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## C. S. LEWIS'S CRITIQUE OF HUME'S "OF MIRACLES"

Robert A. Larmer

In this article I argue that C. S. Lewis is both a perceptive reader and trenchant critic of David Hume's views on miracle.

Despite his popularity as a Christian apologist and despite the fact that one of his major works is *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, C. S. Lewis is virtually ignored in contemporary discussions of miracles. When he is mentioned, he is usually quickly dismissed as displaying a superficial understanding of David Hume's famous criticism of the possibility of rational belief in miracles based on testimonial evidence.

My contention in this article is that such dismissals are unjustified. Although he did not write as a professional philosopher and did not direct his writing to specialists in philosophy, Lewis was well trained in philosophy. While a student at University College, Oxford, he received a First in Greats (Philosophy and Ancient History) and, as a young man, served as philosophy tutor at University College. While at Oxford, Lewis served as the first president of the famous Socratic Club founded by Stella Aldwinckle in 1941 as an "open forum for the discussion of the intellectual difficulties connected with religion and with Christianity in particular."<sup>1</sup> Regarding the Socratic Club, Antony Flew has commented that "the five or ten years immediately following the end of World War II were the heyday of what the media dubbed 'Oxford linguistic philosophy' . . . [and] it was mainly in meetings of the Socratic Club that Oxford linguistic philosophers . . . began to explore what Immanuel Kant famously distinguished as the three great questions of philosophy—God, Freedom and Immortality."<sup>2</sup> Lewis regularly read papers at the Socratic Club and engaged in dialogue with Elizabeth Anscombe, A. J. Ayer, Antony Flew and Gilbert Ryle, to name only a few of the philosophers that contributed papers. The fact that philosophers of this stature took Lewis seriously suggests that his critique of Hume's "Of Miracles" deserves more attention by professional philosophers than it typically receives. Once this attention is paid it becomes clear that, although he did not devote a great deal of space to discussion of Hume's argument, Lewis is both a perceptive reader and trenchant critic of Hume's views on miracle.

Three major criticisms of Hume's position emerge in *Miracles*. The first two occur in Chapter XIII, "On Probability," and are explicitly developed in response to Hume. The third occurs in Chapter VIII, "Miracle and the Laws of Nature," and is not explicitly developed in response to



Hume, although it seems to contain Lewis's most important objection to Hume's argument.

Lewis's explicit criticisms of Hume focus on the argument of Part I of the "Essay on Miracles." He raises the issues of: (1) whether Hume's account of natural law found in "Of Miracles" is consistent with what he says elsewhere concerning causality and induction, and (2) whether Hume's argument against the rationality of belief in miracles is viciously circular. It is interesting that, although these two criticisms can be distinguished, they are curiously intertwined in Lewis's exposition. I think the reason this is so is that Lewis is concerned not only to expose flaws in Hume's argument, but to provide positive philosophical grounds for taking reports of miracles seriously.

Lewis's interpretation of the argument of Part I of the "Essay" is the traditional one that it is intended to demonstrate that belief in a miracle can never, even in principle, be rationally justified on the basis of testimonial evidence.<sup>3</sup> He summarizes the argument as follows:

Probability rests on what may be called the majority vote of our past experiences. The more often a thing has been known to happen, the more probable it is that it should happen again; and the less often the less probable. . . . The regularity of Nature's course . . . is supported by something better than the majority vote of past experiences: it is supported by their unanimous vote, . . . by "firm and unalterable experience." There is, . . . "uniform experience" against Miracle; otherwise, . . . it would not be a Miracle. A miracle is therefore the most improbable of all events. It is always more probable that the witnesses were lying or mistaken than that a miracle occurred.<sup>4</sup>

In response to Hume, Lewis initially raises the issue of whether the argument is circular, but then digresses to the question of how belief in the uniformity of nature is justified, only to return after this digression to the charge that Hume's argument is circular. It is in the context of this digression that Lewis develops, very briefly, an *ad hominem* argument that Hume's assumption of the uniformity of nature in the "Essay" is inconsistent with what he says elsewhere regarding induction. Lewis writes,

Unless Nature always goes on in the same way, the fact that a thing had happened ten million times would not make it a whit more probable that it would happen again. And how do we know the Uniformity of Nature? A moment's thought shows that we do not know it by experience. . . . Experience . . . cannot prove uniformity, because uniformity has to be assumed before experience proves anything. . . . Unless Nature is uniform, nothing is either probable or improbable. And clearly the assumption which you have to make before there is any such thing as probability cannot itself be probable. . . . The odd thing is that no man knew this better than Hume. His *Essay on Miracles* is quite inconsistent with the more radical, and honourable, scepticism of his main work.<sup>5</sup>

This criticism is hardly unique to Lewis. There is no way of knowing for sure, but Lewis may well have been aware that C. D. Broad had made this point at much greater length in an article published in the 1916–17 volume of the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Broad writes:

Hume has told us that he can find no logical ground for induction. He cannot see why it should be justifiable to pass from a frequent experience of A followed by B, to a belief that A always will be followed by B. All that he professes to do is to tell us that we actually do make this transition, and to explain psychologically how it comes about. Now, this being so, I cannot see how Hume can distinguish between our variously caused beliefs about matters of fact, and call some of them justifiable and others unjustifiable. . . . Hume's disbelief [in a miracle] is due to his natural tendency to pass from the constant experience of A followed by B to the belief that A will always be followed by B. The enthusiast's belief is due to his natural tendency to believe what is wonderful and makes for the credit of his religion. But Hume has admitted that he sees no logical justification for beliefs in matters of fact which are merely caused by a regular experience. Hence the enthusiast's belief in miracles and Hume's belief in natural laws (and consequent disbelief in miracles) stand on precisely the same logical footing. In both cases we can see the psychological cause of the belief, but in neither can Hume give us any logical ground for it.<sup>6</sup>

Fred Wilson suggests that Broad's and, by implication Lewis's, reading of Hume on this point is superficial. In response to Broad and Lewis's claim that Hume's treatment of miracles is not consistent with his views regarding induction, Wilson writes that "there is a certain implausibility to this claim that makes it a difficult one to entertain seriously, since it is unlikely that a philosopher as careful as Hume would have failed to recognize the inconsistency if it existed."<sup>7</sup> It may be agreed that it is unwise to be overhasty in attributing inconsistency to a philosopher of Hume's stature, but it is scarcely unknown that the greatest thinkers are occasionally guilty in this regard, and there seems no reason to assume that Hume is incapable of such slips. The real question is whether the text supports Wilson's interpretation, as opposed to Broad and Lewis's.

Wilson offers two arguments in support of his contention that Hume is not guilty of inconsistency. The first is that neither the scepticism inherent in Hume's treatment of causality and induction nor the dogmatism characteristic of his explicit statements in "Of Miracles" represents his true view concerning the laws of nature. Wilson suggests that in order to arrive at Hume's true view of the laws of nature, we must examine his account of probable reasoning and its grounding in human psychology. When we do this we find that the idea of necessary connection is retained as an essential element of the concept of causality, but that this idea of necessary connection is grounded in human psychology, not in nature itself.<sup>8</sup> The justification of taking our admittedly psychologically grounded concept of causality as involving necessary connections seriously is that it offers a pragmatic justification of science and it is science alone that is

capable of satisfying our curiosity and desire for truth.<sup>9</sup> Belief in miracles explains nothing and leaves our experience incomprehensible, whereas belief in causality and the uniformity of nature allows us to understand the world.

Wilson's second argument is that Hume's account of causal reasoning is not simply that in our experience an event A is always followed by an event B.<sup>10</sup> Hume recognized that in our experience "'tis frequently found, that one observation is contrary to another, and that causes and effects follow not in the same order of which we have had experience, [in such instances] we are oblig'd to vary our reasoning on account of this uncertainty, and take into consideration the contrariety of events."<sup>11</sup> Thus, "from the observation of several parallel instances, philosophers form a maxim, that the connexion betwixt all causes and effects is equally necessary, and that its seeming uncertainty in some instances proceeds from the secret opposition of contrary causes."<sup>12</sup> Wilson concludes from remarks such as this that "Hume's crucial move is to insist that simply because an event is somehow incomprehensible to a spectator, it does not follow that one can reasonably infer that it is a miracle, or even probably a miracle."<sup>13</sup> He goes on to chastise Broad, and by implication Lewis, for failing to recognize that "the fact that we discover exceptions to what we have previously thought to be regularities hardly testifies to there being events that are miracles, that is, events that violate laws of nature."<sup>14</sup>

With regard to Wilson's first argument, two critical comments seem in order. First, Hume's most explicit remarks concerning the laws of nature occur in "Of Miracles." It is exegetically suspect to ignore his explicit treatment of the laws of nature in the "Essay" in hopes of deriving a more palatable alternative from a different portion of his philosophy. Further, deriving a more palatable alternative would not absolve Hume of the charge of inconsistency, since it would remain true that it is not the concept of unalterable natural law he is working with in "Of Miracles." The issue is not whether Hume could have developed a concept of the laws of nature consistent with his treatment of induction and causality or whether such a concept can be found elsewhere in his work but whether the concept actually employed in "Of Miracles" is consistent with his treatment of induction and causality earlier in the *Enquiry*.<sup>15</sup>

Second, the suggestion that belief in the uniformity of nature can be pragmatically justified on the basis of the success of science<sup>16</sup> begs the question of whether Hume's treatment of induction is consistent with the view of science being espoused by Wilson. Wilson seems to feel that any difficulty in this regard can be overcome if we realize that "the fact that we run across an event that violates a regular pattern of our experience provides evidence only that the pattern is not a law, but it does not falsify the belief that *there* is a law that explains it, for the latter can be inferred on the basis of our more general experience, which leads us to conclude that for any event there is a law that explains it."<sup>17</sup> What Wilson fails to see is that any appeal to experience as justifying the conclusion that for every event there is a law that explains it is inconsistent with Hume's account of induction. We have already noted Lewis's comment that "experience . . . cannot prove uniformity, because uniformity has to be assumed before experience proves anything."<sup>18</sup> Once one accepts Hume's denial of necessary connections and

his reduction of causality to constant conjunction, it becomes impossible to argue that the fact that certain events have been constantly conjoined in the past provides *any* reason for thinking they will be constantly, or even probably, conjoined in the future.<sup>19</sup> As Hume comments, "it is impossible . . . that any arguments from experience can prove . . . resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance."<sup>20</sup> Wilson's appeal to the rules of eliminative induction as grounding science presupposes that we can justify prediction of the future on the basis of past experience and involves a view of induction that contradicts Hume's explicit treatment of this issue.<sup>21</sup>

Wilson's second argument "that Hume's crucial move is to insist that simply because an event is somehow incomprehensible to a spectator, it does not follow that one can reasonably infer that it is a miracle, or even probably a miracle"<sup>22</sup> and thus "the fact that we discover exceptions to what we have previously thought to be regularities hardly testifies to there being events that are miracles, that is, events that violate laws of nature"<sup>23</sup> also seems deficient. It is true that Hume wants to distinguish between unusual events that can plausibly be viewed as having natural though unknown causes, i.e., marvels, and those that cannot, i.e., miracles. A criticism of his argument that appears to have concerned Hume is that it is unreasonable to insist that one's uniform personal experience should inevitably trump the testimony of others. The class of unusual events is not exhausted by miracles and we quite often accept the occurrence of unusual events outside our personal experience on the basis of testimonial evidence. On pain of his argument proving too much Hume must argue not that it is in general impossible to establish the occurrence of unusual events on the basis of testimonial evidence, but that it is impossible to establish the occurrence of a special type of unusual event, that is, miracles, on the basis of such evidence. His concern to deal with this criticism seems to be what motivated Hume, in the 1750 second edition, to include a discussion of Locke's well-known example of the Indian prince. He wants to claim that testimony can be sufficiently strong to establish the occurrence of marvels, but not of miracles. He attempts to do this on the ground that an event that is a marvel is unusual, but it does not contradict our firm and unalterable experience, that is, the laws of nature, whereas a miracle does contradict such experience, that is, it violates the laws of nature.<sup>24</sup> It is an error, therefore, to suggest, as does J. C. A. Gaskin, that Hume can dispense with the distinction he attempts to draw between marvels and miracles.<sup>25</sup>

Even the most superficial reading of "Of Miracles" makes clear, however, that Hume was convinced that if certain events were to occur, they would be genuinely miraculous. Thus, he is quite prepared to say that "it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life."<sup>26</sup> Wilson goes wrong in confusing two logically distinct questions: "How much testimonial evidence is needed to establish the occurrence of an unusual event?" and "On what basis could it be established that an unusual event is a miracle?" Wilson takes Hume to be addressing the second question and interprets him as arguing that it is impossible to justify belief that an unusual event is a violation of the laws of nature. On Wilson's reading, Hume's argument is directed not at the difficulties of establishing unusual events on the basis

of testimonial evidence but at the impossibility of ever rationally believing that an unusual event constitutes a violation of the laws of nature.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, this reading makes nonsense not only of Hume's explicit willingness to identify certain conceivable events as miracles but also of his emphasis on the inability of testimonial evidence to establish such events. If Wilson's reading is accepted, it becomes a mystery why Hume would concern himself with issues of testimony, since the argument would establish that no matter what the unusual event, it is always irrational to view it as a violation of the laws of nature.<sup>28</sup> Contra Wilson, Hume's aim is not to argue that the Resurrection of Jesus could never be accurately described as a miracle, but rather that testimonial evidence could never justify belief that it did in fact occur. What Broad and Lewis recognize but Wilson fails to recognize—and what must be taken into account in any discussion of whether Hume's treatment of miracles is consistent with his sceptical treatment of induction and causality—is that Hume's argument is directed not at demonstrating that it is irrational to believe that unusual events of a certain conceivable type, that is to say miracles, violate the laws of nature, but at showing there could never be sufficient testimonial evidence to justify belief in the occurrence of such events. Wilson does not succeed, therefore, in demonstrating that there is no inconsistency between Hume's treatment of induction earlier in the *Enquiry* and his claims regarding "unalterable laws of nature" in "Of Miracles."

Unfortunately, establishing an inconsistency between Hume's account of induction and his claims regarding unalterable laws of nature does little to advance a positive case for believing in miracles. As Lewis notes, following Hume,

we cannot say that uniformity is either probable or improbable; and equally we cannot say that miracles are either probable or improbable. We have impounded both uniformity and miracles in a sort of limbo where probability and improbability can never come. This result is equally disastrous for the scientist and the theologian; but along Hume's lines there is nothing whatever to be done about it.<sup>29</sup>

Lewis, however, is not content to offer a purely negative argument. He goes on to observe that we do in fact have a deep trust in the uniformity of nature, that "in advance of experience, in the teeth of many experiences, we are already enlisted on the side of uniformity."<sup>30</sup> It is this deep trust that regularities in nature can always be discovered, even in the face of apparent evidence to the contrary, that makes science possible. This raises the question of whether such trust should be regarded as justified or simply as an irrational quirk of human nature. Can trust in the uniformity of nature, which seems to be a prerequisite of science, be philosophically vindicated?

Lewis writes that the answer to this question depends upon one's metaphysic. If one is a naturalist there seems no reason to view such trust as in fact justified, but if one is a theist such trust seems eminently reasonable.

If all that exists is Nature, the great mindless interlocking event, if our own deepest convictions are merely the bye-products of an irrational



process, then clearly there is not the slightest ground for supposing that our sense of fitness and our consequent faith in uniformity tell us anything about a reality external to ourselves. . . . If Naturalism is true we have no reason to trust our conviction that Nature is uniform. It can be trusted only if quite a different Metaphysic is true. If the deepest thing in reality, the Fact which is the source of all other facthood, is a thing in some degree like ourselves—if it is a Rational Spirit and we derive our rational spirituality from It—then indeed our conviction can be trusted. Our repugnance to disorder is derived from Nature's Creator and ours. The disorderly world which we cannot endure to believe in is the disorderly world He would not have endured to create.<sup>31</sup>

Put a little differently, one of the central presuppositions of science seems to require a theistic metaphysics, if we are to place any trust in it. Once one adopts such a metaphysic, however, one must recognize the possibility of miracles. As Lewis puts it,

the philosophy which forbids you to make uniformity absolute is also the philosophy which offers you solid grounds for believing it to be *almost* absolute. The Being who threatens Nature's claim to omnipotence confirms her in her lawful occasions. . . . The alternative is really much worse. Try to make Nature absolute and you find that her uniformity is not even probable. By claiming too much, you get nothing. You get the deadlock, as in Hume. Theology offers you a working arrangement, which leaves the scientist free to continue his experiments and the Christian to continue his prayers.<sup>32</sup>

Lewis's second explicit criticism is that Hume's argument is viciously circular. Hume writes that "a firm and unalterable experience has established the laws of nature"<sup>33</sup> and since "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature,"<sup>34</sup> "there must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation."<sup>35</sup> Lewis responds that this argument begs the question, inasmuch as it assumes what needs to be proved. He writes,

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 occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle.<sup>36</sup>

As in the case of his previous criticism of Hume's argument, this objection is not unique to Lewis, but was made by earlier writers. One of Hume's early critics, William Samuel Powell, asserts that Hume's claim that "nature . . . is uniform and unvaried in her operations . . . either presumes the point in question, or touches not those events which are supposed to be out of the course of nature"<sup>37</sup> and William Paley, writing in the nineteenth



century, makes essentially this point against Hume, when he claims that for Hume "to state concerning the fact in question that no such thing was ever experienced, or that *universal* experience is against it, is to assume the subject of the controversy."<sup>38</sup>

Lewis's charge that Hume's argument is viciously circular is frequently dismissed as based on a superficial reading of Part I of the "Essay." Joseph Houston suggests that Lewis takes Hume as claiming that a law of nature is based on uniform invariable experience that can allow of no exceptions if it is to be a law. Such an understanding of the laws of nature implies that miracles cannot occur, since they would be exceptions to what are, by definition, exceptionless regularities. Since Hume did not take himself simply to be exploring the implications of his definition of the laws of nature, Houston claims that Lewis must be mistaken in his understanding of Hume's argument.<sup>39</sup>

Robert Fogelin also accuses Lewis of misreading Hume. He asserts that Hume never argues that we know that all reports of miracles are false. He takes Hume simply to be claiming that we have a good deal of reliable testimonial evidence for the regularities of nature and that this body of evidence creates a strong presumption that testimonial evidence that these regularities have exceptions is false. He goes on to suggest that charges of circularity are probably due to the mistake of "attributing an a priori argument [against the possibility of a miracle occurring] to Hume where there is none."<sup>40</sup>

With regard to Houston's criticism of Lewis, while it seems true that Hume did not take himself simply to be exploring the implications of a definition of the laws of nature, what he in fact says about the laws of nature seems to imply that they must be defined as exceptionless regularities.<sup>41</sup> We are told early in the argument that the laws of nature are based on "infallible experience" and a little later that they have been established by "firm and unalterable experience."<sup>42</sup> Lest we misunderstand what is meant by the phrase "firm and unalterable experience" Hume tells us that "it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country" and that "there must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation."<sup>43</sup> Further, when Hume is faced with what would seem to be extremely strong evidence for the occurrence of an event plausibly viewed as miraculous, he is prepared to assert either that the event could not have occurred on the basis that miracles are absolutely impossible, or, if the event occurred, it must not be a miracle.<sup>44</sup> It thus seems that, although Hume may have not noticed that he ruled out the occurrence of miracles by definition, there is good reason to think that this is in fact an implication of how he conceives the laws of nature.<sup>45</sup>

Strictly speaking, ruling out belief in miracles on the grounds that there cannot exist exceptions to what are, by definition, exceptionless regularities, does not commit one to a circular argument. Thus David Johnson suggests that Hume might attempt to escape the charge of circularity by making a conceptual argument from the very concept of a law of nature against the logical possibility of a miracle. The problem, as Johnson notes, is that, although there are elements of the "Essay" that point Hume's argument in this direction, such a move does not fit well

with Hume's claim of weighing the evidence for miracles against the evidence for the laws of nature. If the concept of miracle is a logical absurdity—akin to the idea of a married bachelor—there is no need to raise the issue of conflicting bodies of evidence, since there can exist no evidence for what is logically impossible.

I think a good case can be made that there are conflicting lines of argument in the "Essay." Although Hume's official stance seems to be that miracles are logically possible but that there are insurmountable difficulties in justifying belief in their actual occurrence, the claims he makes at several points in attempting to develop his argument imply the stronger conclusion that miracles are logically impossible. It is this conflict between his official stance and what he actually says in attempting to justify it that enables authors such as Johnson to suggest that Hume's goals are so confused as to make it impossible to determine what his argument is.<sup>46</sup> What is clear is that, unless he is simply willing to suggest that the concept of a miracle is logically incoherent, Hume's talk of "firm and unalterable experience" as ruling out the possibility of belief in miracles leaves him open to the charge of circularity.

Fogelin's criticism of Lewis hinges on his contention that Hume never intended to argue that it is in principle impossible to justify belief in a miracle on the basis of testimonial evidence. Although it has become increasingly popular, this claim appears fundamentally mistaken. There are numerous lines of evidence, both direct and indirect, which demonstrate it is untenable.<sup>47</sup> In the context of the present discussion two examples will suffice, although numerous others are available.

First, at the direct level, it cannot have escaped Hume's notice that to claim "*the proof against a miracle . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined*"<sup>48</sup> (emphasis added) and that "such a proof [cannot] be destroyed or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior"<sup>49</sup> does not allow the possibility of establishing a miracle on the basis of testimonial evidence, since there is no way, even in theory, that one could trump a proof against a miracle which "is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined." The most a proponent of belief in miracle might hope for, even supposing she could produce an entirely convincing proof of a miracle, is a mutual destruction of arguments, i.e., a suspension of belief one way or another. Hume, of course, is not unaware that this conclusion must follow, but with typical irony and what Flew terms "mischievous modesty"<sup>50</sup> he suggests that belief could be justified if, per the impossible, the evidence for a miracle could exceed the evidence against it.<sup>51</sup>

Second, at the indirect level, it is significant that all the responses made to the "Essay" during Hume's lifetime took him to be arguing the impossibility of testimony justifying belief in miracles, but Hume never suggested that these critics misunderstood the intent of the "Essay." Philip Skelton's *Opiomaches or Deism Revealed*<sup>52</sup> contains the first published reply to the "Essay" and takes it as attempting to demonstrate that belief in miracles can never be rational, yet Hume as the publisher's reader recommended publication of Skelton's manuscript.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Campbell in his *Dissertation on Miracles*, takes Hume to be arguing for an in principle rejection of establishing belief in miracles on the basis of testimony. Hume accepted an

invitation to respond to Campbell, but at no point in criticizing Campbell does he claim that Campbell has misunderstood what the argument of the "Essay" is intended to establish. Hume's silence is inexplicable if he felt that his respondents fundamentally missed the point of the "Essay," but makes good sense if he intended to assert that no amount of testimonial evidence could be sufficient to justify accepting a miracle report.<sup>54</sup>

That Hume does in fact intend his argument to be taken as an a priori demonstration that belief in a miracle can never, even in principle, be justified on the basis of testimony seems clear. Fogelin is wrong, therefore, to suggest that Lewis's objection that Hume's argument is circular can be simply dismissed on the basis that Lewis does not understand what Hume is trying to show. There are conflicting elements of argument in the "Essay," but at least some of these strongly suggest that the charge of circularity is well grounded.<sup>55</sup>

We have looked at Lewis's explicit criticisms of Hume's argument, which occur in Chapter XIII, "On Probability." I think, however, that a more important criticism is implicit in Chapter VIII, "Miracle and the Laws of Nature."

Hume's argument in Part I of the "Essay" can be summarized as follows:

The testimonial evidence in favour of a miracle inevitably conflicts with the evidence in favour of the laws of nature.

The testimonial evidence in favour of a miracle cannot exceed, even in principle, the evidence in favour of the laws of nature.

Therefore, belief in the occurrence of a miracle can never be justified on the grounds of testimonial evidence.

Critics of the argument have almost exclusively focussed on the second premise. Accepting Hume's claim that a miracle must be conceived as violating the laws of nature and thus that any evidence for a miracle must conflict with the evidence for the laws of nature, they have left the first premise unexamined. This is unfortunate, since accepting the first premise means that even if, contra Hume, there exists in some cases sufficient evidence to justify belief in a miracle, this evidence must be viewed as necessarily conflicting with another body of evidence we are strongly inclined to accept, namely the evidence which justifies belief in the laws of nature. Thus Hume insists that

the very same principle of experience which gives us a certain degree of assurance in the testimony of witnesses gives us also, in this case [reports of miracles], another degree of assurance against the fact which they endeavour to establish; from which contradiction there necessarily arises a counterpoise and mutual destruction of belief and authority.<sup>56</sup>

The view that a necessary condition of an event being a miracle is that it violates the laws of nature, arises out of the assumption that divine

interventions in nature would necessarily involve violating the laws of nature. One of Lewis's greatest insights is that this assumption is mistaken. That it is mistaken can be seen if one reflects on the fact that laws of nature do not, by themselves, allow the prediction or explanation of any event. Scientific explanations must make reference not only to laws of nature, but to material conditions to which the laws apply. Thus, although we often speak as though the laws of nature are, in themselves, sufficient to explain the occurrence of an event, this is not really so. Any explanation involving the laws of nature must make reference not only to those laws, but also to the actual "stuff" of nature whose behaviour is described by the laws of nature. As Lewis notes,

we are in the habit of talking as if they [the laws of nature] caused events to happen; but they have never caused any event at all. The laws of motion do not set billiard balls moving: they analyse the motion after something else (say, a man with a cue, or a lurch of the liner, or, perhaps, supernatural power) has provided it. They produce no events: they state the pattern to which every event—if only it can be induced to happen—must conform, just as the rules of arithmetic state the pattern to which all transactions with money must conform—if only you can get hold of any money. Thus in one sense the laws of Nature cover the whole field of space and time; in another, what they leave out is precisely the whole real universe—the incessant torrent of actual events which makes up true history. That must come from somewhere else. To think the laws can produce it is like thinking that you can create real money by simply doing sums. For every law, in the last resort, says "If you have A, then you will get B." But first catch your A: the laws won't do it for you.<sup>57</sup>

If we keep in mind this basic distinction between the laws of nature and the "stuff," call it mass/energy, whose behaviour they describe, it can be seen that, although a miracle is an event which would never have occurred without the overriding of nature, this in no way entails the claim that a miracle involves a violation of the laws of nature. If a transcendent agent creates or annihilates a unit of mass/energy, or if he simply causes some of the stuff to occupy a different position than it did formerly, then he changes the material conditions to which the laws of nature apply. He thereby produces an event that nature on its own would not have produced, but He breaks no laws of nature. To use Lewis's example, one would not violate or suspend the laws of motion if one were to toss an extra billiard ball into a group of billiard balls in motion on a billiard table, yet one would override the outcome of what would otherwise be expected to happen on the table. Similarly,

if God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any laws. The laws at once take it over. . . . Pregnancy follows, according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born. . . . If events ever come from beyond Nature altogether she will . . . [not be] incommoded by them. . . . The moment they enter her realm they obey all her laws. Miraculous wine will intoxicate,

miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested. The divine art of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern to which events conform but of feeding new events into that pattern. It does not violate the law's proviso, "If A, then B": it says, "But this time instead of A, A2" and Nature, speaking through all her laws, replies, "Then B2" and naturalises the immigrant, as she well knows how.<sup>58</sup>

The importance of Lewis's insight is that if miracles can occur without violating the laws of nature then the testimonial evidence in favour of miracles need not be conceived as conflicting with the evidence which grounds belief in the laws of nature. This means that Hume's argument in Part I of the "Essay," depending as it does upon the assumption that these two bodies of evidence must conflict, cannot even get started.

An important objection which might be raised, but which Lewis fails to discuss is that at least one law of nature must be broken on this account of miracle, since the creation, annihilation or moving of material entities by a non-physical agent would involve the creation or destruction of energy and thus would violate the First Law of Thermodynamics, i.e., the Principle of the Conservation of Energy. It seems, however, that Lewis's account can be defended against this objection.

This objection fails to take into consideration a very important distinction between two forms of the Principle of the Conservation of Energy. The Principle is commonly stated as "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed" or as "In an isolated system the total amount of energy remains constant"; the assumption being that these two statements are logically equivalent. This, though, is false. We can deduce from the proposition "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed" the proposition "In an isolated system the total amount of energy remains constant," but we cannot deduce from the proposition "In an isolated system the total amount of energy remains constant" deduce the proposition "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed." The proposition "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed" is considerably stronger, i.e., carries a greater ontological commitment, than the proposition "In an isolated system the total amount of energy remains constant."

The significance of this distinction is considerable. First, it bears emphasis that the strong form of the Principle, i.e., the claim that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, not only rules out miracles but theism in general, since it rules out the possibility of creation *ex nihilo*. Second, although the believer in miracles must reject the strong form of the Principle, she can accept what I have called the weak form of the Principle, i.e., the claim that energy is conserved in a causally isolated system. She is in a position to accept all the experimental evidence taken to support belief in the Principle, since that evidence only demonstrates there is good reason to believe that energy is conserved in a causally isolated system. She rejects not the well-evidenced claim that in a causally isolated system energy is conserved, but the much more questionable claim that nature is an isolated system, in the sense that it is not open to the causal influence of God. In short, she is in a position to affirm the Principle of the Conservation of

Energy when it is formulated as a scientific law and not as an a priori metaphysical principle which excludes the possibility of theism being true.

It is clear, therefore, that conceiving of a miracle as involving the creation or annihilation of mass/energy does not imply that the Principle of the Conservation of Energy is violated, so long as there is good reason to adopt the weak rather than the strong form of the Principle. Accepting the occurrence of a miracle involving the creation or annihilation of energy does not commit one to denying the vast body of experimental evidence supporting belief that energy is conserved in an isolated system. Rather, accepting the occurrence of such a miracle commits one to arguing that the inference employed in moving from the claim that energy is conserved in an isolated system to the claim that energy can neither be created nor destroyed is ill-founded.<sup>59</sup>

That the inference is ill-founded and tends to be question-begging seems clear. The experimental evidence taken to support belief in the Principle establishes that we have good reason to believe that energy is conserved in an isolated system, but is neutral as regards the further question of whether or not there exists something capable of creating or destroying energy. All that any experiment or series of experiments can show is that energy was conserved in an isolated system on a particular occasion or series of occasions. If the move from the weak form of the Principle is to be justified, it must be on the basis that the strong form of the Principle provides an explanation of why the weak form holds true and that there exists no evidence that energy is ever created or destroyed. This move is problematic on several counts.

First, the theist is able to provide an alternative explanation of why the weak form of the Principle would hold true. Conceiving of the universe as a contingent reality in which physical causes operate, equally explains why the weak form holds true. Insisting that energy can neither be created nor destroyed seems merely to attribute necessary existence to energy rather than to God and makes clear the fact that the strong form functions not simply as a statement of observed regularity in nature, but as a defining-postulate of physicalism.

Second, the strong form seems at odds with the Big-Bang theory of the origin of the universe. This theory is commonly accepted and commonly interpreted as implying an absolute beginning to the energy that composes the universe. It is possible to accept both the weak form of the Principle and the Big-Bang theory, but it is hard to see how acceptance of the Big-Bang theory is consistent with affirming the truth of the strong form of the Principle.

Third, leaving aside the fact that commonly accepted scientific theory may imply the falsity of the strong form of the Principle, it is clear that the physicalist is in no position to object to belief in miracles on the basis of the strong form of the Principle. The occurrence of miracles would imply the creation or annihilation of energy, but would not imply that energy is not conserved in an isolated system. The theist denies not that energy is conserved in an isolated system, but rather that the physical universe is an isolated system in the sense that it is never causally affected by transcendent agents. Given a positive body of evidence for miracles, it will not do to try and frame a Humean type balance-of-probabilities argument



designed to show there is a conflict between the experimental evidence taken to support belief in the Principle of the Conservation of Energy and the evidence in favour of miracles. The occurrence of miracles conceived as acts of creation or annihilation of energy conflicts not with any positive evidence supporting belief in the Principle, but rather with a metaphysical commitment to naturalism. Faced with reports of events which would constitute positive evidence that energy can be created or destroyed, it begs the question to dismiss such events, or to argue that they are antecedently improbable, on the ground that they imply the falsity of the strong form of the Principle.<sup>60</sup> It seems, therefore, that Lewis is correct in his assertion that miracles should not be defined as implying violation of the laws of nature.

I conclude that Lewis's views on miracle are worthy of more attention and respect by professional philosophers than they typically receive. Especially important is his insight that miracles need not be defined as violations of the laws of nature and the implications this insight has for Hume's famous argument in Part I of the "Essay on Miracles."<sup>61</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. <http://www.scriptoriumnovum.com/l/club.html>.
2. Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification (Preface)" *Philosophy Now* (October/November 2000): pp. 28–29.
3. Commentators on Hume's "Of Miracles" have increasingly tended to argue that it was never Hume's intention to suggest that testimonial evidence is in principle incapable of justifying belief in miracles. Popular though they have become, such interpretations appear mistaken. The view of earlier commentators, both friendly and unfriendly to the "Essay," that Hume's goal was to provide an argument whereby testimonial evidence for the occurrence of miracles can be dismissed without examining the particulars of any case is strongly supported by both direct and indirect lines of evidence. An excellent discussion of this issue occurs in R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles* (London: Associated University Presses, 1981), pp. 131–75.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 122–23.
5. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, pp. 123–24.
6. C. D. Broad, "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 17 (1916–17): pp. 77–94, 91–92.
7. Fred Wilson, *Hume's Defence of Causal Inference* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 285.
8. *Hume's Defence of Causal Inference*, p. 287.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888), p. 131.
12. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 132.
13. Fred Wilson, "The Logic of Probabilities in Hume's Argument against Miracles," *Hume Studies*, Vol 1, No. 2 (Nov. 1989): pp. 255–75.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 260.



15. In "Of Miracles," Hume is prepared to use the term "unalterable experience," yet earlier in the *Enquiry*, where he discusses causality, he writes "it is impossible . . . that any arguments from experience can prove . . . resemblance of the past to the future; since all these arguments are founded on the supposition of that resemblance." David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 38.

16. Wilson charges Broad with a very superficial reading of Hume, yet ignores the fact that Broad discusses this possibility at considerable length. ("Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles," pp. 92–94.)

17. "The Logic of Probabilities in Hume's Argument against Miracles," p. 260.

18. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, pp. 123–24.

19. One of the referees for this paper suggests that it is wrong to claim that Hume reduces causality to constant conjunction. The referee writes that "For Hume . . . necessity lay at the heart of causality, and this had to be accounted for, which Hume does by his appeal to psychological propensity. Belief in causality, hence, has a non-rational component (consonant with Hume's view of belief)." If by this the referee means that Hume recognized that humans have a psychological tendency to regard events which are constantly conjoined as necessarily conjoined I would agree. The central point, however, is that, given Hume's thoroughgoing empiricism there are no rational grounds for thinking this psychological propensity provides genuine insight into the nature of reality. This psychological propensity does not provide, therefore, any reason to think that events which have occurred together in the past will continue to occur together in the future.

20. *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 38.

21. It might be suggested that Hume's account of induction and causality leaves open the possibility that our psychological makeup is such that we necessarily come to expect that events that were conjoined in the past will be conjoined in the future and that this psychological necessity provides a foundation for the scientific enterprise. Given Hume's naturalism, such a psychological necessity provides no justification for thinking that the events that were conjoined in the past will in fact be conjoined in the future.

22. "The Logic of Probabilities in Hume's Argument against Miracles," p. 257. This claim seems a product of eisegesis not exegesis. It is significant that in an article crammed with references, Wilson simply asserts this claim without making any reference to the text.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

24. *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 114.

25. J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1978), p. 122.

26. *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 115.

27. This is the case even if one grants Wilson his claim that Hume does not reduce causality simply to constant conjunction, but also recognizes a non-rational psychological component, namely our inclination to believe in necessary connections.

28. There is a tendency on the part of ardent admirers of a philosopher to make the philosopher say what one thinks he or she ought to have said. It may be granted that Hume's general philosophy is consistent with the type of argument Wilson formulates, but it is not the argument that Hume actually puts forward.

29. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, p. 125.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
33. *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 114.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
36. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, pp. 122–23.
37. William Samuel Powell, *Discourses on Various Subjects* (London: Thomas Balguy, 1776), p. 95.
38. The larger context of Paley's remark is worth mention. He writes

Now there appears a small ambiguity in the term "experience," and in the phrases "contrary to experience," or "contradictory experience," which it may be necessary to remove in the first place. Strictly speaking the narrative of a fact is then only contrary to experience, when the fact is related to have existed at a time and place, at which time and place we being present did not perceive it to exist; as if it should be asserted that in a particular room, and at a particular hour of a certain day, a man was raised from the dead, in which room, and at which time specified, we being present, and looking on, perceived no such event to have taken place. Here the assertion is contrary to experience, properly so called; and this is a contrariety which no evidence can surmount. It matters nothing whether the fact be of a miraculous nature or not. . . . And short of this, I know no intelligible signification which can be affixed to the term "contrary to experience," but one, viz., that of not having ourselves experienced anything similar to the thing related, or such things not being generally experienced by others. I say "not generally," for to state concerning the fact in question that no such thing was *ever* experienced, or that *universal* experience is against it, is to assume the subject of the controversy. *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (Halifax: Milner, 1844)

39. Joseph Houston, *Reported Miracles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 129.
40. Robert Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 19–20.
41. Antony Flew notes that Hume fails to provide an adequate conception of what constitutes a law of nature and that this inadequacy "makes it impossible for Hume . . . to justify a distinction between the marvellous or the unusual and the truly miraculous." *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 204.
42. *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 114.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
45. This is scarcely surprising, since it can be strongly argued that on all major theories of the laws of nature it is logically absurd to construe a miracle as a violation of a law of nature, since laws of nature do not logically allow for exceptions. See, for example, Hendrik van der Breggen, *Miracle Reports, Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Science*, Ph.D dissertation (University of Waterloo, 2004), pp. 75–92.
46. David Johnson, *Hume, Holism and Miracles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 18–21.

47. See, for example, *The Great Debate on Miracles* pp. 131–75. More recently see Timothy McGrew's review of Fogelin's *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press in Mind, Vol 114, 2005), pp. 145–49.

48. *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 114.

49. *Ibid.*, 115.

50. Flew, p. 171.

51. Strangely, Robert J. Fogelin, in his article "What Hume Actually Said About Miracles" *Hume Studies* Vol. 16, No. 1, (1990), put the point I am making very nicely when he wrote that

it would be altogether wrong, in fact would miss the whole drift of Hume's argument, to read this passage [the last paragraph of Part I] as leaving open the possibility that the falsehood of the testimony just might, on some occasion, be *more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish*. Hume surely expects us to remember the claim made only a paragraph earlier that the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagine. (p. 84, Fogelin's emphasis)

Indeed, Fogelin was prepared to go even further and assert that Hume's claim that there could never be sufficient testimonial evidence to establish a miracle derives from a stronger and more basic claim that miracles could not occur. He writes that,

it is important to see that Hume describes this thesis concerning testimony as *the plain consequence* of some other thesis, and that other thesis can only be the one just stated, namely that there is *a direct and full proof from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle*. Thus, contrary to the traditional reading, the text contains both a thesis denying the existence of miracles and a thesis denying the credibility of testimony in favour of miracles, and Hume explicitly describes the latter as a *consequence* of the former. (*ibid.*, Fogelin's emphasis)

It is surprising, therefore, that in his recent *A Defense of Hume on Miracle*, Fogelin asserts that Hume did not intend to disallow the "possibility that testimony could establish the occurrence of a miracle" (p. 62) makes no attempt to explain the basis upon which he would reject his earlier claims concerning the intent of the "Essay."

52. Philip Skelton, *Opiumaches or Deism Revealed* (London: 1749, Vol. 2), p. 15.

53. E. A. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 232.

54. A frequent response made to the claim that Hume intended his argument to be taken as demonstrating that belief in miracles can never, even in principle, be justified on the basis of testimony is that it fails to explain the existence of Part II of the "Essay." Although the existence of Part II may signal a response to anticipated criticisms, the pride Hume so clearly took in the "Essay" supports reading the argument of Part I as intending to demonstrate the impossibility of rational belief in miracles. This pride is evident not only in Hume's private correspondence (the Home and Campbell letters), but also in the phrasing of the "Essay" itself, and in Hume's later refusal to engage in serious discussion of criticisms of his argument. This pride is difficult to explain if Hume only took himself to be making the point that a greater degree and quality of testimonial evidence are required to jus-

tify belief in a miracle than is the case for ordinary non miraculous events. This was a point already granted by orthodox apologists such as Sherlock. Add to this the fact that each of Hume's four arguments of Part II was well known and far from original to Hume and it becomes a mystery why Hume would display such pride in the presumed originality and decisiveness of the "Essay."

55. *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, pp. 204–205.

56. *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 113.

57. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, pp. 71–72.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

59. Robert Larmer, *Water Into Wine?* (Toronto: McGill University Press, 1988), p. 26.

60. *Water Into Wine?*, pp. 61–92.

61. I wish to thank the two anonymous referees of this paper for their helpful comments.