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*Hume Studies* Volume XVI, Number 2 (November, 1990) 141-144.

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# Fogelin on Hume on Miracles

*Antony Flew*

## I. Introduction

In "What Hume Actually Said About Miracles"<sup>1</sup> Robert Fogelin maintains that two contentions are essential to what, following Dorothy Coleman, he calls the "traditional interpretation" of Section X of the first *Enquiry*. The first is that "Hume did *not* put forward an *a priori* argument intended to show that miracles are not possible"; the second, that "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 further sees me as "virtually alone in challenging the traditional interpretation, arguing, in particular, that ... Hume's argument was intended to do no more than place a 'check' on arguments put forward to establish ... miracles on the basis of testimony." Fogelin concludes his statement of what he wants to refute by quoting from my *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*:<sup>2</sup>

What he is trying to demonstrate *a priori* in Part I is: not that, as a matter of fact, miracles do not happen; but that, from the very nature of the concept—from the very nature of the fact—there must be a conflict of evidence required to show that they do.

Fogelin's own contrary conclusion is agreeably forthright and decisive: "the traditional reading of Hume's essay on miracles is wrong, and Flew, in rejecting the aspect of the traditional interpretation that is correct, is doubly wrong."

## II. What, indisputably, Hume did not say

About all this the first thing which we need to recall is that Hume certainly does not present, and in consistency could not present, what is the most obvious *a priori* argument to show that miracles, defined as supernatural overridings of the order of nature, must be (naturally and) physically impossible. That obvious *a priori* argument takes off from the semantic observation that to assert that a law of nature obtains is to assert, among other things, that the occurrence of events the occurrence of which would be inconsistent with the truth of that law is (naturally and) physically impossible. For it is only and precisely inasmuch as the assertion of such laws embraces assertions of physical

impossibility that it becomes logically possible to deduce contrary to fact implications from nomological propositions. It therefore follows immediately that miracles, thus defined, must be (naturally and) physically impossible.

The key word 'miracle' has to be construed in this way since Hume is here concerned, primarily albeit not exclusively, with the possibility of proving the occurrence of a miracle "so as to be the foundation of a system of religion."<sup>3</sup> I have taken care regularly to insert the parenthetic qualification "(naturally and)" in order to make it quite clear that no one is trying to rule out the occurrence of such Supernatural overridings as, by definition, *logically* impossible.

Being unable to discover any antecedent impression from which the idea of physical necessity could be derived, Hume disqualifies himself from appealing thus openly and directly to the necessary physical impossibility of the miraculous. But, even if he had to his own satisfaction succeeded in legitimating that crucial concept, it would still have been pointless here to point to the (natural and) physical impossibility of the miraculous—as if this was a reason for thinking that there have not in fact been and could not conceivably have been or be Supernatural overridings of the natural order. Had Fogelin noticed that Hume certainly did not present that obvious yet irrelevant *a priori* argument, he could not have concluded, not at least without emphatic qualification, "that this consensus on the first part of the traditional interpretation is unfounded."

### III. Proofs against proofs are no proofs

In arguing about the interpretation of "the first part of Section X of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*" Fogelin insists upon attending only to what Hume wrote in that one part of one section. But suppose we refuse to follow him in imposing this curiously unscholarly self-denying ordinance upon ourselves. Then we find, in the very first sentence of Part II of that same Section X, that Hume is at pains to warn readers that we are to construe the previous Part I: *not* as offering "an *a priori* argument ... to show that testimony, however strong, could never make it reasonable to believe that a miracle had occurred"; but rather as—far too generously—supposing "that the testimony, upon which a miracle is founded, may possibly amount to an entire proof" (E 116). That sentence reads:

In the foregoing reasoning we have supposed, that the testimony, upon which a miracle is founded, may possibly amount to an entire proof ... But it is easy to shew, that we have been a great deal too liberal in our concessions, and that

there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence. (E 116)

Later in that same Part II Hume adds what he sees as a most crucial *caveat*:

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 own, 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. (E 127)

This passage, just as much as the single sentence quoted previously, contradicts the second contention of the “traditional interpretation.” Certainly Hume is here expressing his conviction that he has by now proved that the occurrence of a miracle could never be evidenced sufficiently. For he proceeds at once—by supposing a case which, if it were to occur, “our present philosophers, instead of doubting that fact, ought to receive ... as certain, and ... search for the causes whence it might be derived” (E 128)—to bring out that the “violations of the usual course of nature” which might possibly be shown to have occurred would not constitute the Supernatural overriding definitionally required of a genuine miracle. For it is obvious that for Hume “our present philosophers” are natural philosophers, while the causes they are called upon to seek must be merely natural causes.

However, even if we allow that Hume has succeeded in proving that the occurrence of a genuine miracle could never be sufficiently evidenced, the claim made here still fails to consist with the second contention of the “traditional interpretation.” For the considerations which Hume has been deploying in Part II of Section X are certainly not *a priori*.

It remains to enquire how we ought to interpret the word ‘proof’ in the several passages, all from Part I, which Fogelin cites as his own proof texts. Certainly, to award to any argument the diploma title ‘proof’ is to imply that the conclusions proved thereby must be true. So, in that understanding, there cannot be contrary or contradictory proofs. But a contrariety of ‘proofs’ is exactly what Hume is presenting in the final sentence of the penultimate paragraph of Part I:

And as an 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. (E 115)

This passage can, therefore, be rendered coherent only by reading these employments of the word 'proof' as tacitly prefaced by some qualification; a qualification to the effect that the reference is to what would in ordinary circumstances be accounted a proof, yet in the present case may conceivably not be. Hume himself suggests this in the previous paragraph, in recommending a treatment for what looks like a strong case for the occurrence of a miracle: "suppose ... 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" (E 114, emphasis added).

#### IV. So what is the upshot?

Although I myself feel far from sure for how long or even whether there has been a "traditional interpretation," including or comprising the two contentions restated above, I certainly agree with Fogelin that one of these is true and the other false. But I believe, and I hope that I have shown, that it is the first which is true and the second which is false.

Whether I am indeed "virtually alone" in maintaining that "Hume's argument was intended to do no more than place a 'check' on arguments to establish" the occurrence of miracles, I do not know. Maybe it is true, however depressing to its author, that a book which has now been in print for nearly thirty years has nevertheless won no converts. The only possible, yet more than adequate, consolation is that this is precisely and only what was maintained by Hume; who flattered himself "that I have discovered an argument of a like nature, which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion" (E 110). Nor is 'check', nor has it ever been, a synonym for 'checkmate'.

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1. Robert Fogelin, "What Hume Actually Said About Miracles," *Hume Studies* 16.1 (April 1990): 81-86.
2. Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London and New York, 1981), 176.
3. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 127. Further references ("E") are given in parentheses within the text and notes.