it did not exceed the capacity of human nature to foretell future events, it would be absurd to employ any prophecy as an argument for a divine mission or authority from heaven. So that, upon the whole, we may conclude that the Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. More reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity. And whoever is moved by faith to assent to it is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person which subverts all the principles of his understanding and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**


2. "Is it coherent to speak of a "violation of a law of nature"? After all, if there is a violation, how can we speak of a law? (The problem was discussed in the introduction to this chapter.)

3. What method does Hume propose for evaluating the reports of (supposed) miracles?

4. "Is Hume attacking the view that miracles are possible? Or instead is he attacking only the view that we can ever know that a miracle has occurred? Explain.

5. Is Hume's willingness to accept the reports in his example of the prolonged total eclipse consistent with the lead principles of his essay? Explain. Why is the case of the eclipse different, in his opinion, from the case of Queen Elizabeth's reported death?

6. Famous British religious writer C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) criticized Hume as follows: Now of course we must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely "uniform experience" against miracles, if in other words, they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately we know the experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we can know all the reports to be false only if we know already that miracles have never
Of "Of Miracles"

Peter van Inwagen

Contemporary philosopher Peter van Inwagen (Notre Dame) focuses on Hume's argument in "Of Miracles" and the controversy it has generated. He argues that Hume's argument against the existence of miracles is not a strict logical proof, but rather a probabilistic argument. Van Inwagen's response to Hume's argument is that miracles should be considered as instances of extraordinary events, which cannot be determined by normal probability calculations. He concludes that the existence of miracles cannot be ruled out on the basis of Hume's argument alone.

"Of Miracles" is a classic essay by David Hume in which he argues that miracles are improbable events and that the probability of them occurring is so low that they cannot be considered as a legitimate explanation for extraordinary events. Hume's argument is based on the premise that miracles are supernatural events, which are not subject to the laws of nature and therefore cannot be explained by natural causes.

Van Inwagen's response to Hume's argument is that miracles should be considered as instances of extraordinary events, which cannot be determined by normal probability calculations. He concludes that the existence of miracles cannot be ruled out on the basis of Hume's argument alone.

In summary, van Inwagen argues that Hume's argument against the existence of miracles is not a strict logical proof, but rather a probabilistic argument. He concludes that the existence of miracles cannot be ruled out on the basis of Hume's argument alone.
answer to this question is. His conclusion is that one should react in a certain way to any miracle-report one encounters, and his reasoning can be evaluated independently of the question whether anyone ever does encounter any miracle-reports.

But what does Hume say about how one should react to a miracle-report? Is his position simply that one should not believe the report, or is it that one should disbelieve (not believe and believe the denial of) the report—or is it some third thing? I do not think that Hume is clear or entirely consistent about the matter, but I believe that the best way to state his conclusion is this: One should dismiss any miracle-report one encounters. The concept of dismissal may be spelled out as follows: One dismisses a report—an allegedly historical narrative—if one either disbelieves it or (does not believe it and) assigns it a very low probability. (How low? Let's say very low—a probability of the sort that we describe in ordinary speech by phrases like 'of insignificant probability' and 'no real possibility'.)

We shall need one more definition before we turn to Hume's argument for this conclusion. Let us say that a proposition is a contradiction of one's experience (for short, a contradiction) if the truth of that proposition is contrary to one's experience. Contradictions, moreover, come in sizes: p is a larger or greater contradiction than q if, although q is contrary to experience, p is even more contrary to experience than q. . . . If I tell my friends that on a recent trip from Boston to Los Angeles my 1973 Cadillac averaged sixty miles to the gallon, what I tell them will no doubt be a contradiction. If Calvin tells his mother that the janny handprints on the wall of the sofa were put there not by himself but by an evil Calvin doppleganger constructed by beings from Arcturus, that will also be a contradiction, and perhaps there is some intuitive sense in which it is a larger contradiction than the one I have asserted. An historical narrative will be called a contradiction if its propositional content is a contradiction.

I will now present Hume's argument, or my reconstruction of it. The argument has three premises, two epistemological premises and one 'historical' premise. The first epistemological premise is:

E1. Any miracle-report must necessarily be a contradiction and, in fact, a very large contradiction.

(If a story is a miracle-report for some audience, it will also be a contradiction for that audience. If a story is not a contradiction, it will not qualify as a miracle-report. Suppose, for example, that we hear the story of Jill's sudden translation from New York to Sydney. It may or may not be reasonable for us to classify this as a miracle-report, but if the proposition that people sometimes find themselves suddenly on the other side of the earth is not contrary to experience, a necessary condition for classifying the story as a miracle-report will be absent. There are, moreover, stories that are contradictions but which are not large enough contradictions to qualify as miracle-reports. If I tell you that Sally, who was hitherto entirely ignorant of French, spoke perfect French after spending three months in France, then that story would be a contradiction but no doubt not one that is large enough to qualify as a miracle-report. And how large a contradiction must a miracle-report be? One way to answer this question would be to specify some story that is a large enough contradiction by just about anyone's reckoning to be a miracle-report and say, 'At least as large as that.' I think that the following story will do for this purpose: Let us suppose that we have heard a report of a shaman in Peru who has, it is alleged, restored several incestuous long-dead corpses to life. Suppose we are willing to agree that this story is more contrary to experience than the story of Sally's remarkable quick mastery of French. Then, according to the criterion I have proposed, the story of Sally's remarkable quick mastery of French is not a contradiction. And so, according to the criterion I have proposed, one cannot say that the story of Sally's remarkable quick mastery of French is a contradiction.

We should note that it does not follow from the propositional content of the premiss that just any story that is as large a contradiction as the 'shaman' story is a miracle-report. Indeed, it does not follow from anything we have said that the 'shaman' story itself is a miracle-report. And if someone maintained that Calvin's story of the origin of the janny handprints was as large a contradiction as the 'shaman' story, despite the fact that Calvin's story was not a miracle-report and the 'shaman' story was, then that person would have said nothing inconsistent with the proposed criterion.

Let us say that any contradiction that is at least as large as the 'shaman' story is very large. The second epistemological premise requires a little stage-setting. Let us say that two narratives are historically independent if neither is derived from the other. Two narratives will be said to support each other if they are independent and "tell the same story"—(purport to) describe events that are the same or at least very similar. ('Similarity' is to include the elements 'cast of characters' and 'pace and time'.)

Hume's second epistemological premise is:

E2. One should dismiss any very large contradiction one encounters unless one knows that one of the following two conditions holds:

(a) if the very large contradiction is unhistorical—if it is not a reasonably accurate description of events that actually happened — its existence is itself a contradiction and larger contradiction than its truth would be;
(b) if it is one of two or more mutually supporting narratives such that if they are unhistorical, their (collective) existence is a contradiction and a larger contradiction than their truth (i.e., the truth of their common propositional content) would be.

Suppose that X tells me that Jimmy Carter is a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings. And suppose no one else has told me that. X's statement is a very large contradiction and should therefore be dismissed—unless X's telling me falsely that Carter is a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings is a contradiction and a larger contradiction than his being a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings would be. Or suppose that shortly after X has told me that Carter is a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings, Y tells me the same thing. And suppose I am somehow satisfied that X's statement and Y's statement are historically independent. I should dismiss what they have told me unless the existence of the two independent false allegations that Carter is a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings is a contradiction and a larger contradiction than his being a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings would be.

Here, finally, is Hume's 'historical' premise:

H. Although it may be possible to imagine a miracle-report that satisfies one or the other of the conditions set out in E2, no miracle-report known to history satisfies either: Indeed, all known narratives that anyone might be inclined to classify as miracle-reports (such as the Gospel story of the stilling of the storm) fall far short of satisfying either of them.

I will make a few remarks about E2 and H and then proceed to argue against E1. I shall, in discussing Hume's views, write as if he were familiar with the vocabulary and distinctions of the present essay. I believe that this unacknowledged could be eliminated from my argument, although only at the cost of a great deal of circumscription.

Hume wrote in an era when photography and sound recordings had not yet been invented—in an era when almost the only evidence as to what had occurred in the past was human testimony. No doubt if he were writing today, he would want to emend E2 to take account of "nontestimonial" evidence about the past. But any such emendation of E2 would affect no point of principle, and the question of its proper formulation need not detain us.

It is evident that Hume believed that clause (a) in E2 could not possibly be satisfied, for (such is human credulity and epistemic frailty) the proposition that a given person has made a false statement about the past could not possibly be a "very large" contradiction. Hume's position was, therefore, that the only possibility of a case in which a very large contradiction should not be dismissed would be of this sort: It was one of two or more historically independent contradictions, with essentially the same propositional content. It is, however, unclear whether Hume thought that even a very large number of mutually supporting false statements about the past could constitute a "very large" contradiction. In introducing the important "eight-day darkness" example ("Thus, suppose, all authors, in all languages, agree, that, from the first of January 1660, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days . . ."), he says, "For I own, that otherwise (i.e., if we imagine testimony much more extensive and uniform than the testimony to the supposed miracles foundational to Christianity and its rivals), there may possibly be miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony, though, perhaps, it will be impossible to find any such in all the records of history."

Although Hume uses the word 'miracle' here, he goes on to say that although philosophers of his own day, if they had available to them the testimony he imagines, ought to grant the historicity of the eight-day darkness (in fact, they should "receive it as certain"), they
should proceed to “search for the causes whence it might be derived”—and hence they should presumably not regard the darkness as a miracle as the term is “accurately defined” (“A transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent”) but only in the loose and much weaker sense he has supplied: as a violation of the usual course of nature. He then argues that various (unspecified) analogies with known events suggest that a universal eight-day darkness “comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform.” And this statement implies that other imaginable events might not come within the reach of any testimony, however extensive and uniform. This argument is immediately followed by an example of such an imaginable event: the death and “resurrection” of Elizabeth I. It seems likely, therefore, that Hume would maintain that no imaginable human testimony could be such that its falsity would be what we are calling a very large contradiction. And from this and our two epistemological premises, it follows that any imaginable miracle-report should be dismissed.

Even if I have not interpreted Hume correctly, however even, in his view, there are imaginable miracle-reports that should not be dismissed. It does not follow from this that any imaginable miracle-report should be accepted. (I do not believe that the story of King Alfred and the cakes is false—that is, I do not assent to the proposition that the story of King Alfred and the cakes is false. And I do not think that the probability of this story’s being true is so low as to be insignificant. I therefore do not dismiss the story of Alfred and the cakes. But I certainly do not assent to the proposition that the story is true—and, in fact, I think it’s very unlikely to be true.) And I think that it would certainly be Hume’s position that none should be: Whether or not any imaginable miracle-report should be dismissed, no imaginable miracle-report should be accepted. No imaginable miracle-report should be accepted because a miracle-report, no matter what testimony might support it, is a very large contradiction, and no testimonial evidence in favor of a very large contradiction could be so good as to make it worthy of belief—even if it were possible for there to be testimonial evidence good enough to lead the judicious reasoner not to dismiss it. (In the most favorable possible case, there would be, as Hume says, “a mutual destruction of arguments.”) And, of course, if we leave the realm of the merely imaginable and turn to the actual and historical, it is clear—this is the import of our “historical” premise—that Hume believes that all actual miracle-reports should be dismissed.

Is Hume’s argument, as I have reconstructed it, cogent? I think not. My defense of this judgment begins with an examination of E1, the premise that any miracle-report must be a very large contradiction. That is, for any story about the past one might hear, one should refuse to make the following judgment about it:

If that story is true, then some of the events it relates involve violations of the laws of nature, unless one is also willing to make the following judgment:

That story is contrary to my experience—and as contrary to my experience as the “shaman” story.

In order to evaluate this premise, we must turn to a question we have so far glossed over. What is it for a story to be “contrary to one’s experience”? Hume generally writes as if the following were true: A story is true if it involves something’s having the property F and the property G and one has observed many things having the property F and has observed that all of them have the complement of G. For example, on this account, a story about a man’s returning from the dead is contrary to my experience owing simply to the fact that I have known of a very large number of people who have died and all of them have the property “not having returned from the dead.” But this account of what it is for a story to be contrary to one’s experience is useless for Hume’s purposes, since it will classify far too many stories as contrary to one’s experience.

Suppose for example, that I know of many visits that Tom has made to his mother over the past ten years; it is all but inevitable that if I hear a detailed account of his latest visit to her, this account will ascribe to this visit some property that all of the others lacked. And this will be true even if we do not “count” the date of the latest visit as a relevant property. It may, for example, be that the story I have been told of his latest visit includes the information that he arrived on her doorstep at 3:21. I have for some reason kept of his earlier visits reveals that on all the other occasions on which he has visited her he arrived at some other time. No doubt we could play a lengthy game of “counterexample” and “revision” with the above account of what it is for a story to be contrary to experience. But I do not know of any way of “improving” this account that will enable it to avoid consequences like the following: The first reports of someone’s making a solo flight across the Atlantic or running a four-minute mile or reaching the summit of Mount Everest were contrary to the experience of those who heard them.

But might Hume not reply that these consequences are acceptable? Might he not argue that such reports would indeed be a bit contrary to the experience of those who heard them? Might he not go on to say, “But it would be more contrary to the experience of those who heard them if all the reports of these events were false, and that is why it was proper for those who heard the reports to believe them”? Perhaps so. But how, then, are we to understand the relevant notion of degree of contrariety? If I hear on Monday that Lindbergh has flown across the Atlantic without a copilot and on Tuesday that another rival has flown across the Atlantic without an aircraft, on what basis am I to judge that the second story is more contrary to my experience than the first? My experience tells me that all previous transatlantic flights have involved an aircraft of some sort, but it also tells me that all previous transatlantic flights have involved two or more pilots. There simply do not seem to be any materials in the “property-complement” account of a story’s being contrary to experience from which to construct an account of the concept of one story’s being “more contrary to experience” than another is.

Let us consider an actual example (at least I believe it to be actual, although, unfortunately, I no longer remember where I heard or read it) of someone’s applying the “property-complement” account of this concept. Thomas Jefferson was once told that in a museum in Cambridge (Massachusetts) there was exhibited a stone that had fallen from the sky. Jefferson declined to believe this story on the ground that although he had never known a stone to fall from the sky, he had often known a Yankee parson—the staff of Harvard College in those days comprised Congregational ministers—to precipitate. (He had observed the sky on many occasions, and on each of those occasions, it had the property “not being the source of a falling stone”; he had observed many Yankee parsons making assertions, and on many of those occasions, the assertions had the property “being a lie.”) He concluded that stones falling from the sky were contrary to his experience and lying Yankee parsons were not. Now even if Jefferson’s statement about his experience of the New England clergy was something of an exaggeration, he was no doubts telling the truth when he said he had never known a stone to fall from the sky. But there were many, many things he had “never known” that he wouldn’t have been disinclined to believe reports of, even reports from Yankee parsons. If I think the story unlikely on the basis of his experience, it cannot have been simply because such a thing had never happened in his experience. If the story was indeed contrary to his experience, it cannot have been simply because events of the type related in the story were not included in the totality of his experience to date. This observation might lead us to conclude that the “property-complement” account of an event’s being contrary to experience must be replaced by some other account.

Was there any sense in which the story Jefferson was told was contrary to his experience? Well, suppose that Jefferson had fallen asleep like Rip van Winkle and had slept till the existence and nature of meteors was common knowledge. Suppose that, on waking, he was given an encyclopedia article
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of course, I think I am being reasonable in thinking that it is true), and I think that anyone who heard and believed the "shaman" story and whose experience of the world was otherwise like mine would be very unreasonable indeed. I am not trying to convince you, the reader, that these epistemological judgments are correct. I am saying only that nowhere in "Of Miracles" do I find any reason to suppose they are not correct. Hume's argument, after all, is of this general form: Because certain propositions are contrary to experience—very contrary to experience—it is unreasonable to accept them. And it is, to say the least, very hard to see how an argument of this form could be cogent if "contrary to experience" meant "unreasonable to believe."

I think of no other plausible sense that can be given to the phrase 'contrary to experience.' I conclude, provisionally, that Hume's argument is a failure, owing to the fact that there is no sense that can be given to 'contrary to experience' such that E1 is compelling when 'contrary to experience' is interpreted in that sense. It should be noted that I do not claim to have shown that anyone is ever justified in believing a miracle-report. Indeed, I do not even claim to have addressed this question. It is perfectly consistent with everything I have said to suppose that anyone who believed any story that could conceivably count as a miracle-report (such as the Matthean story of the stilling of the storm) would be wholly unreasonable. I claim to have shown only that the argument of "Of Miracles" (as I understand the argument) does not establish either this conclusion or any other negative conclusion about the reasonableness of accepting miracle-reports.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between the ontological and epistemological interpretations of Hume's position. Which interpretation does Van Inwagen think is correct?

2. What difficulty does Van Inwagen see in Hume's argument, using Hume's notion of an event being "contrary to experience'"?

3. "Intuitively, we do not react the same to reports of Lindbergh's flying across the Atlantic without a copilot as we do to reports of Lindbergh's flying across the Atlantic without an aircraft. How might one distinguish between these cases and thereby perhaps rescue Hume from van Inwagen's objection? How might van Inwagen reply to this counter?"

4. Do you think there is a difference between the situations of someone who believes he or she has heard a report of someone else's having seen a miracle? Why or why not?

READING 6.11

Miracles and Undetected Natural Causes

John Stuart Mill

In Reading 6.9, Hume emphasized the question of whether when we hear a report of a miracle, we should believe that the reported event really happened. In Reading 6.11, John Stuart Mill stresses a different question, also touched upon by Hume: assuming the event happened, do we know that it has no natural explanation? Perhaps the event is due to an as yet unknown law of nature or a "hidden factor." Mill distinguishes between the situation of one who already believes in God and one who does not, pointing out that the former may have greater reason than the latter to think that God produced the event. Even then, argues Mill, the event would have to accord with what can reasonably be surmised about the ways of God. The problem with determining whether this accord obtains is that the believer must hold that
not only events beneficial to people, but also events harmful to people, are consistent with God’s workings. Mill suggests as well that, although a miracle can be tested by a challenge to repeat it, “recorded miracles were seldom or never put to this test.”

In the case of an alleged miracle, the event is supposed not to have been produced at all through physical causation, while there is no direct evidence to connect it with any volition. The ground on which it is ascribed to a volition is only negative, because there is no other apparent way of accounting for its existence.

But in this merely speculative explanation there is always another hypothesis possible, viz., that the event may have been produced by physical causes, in a manner not apparent. It may either be due to a law of physical nature not yet known, or to the unknown presence of the conditions necessary for producing it according to known law. Supposing even that the event, supposed to be miraculous, does not reach us through the uncertain medium of human testimony but rests on the direct evidence of our own senses; even then so long as there is no direct evidence of its production by a divine volition, like that we have for the production of bodily movements by human volitions—so long, therefore, as the miraculous character of the event is but an inference from the supposed inadequacy of the laws of physical nature to account for it,—to believe the hypothesis of a natural origin for the phenomenon be entitled to preference over that of a supernatural one. The commonest principles of sound judgment forbid us to suppose for any effect a cause of which we have absolutely no experience, unless all those of which we have experience are ascertained to be absent. Now there are few things of which we have more frequent experience than of physical facts which our knowledge does not enable us to account for, because they depend either on laws which observation, aided by science, has not yet brought to light, or on facts the presence of which in the particular case is unsuspected by us. Accordingly when we hear of a prodigy we always, in these modern times, believe that if it really occurred it was neither the work of God nor of a demon, but the consequence of some unknown natural law or of some hidden fact. Nor is either of these suppositions precluded when, as in the case of a miracle properly so called, the wonderful event seemed to depend upon the will of a human being. It is always possible that there may be at work some undetected law of nature which the wonder-worker may have acquired, consciously or unconsciously, the power of calling into action; or that the wonder may have been wrought (as in the truly extraordinary feats of jugglers) by the employment, unperceived by us, of ordinary laws: which also need not necessarily be a case of voluntary deception; or, lastly, the event may have had no connection with the volition at all, but the coincidence between them may be the effect of craft or accident, the miracle-worker having seemed or affected to produce by his will that which was already about to take place, as if one were to command an eclipse of the sun at the moment when one knew by astronomy that an eclipse was on the point of taking place. In a case of this description, the miracle might be tested by a challenge to repeat it; but it is worthy of remark, that recorded miracles were seldom or never put to this test. No miracle-worker seems ever to have made a practice of raising the dead: that and the other most signal of the miraculous operations are reported to have been performed only in one or a few isolated cases, which may have been by either cunningly selected cases, or accidental coincidences. There is, in short, nothing to exclude the supposition that every alleged miracle was due to natural causes: and as long as that supposition remains possible, no scientific observer, and no man of ordinary practical judgment, would assume by conjecture a cause which no reason existed for supposing to be real, save the necessity of accounting for something which is sufficiently accounted for without it.

Were we to stop here, the case against miracles might seem to be complete. But on further inspection it will be seen that we cannot, from the above considerations, conclude absolutely that the miraculous theory of the production of a phenomenon ought to be at once rejected. We can conclude only that no extraordinary powers which have ever been alleged to be exercised by any human being over nature, can be evidence of miraculous gifts to any one to whom the existence of a supernatural Being, and his interference in human affairs, is not already a vera causa [true cause, i.e., true position]. The existence of God cannot possibly be proved by miracles, for unless a God is already recognized, the apparent miracle can always be accounted for on a more probable hypothesis than that of the interference of a Being of whose very existence it is supposed to be the sole evidence. Thus far Hume’s argument is conclusive. But it is far from being equally so when the existence of a Being who created the present order of Nature, and, therefore, may well be thought to have power to modify it, is accepted as a fact, or even as a probability resting on independent evidence. Once admit a God, and the production by his direct volition of an effect which in any case owed its origin to his creative will, is no longer a purely arbitrary hypothesis to account for the fact, but must be reckoned with as a serious possibility.

...To those who already believe in supernatural power, the supernatural hypothesis may appear more probable than the natural one; but only if it accords with what we know or reasonably surmise respecting the ways of the supernatural agent. Now all that we know, from the evidence of nature, concerning his ways, is in harmony with the natural theory and repugnant to the supernatural. There is, therefore, a vast preponderance of probability against a miracle, to counterbalance which would require a very extraordinary and indisputable congruity in the supposed miracle and its circumstances with something which we conceive ourselves to know, or to have grounds for believing, with regard to the divine attributes.

This extraordinary congruity is supposed to exist when the purpose of the miracle is extremely beneficial to mankind, as when it serves to accredit some highly important belief. The goodness of God, it is supposed, affords a high degree of antecedent probability that he would make an exception to his general rule of government, for so excellent a purpose. For reasons, however, which have already been entered into,1 any inference drawn by us from the goodness of God to what he has or has not actually done, is to the last degree precarious. If we reason directly from God’s goodness to positive facts, no misery, nor vice nor crime ought to exist in the world. . . .

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What is Mill’s objection to accepting claims of miracles? How does this objection differ from Hume’s main one?
2. According to Mill, why is the believer in a different situation than the unbeliever with regard to belief in miracles?
3. At the end of the selection, what problem does Mill pose to the believer with regard to establishing that a certain event is due to God’s activity?
4. Explain Mill’s rationale for the requirement that a miracle be repeatable. Do you agree with this requirement? Why or why not? Do you know of reported miracles that satisfy this condition?

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1.[Elsewhere in the work.—Ed.]

**READING 6.12**

Mill’s Challenge to Belief in Miracles

David Johnson

Mill held we should not infer to a cause of which we have no prior experience until it has been ascertained that all those causes of which we have experience are absent. David Johnson (Yeshiva University) replies, however, that, if we were to follow Mill’s
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Mill claims that the "commonest principles of sound judgment forbid us to suppose for any effect a cause of which we have absolutely no experience, unless all those of which we have experience are ascertained to be absent." But, given what he says earlier in the passage, "ascertained to be absent" must be taken in a rather strong sense, since it is allowed that the effect "may either be due to a law of physical nature not yet known, or to the unknown presence of the conditions necessary for producing it according to some known law." But how then is this "principle of sound judgment" followed even in science? When Enrico Fermi (following Wolfgang Pauli) postulated the existence of "a cause of which we had absolutely no experience"—the neutrino (the "little neutral one")—to explain a certain effect (Beta decay), how had he "ascertained" that the then familiar particles were not somehow producing the effect by way of "a law of physical nature not yet known?" How is it that he rightly postulated the existence of an otherwise unknown cause, rather than postulate the existence of otherwise unknown powers of the familiar particles? Fermi was of course perfectly justified, but it will be very difficult for Mill to explain why. In science, there are always logically possible alternative hypotheses for explaining any effect, especially if we are given a free hand vis-à-vis "a law of physical nature not yet known, or ... the unknown presence of the conditions necessary for producing it according to some known law." The explainer who is free with low and free with conditions is free indeed. So how will we ever get to the neutrino?

Of course, Fermi's explanation was somehow better than the (ever-present) logically possible alternates, in a way philosophers of science find hard to specify. It was simpler, or more natural (which of course does not mean "natural" in Mill's sense) than its gerrymandered competitors (which were equally "natural" in Mill's sense). But if considerations of "simplicity" or of "naturalness" (or, as one some...