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Under an aggressive title, Robert Fogelin has recently undertaken to reveal "What Hume Actually Said About Miracles."¹ He felt this necessary to correct what he considers a serious misreading of Hume's essay "Of Miracles" (sec. 10 of the *Enquiries*²), a reading which infers that Hume did not argue that miracles are impossible a priori (Fogelin, 81). One writer at least regards this reading so common that she has dubbed it the "traditional interpretation" of Hume's account of miracles.³ At any rate, it finds a strong advocate in Anthony Flew,⁴ against whom the majority of Fogelin's comments are directed. What I find fascinating about this debate is that *both* Flew and Fogelin appear to be right. On the one hand, Hume does have the textual resources to marshall a fully *deductive* argument against miracles, at least, once a strict definition of miracles is admitted. On the other hand, while exploiting these resources, Hume somewhat clumsily mingles in vestiges of a not-fully consistent *inductive* argument against miracles which he bases on the balancing of probabilities. I will attempt to identify these two skeins of argument, in the anticipation that this will help to temper the debate between Flew and Fogelin.

Hume opens section 10 by promising an argument that will furnish "an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion" (E 110). Moreover, he claims that "there is here a direct and full *proof*... against the existence of any miracle" (E 115), a quote which Fogelin repeats seven times (to extract its full flavour). C. S. Peirce, who late in life took an interest in Hume's argument, conjectured that Hume hoped to provide a general disproof of all miracles that would not require "a minute analysis of each story"; such a procedure was in fact popular among the miracle debunkers of Hume's day, for example, Rev. Thomas Woolston, whose books were extremely popular.⁵ Hume's boast of "a direct and full *proof*" might be assumed, offhand, to augur an a priori argument based on the comparison of ideas; but it must not be forgotten that back in the *Treatise* (for which the essay "Of Miracles" was originally drafted⁶) Hume defines a "proof" as an argument "deriv'd from the relation of cause and effect."⁷ There he contrasts "proofs" explicitly with the type of assured knowledge that comes "from the comparison of ideas" (T 124). Still, Hume requires that proofs, despite their empirical origin, must nonetheless be "entirely free from doubt

and uncertainty" (T 124); proofs, then, must be superior to ordinary causal arguments that are able to offer only a degree of *probability* (T 124). By his own examples, namely, that "the sun will rise to-morrow" and "all men must dye" (T 124), likewise from the essay "Of Miracles" itself, that "lead cannot, of itself, remain suspended in the air" and that "fire consumes wood" (E 114), Hume makes it clear that "proofs" are simply to be causal arguments uniformly confirmed by a great wealth of past experience: empirical conclusions so sound that any who deny them "wou'd appear ridiculous" (T 124).

Taking Hume's definition of "proof" to heart, we might infer that his "direct and full *proof*" against miracles is not then to be an a priori or deductive conclusion, but instead merely a fully convincing induction, along the lines of "all men must dye." This would appear to dispel Fogelin's hope to portray the argument as a priori; but the logic of Hume's special proof against miracles is somewhat complicated. As Hume's own selection of examples verify, a proof, at least ordinarily, issues in the confirmation of a law of nature. This contrasts with the special proof against miracles where the object is, of course, not to defend a law of nature, but rather to exploit reasoning about the formation of such laws to prove a result regarding the occurrence of miracles. The *proof* against miracles, consequently, concerns causes, but is not necessarily a causal argument in the ordinary sense. Indeed, it might be properly thought of as a "meta-causal" argument, if such a term is allowed. And such an argument may potentially have, as Fogelin proposes, an a priori or at least deductive structure, even if it may no longer amount to a "proof" on Hume's strict definition of this term.

We know, of course, that Hume defines a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature" (E 114): this is the opening salvo in his argument, as well as the seed. Hume lays out his account of the laws of nature in the *Enquiries*, section 7. Describing our past experience of nature, Hume remarks that "[a]ll events seem entirely loose and separate," and that "we never can observe any tie between them" (E 74). This missing "tie," this never observed "necessary connexion" between events, leads Hume to settle for a very reductive definition of the cause-and-effect relation. Now a *cause*, according to Hume, is nothing but "*an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second*" (E 76). This means that a law of nature, as an observed causal regularity, has no more status than a conjunction of events that has been constantly observed in the past; that is, if B has *always* followed A, then custom approves a *law* that A "causes" B (cf. E 78-79).

But given that "[a]ll causes are not conjoined to their usual effects with like uniformity" (E 86), Hume is unwilling to scuttle otherwise

well-confirmed laws merely because of occasional exceptions. Rather than reject the law (viz., permitting any genuinely "loose" events), or to admit the possibility of truly probabilistic laws, Hume is committed to writing off exceptions as due to "the secret operation of contrary causes" (E 87). In his own words:

A peasant can give no better reason for the stopping of any clock or watch than to say that it does not commonly go right: But an artist easily perceives that the same force in the spring or pendulum has always the same influence on the wheels; but fails of its usual effect, perhaps by reason of a grain of dust.
(E 87)

Indeed, Hume maintains that constant observation has proven that "a contrariety of effects always betrays a contrariety of causes" (E 87). In other words, Hume argues, as Fred Wilson accurately observes,⁸ to a proof that *every event has a cause*, and that, ultimately, every event will turn out to be causally determined (cf. also T 130-34).

With these texts in mind, consider the following preliminary version of Hume's deductive argument against miracles.⁹ Suppose that constant observation has led to belief in a law that event A causes event B. Then, if afterwards, a report of a "miracle" contrary to this law is lodged, we have *prima facie* only two choices for introducing consistency: either reject the miracle report or else reject the law. Under the first choice, the miracle is of course denied; but, also under the second choice, there is no miracle, for a rescinded law cannot be *violated*, whereas a miracle, in Hume's strict terms, must of course be a violation of law. To supply Hume with a friendly example, suppose that A is the event of a person's attempt to walk on water and that B is the subsequent sinking of that same individual. Then, if B is always observed to follow A, custom would acknowledge a law that no one may walk on water. But suppose we hear a report that someone has been observed to walk on water without sinking. If we accept this report and *void the law*, then walking on water is not to be accounted a miracle, for even though it led to the scuttling of a law, it did not *violate* it. Hence, fabulous or marvellous reports, even if accepted, cannot constitute miracles in Hume's strict sense of this term.

Hume, however, given his strong principle that every event has a cause, would not countenance the solution of accepting the report at the pain of *voiding the law*, as this would imply that walking on water, even if not a miracle, is yet a "lawless" event, one without a cause. Hume, that is, wishes to retain the logical option of keeping *both* the law that "All A is B," and the possibility that "Some A is not B," attributing this exception to "the secret operation of contrary causes"

(E 87), his unnoticed "grain of dust." This complication demands a second, more adequate form for Hume's deductive argument against miracles. To develop this expanded argument, suppose, as before, that there is a well-attested law that no one may walk on water, followed by a report that this law has been "violated." We have now *three* possible options: (1) accept the law and reject the report; (2) accept the report and reject the law; or (3) accept *both* the law and the report. Option (1) denies the report, hence its possibility as a miracle. Option (2) runs afoul of Hume's cherished principle that every event has a cause, implying as it does that the reported event would be able to occur without the backing of a law. But even if this option were taken over Hume's protests, the report still could not constitute a miracle with the law rescinded; this is what invests this option with its deductive character, for the mere insistence that every event must have a cause, however well-confirmed, is for all that still an empirical conclusion. Option (3), likewise, blocks any possibility for a miracle, as here the law is protected by assuming or adding "hidden springs"—unknown variables or auxiliary assumptions—that make it *consistent* with the event, the event being then no longer law-violating, even if marvellous or surprising. As all three options block the possibility of miracles, when strictly defined as violations of the laws of nature, this version of Hume's argument may be regarded as a deductive or a priori disproof of miracles.

This rendering of the argument also speaks to Flew's contention that Hume does not, indeed *could* not, argue that miracles are "physically impossible" (Flew, 142). This is because the bar against miracles, on our rendering, is *logical*, not nomological, following strictly as it does from Hume's definitions of "miracle" and "law." Flew is correct that Hume would be in no way entitled to claim that a particular event is physically impossible, given Hume's strong scepticism that an objective "necessary connexion" can be proven to hold among natural events (E 75-76). For Hume, to impute necessity to any natural relation is merely to *describe* a constancy that has been observed in the past, and necessity, in this sense, rules out nothing. It is, however, at the same time, a type of necessity that obviously cannot be violated. For to attribute necessity to, say, event B given event A, is simply to acknowledge that in the past B has always followed A, or else that its failure to follow A has always been due to hidden causal factors that, once revealed, will protect the constancy of the relation. Hence, it is *logically* impossible on this theory for laws to be violated.

There is, however, some extremely critical fallout from this purely analytic interpretation of Hume's argument against miracles. For, although it obstructs all *miracles* when these are strictly defined as violations of natural law, it cannot rule out any particular *event*,

however prodigious or extraordinary. Suppose, for example, that, in the past, scores of cases have been observed of failed attempts to walk on water—the people invariably sink. This should lead to a custom asserting a law that water will not support people who attempt to walk on its surface. Then suppose that we hear a surprising report that someone has been seen successfully walking on water. Hume's theory has the means to discount this event a priori as a miracle *per se* (that is, it cannot violate the laws of nature, given Hume's account of these), but this is not to say that the event did not occur. Instead, a decision must be made whether to accredit this event at the expense of rejecting or—more accurately for Hume—*modifying* the law of nature it is said to “violate.” Hume advises that we retain our belief in the law and reject the anomalous report, especially if it has no other grounds than testimony or hearsay.

It must be noted, however, that this advice has an *empirical* nature, based on past experience with such reports. Evidently, Hume, recognizing that his analytic argument counted against miracles only under a strict definition, wished also to provide common empirical reasons for countering “bigotry and superstition” (E 110), reasons based on experience and the balancing of probabilities (E 111). Unfortunately, the presence in the text of these two lines of argument appears to draw Hume into vacillating between two meanings for miracles—at some points, miracles are law-violating events that may be ruled out by a *general*, analytic disproof, yet at others, merely incredible events that must be disputed piecemeal on empirical grounds. And these two meanings are mixed so thoroughly that separating them is not easy.

Not only this, but once the *empirical* strain of Hume's argument is separated, it appears to suffer from major difficulties.¹⁰ A fragment of this proof occurs at E 114:

[S]uppose ... that the testimony [that a miracle has occurred] considered apart and in itself, amounts to an entire proof; in that case, there is proof against proof, of which the strongest must prevail.

Suppose, that is, the report of a miracle is backed by an impeccable testimony which passes all the common tests for judging the reliability of hearsay—the witnesses are of good character, speak without hesitation, are consistent, etc. (E 112-13). Then, we are, Hume says, to weigh this fact against the facts (—“proof against proof”) that support the law(s) which the miracle would “violate.” But “as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws” (E 114), the miracle report is apparently swamped by a mass of contrary evidence. Now,

according to Hume, a "wise man" who "proportions his belief to the evidence" (E 110) will reject the miracle report in favour of protecting the law; but there is no known theory of probability that would support such a rejection. For, suppose there are ninety-nine cases of unsuccessful attempts to walk on water, as opposed to only a single case of reported success. Suppose further that the unique case is taken seriously, as Hume allows, for example, by admitting the possibility that some "hidden springs" or unnoticed contrary causes may have combined to an unusual or unexpected effect. Still, the most that could be said against this effect (on, say, a frequency theory of probability) is that it should be assigned a low probability (here, one percent). But this gives us no basis for rejecting it, even if the probability is in fact much lower. For even the ardent believers in the miracle do not assign it a high antecedent probability—this is indeed part of the lure of such events. And Hume, who is famous for admonishing us not to expect previously unexamined cases to conform to those already known, is in especially poor position to call for the rejection of miracles on such purely empirical grounds.

Hume's two lines of argument against miracles reach an interesting confluence at the end of part 1 of his essay. Here Hume no longer asks us to compare the probability behind the law with that of the reported miracle; instead he invites us to consider whether the "falsehood [of the testimony for the miracle] would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish" (E 116). In this version of the argument, Hume compounds the frustrating nature of his essay when he asks us to compare the *relative* probability of two miracles: the miracle of the event versus the "miracle" that its report is a lie. If his "direct and full *proof*" against miracles is to be accepted, then both should have a zero degree of probability. This is especially true in the light of his forceful analogy in a prior section of the *Enquiries* between the laws of nature and the laws that govern human conduct (*viz.*, sec. 7): this analogy, taken with his general disproof of miracles, would rule out a miraculous *lie* as surely as any other sort of miraculous event.

At any rate, at this point Hume appears to have left any analytic dimension of his argument behind. We are now to compare the probability of the miracle—suppose it is one percent—with the probability that the testimony is *deceitful*. If this latter is greater, say ten percent, then the testimony should be rejected. This final argument, probably intended for rhetorical effect, possibly to produce a "murmur among the zealots" (as Selby-Bigge suggests, E xii), has a degree of psychological force. For most regularly discount outlandish or fabulous reports, such as alleged abductions by aliens, by dismissing the report as a lie, even when the testimony has a probity that would easily accredit it were the report a routine one. Nonetheless, this basis

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for rejecting miracles no longer has the air of the "direct and full *proof*" that was originally promised.

In final thought, I would conclude that Fogelin is right that Hume *does* have the textual means to provide an a priori argument against miracles, but Hume does not appear to confine himself to that. If this is so, then there is no unique account of what "Hume actually said about miracles." There is room for Flew to be right, too.

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1. Robert J. Fogelin, "What Hume Actually Said About Miracles," *Hume Studies* 16, no. 1 (April 1990): 81-86 (hereafter cited as "Fogelin").
2. 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) (hereafter cited as "E").
3. Dorothy Coleman, "Hume, Miracles and Lotteries," *Hume Studies* 14, no. 2 (November 1988): 328, 343 n. 4. Coleman departs from Flew, however, in allowing that Hume does at least attempt an a priori argument against *rational belief* in miracles.
4. Anthony Flew, "Fogelin on Hume on Miracles," *Hume Studies* 16, no. 2 (November 1990): 141-44 (hereafter cited as "Flew").
5. Charles S. Peirce, "What Is a Law of Nature?" [1901], MS. 871:20.
6. See Barry Gower, "David Hume and the Probability of Miracles," *Hume Studies* 16, no. 1 (April 1990): 17. Gower surmises that Hume removed the section on miracles from the *Treatise* out of fear that such an overt attack on religion might detract from the reception of the book's principal philosophical aims.
7. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1987), 124 (hereafter cited as "T"). My attention was drawn to this indispensable passage by a referee of an earlier draft of this note.
8. Fred Wilson, "The Logic of Probabilities in Hume's Argument against Miracles," *Hume Studies* 15, no. 2 (November 1989): 258-60.
9. This is very similar to an interpretation of Hume's argument added by Samuel Langley to a draft of an article submitted by Peirce to the Smithsonian Institution. See "Hume on Miracles and Laws of Nature," in *Values in a Universe of Chance: Selected Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, ed. Philip Wiener (Stanford, California, 1958), 294.
10. Peirce canvassed some difficulties of Hume's argument in a series of drafts attempting to satisfy the editor at the Smithsonian,