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Skepticism: David Hume

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SKEPTICISM: HUME

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Enlightenment period was characterized by differing strains of intellectual thought, from which emerged the skeptical philosophy of David Hume (1711–1776). He held that many accepted philosophical and theological beliefs were devoid of epistemological proof and therefore could not be known with certainty to be true. His twofold attack against the inerrancy of Scripture consisted initially of denying the particular evidences in the form of miracles by holding to the superiority of man's experience for the laws of nature. Also, he further posited empirical standards of judgment against the Christian belief in the inspiration of Scripture as a whole. By these specific means, in particular, Hume possibly exercised the greatest influence on the rejection of inerrancy by critical philosophers and theologians of various schools of thought from his time to the present.

In spite of the immense influence of his critique, both Hume and those who have generally followed him in these endeavors are refuted on several accounts in their attempts to dismiss either miracles or the inerrancy of Scripture as a whole. In particular, they failed by not ascertaining if there is a God who chose to act in history by temporarily suspending the laws of nature and in written revelation in Scripture. Since both Hume and his followers have failed in their endeavor to dismiss the truthfulness of such beliefs, the possibility of a Christian theistic world view certainly remains.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT was a particularly significant period in the formulation of modern thought. The seventeenth century marked the development of three strains that later dominated Enlightenment philosophy. The chiefly Continental movement known as rationalism received its impetus from René Descartes (1596–1650). This philosophy was further developed by such scholars as Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716). Deism emerged from the teachings of Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648) and was popular in England chiefly among such scholars as Matthew Tindal (c. 1655–1733) and John Toland (1670–1722). British empiricism grew out of the thought of Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Within the empirical tradition were John Locke (1632–1704), George Berkeley (c. 1685–1753), and David Hume (1711–1776). These three philosophical traditions are often grouped because their methodologies are closely related to one another.

Enlightenment philosophers espoused concepts that have had great influence on twentieth-century epistemology. For this reason, a brief overview of these three movements that arose during the Enlightenment will provide background for identifying and evaluating David Hume's influence on the denial of biblical authority.

BACKGROUND OF HUME'S THOUGHT

The rationalists' epistemology was based on the theory that reality is essentially rational and that by making the proper deductions, an individual could achieve knowledge of self, others, and the world. Reason and particularly deductive logic were emphasized. Even God could be known, at least to some extent, by the exercise of reason.

Descartes started with the reality of doubt and the ability to think. His well-known dictum "I think, therefore I am" is a good example of rationalism's stress on reason. Beginning with the truth that we doubt and are therefore not perfect, he reasoned to the existence of God as the Perfect Being, using the ontological and cosmological proofs. Since a Perfect Being would not deceive lesser beings, whatever we can deduce by means of clear and distinct reasoning concerning the reality of the world must therefore be true.¹

Spinoza also held that the universe is structured on rational principles and that it can be known through the proper exercise of reason. However, dismissing Descartes's mind-body dualism in favor of pantheism, he maintained that reality is composed of one substance. Because God, the world, and human beings are rational, worship is also to be expressed rationally. Ideas such as these are expressed in his major work, *Ethics*, published posthumously. Especially noteworthy for our study of Hume is that Spinoza held that miracles, if understood as violations of nature, do not occur.² Some of the beginnings of biblical criticism can thus be seen in the work of this philosopher.

Leibniz was another thinker in the tradition of rationalism. In his key work, *Monadology*, he described reality in terms of monads—metaphysical units of force. This theory contrasts with the view of materialism, in which the atom is the basic component of reality. Leibniz spoke of a hierarchy of monads, culminating in God, the Monad of monads. Accepting some of the arguments set forth by other rationalists to prove the existence of God, Leibniz maintained that God ordered the monads in such a way that the universe is completely rational and that this is "the best of all possible worlds."

Contemporary with the rise of Continental rationalism was English deism. Herbert of Cherbury is considered the founder of this movement. In *De Veritate* Herbert delineated five "common

notions" about religion: the existence of a supreme God, the worship of God, the need to live a moral life, repentance from sin, and an eternal life of either reward or punishment.³ He offered these as principles that are the foundation of world religions and that constitute the essence of true religion. These five principles, Herbert claimed, are based on mankind's common reason.

The major endeavor of the deists was to formulate a natural religion based on reason as the primary authority. For some scholars, including Herbert of Cherbury, reason could support the orthodox understanding of the Christian faith. There were discrepancies between this approach and revealed Christianity, but this form of deism was not an outright attempt to disprove Christian belief.

Other deists, however, presented their positions as alternatives to revealed religion. Matthew Tindal, for example, considered "true" Christianity to be synonymous with natural religion. In his view, all doctrines not conforming to reason were to be rejected. Miracles were dismissed and morality was stressed. John Toland also believed that nothing in the Bible could conflict with reason. Therefore, miracles were given natural explanations. To these deists, comparative religion and critical investigations of Christianity were popular studies. In fact, deism had a major influence on biblical criticism. The stress on reason led to close similarities to rationalism, but the deists were also affected by the British empiricists.

Rebuttals to those deists who were critical of Christianity were offered by such philosophers as John Locke (see below), Thomas Sherlock (1678–1761), Joseph Butler (1692–1752), and William Paley (1743–1805). The work of Butler, in particular, is thought to have been a major factor in the fall of deism.⁴ These scholars argued for the rationality of revealed religion and also wrote in defense of miracles. Some of their works are appreciated even today as well-reasoned defenses of Christianity.

About the same time that deism and rationalism were developing, British empiricism was emerging in England. The British empiricists were convinced that argumentation based on deductive reasoning (the scholastics) or on innate principles of the mind (the rationalists) is not valid. Rather, these scholars based their epistemology on verification of sense experience. Empirical investigation is thus the chief test of truth claims.

Francis Bacon was one scholar who rejected the methodology of scholastic theology. In *Novum Organum* he proposed that inductive logic replace Aristotle's deductive logic. (Aristotle's deductive approach had greatly influenced Western thought since the late Middle Ages.) Bacon helped to develop the experimental method, in which data are gathered and organized inductively so that conclusions can be drawn. His methodology was very influential for subsequent empirical systems.

John Locke also challenged the thinking of the past. In *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* he rejected Descartes's theory that there are innate ideas in the human mind. Instead, Locke maintained that the mind is an "empty slate" at birth. Knowledge is obtained by the accumulation of sensory data—this is the basis of all learning—and by reflection on that data. Thus Locke rejected the logic of the rationalists in favor of knowledge gained through the senses. Interestingly enough, Locke also defended the tenets of Christian theology. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity* he argued that miracles validate Christian doctrine and point to God's activity in the world.

George Berkeley took Locke's theory of knowledge one step further. In *Principles of Human Knowledge* and other works he taught that learning is a mental process. We do not actually know the material world. All that can be said to exist are other minds (spirits) and their mental perceptions (ideas). For something to exist, it must be perceived. However, reality does not cease to exist if it is not observed by a human being, for reality is still perceived by God, the Eternal Perceiver. Berkeley saw in this approach a new argument for the existence of God.

In summary, three major Enlightenment schools of thought—rationalism, deism, and empiricism—provided the background for the philosophy of David Hume. While often categorized as an empiricist, Hume was critical of each of these movements. In much of his work he questioned the epistemological bases of philosophical beliefs, and in so doing he attempted to establish that some longstanding assumptions were devoid of epistemological proof.

HUME'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Though often placed in the tradition of British empiricism, Hume arrived at more radical conclusions. He continued the emphasis on sense experience by distinguishing between

impressions—that is, sense perceptions—and ideas—memories or recollections of these impressions. The validity of an idea can be tested by tracing it back to the impression. If the idea consistently conforms to the impression, then it is valid. If it does not conform, then it must be rejected.

However, this explanation implies that Hume was much less skeptical in epistemological matters than he actually was. Hume went beyond Locke in asserting that the external world cannot be verified with absolute certainty. He went beyond Berkeley in concluding that spirit also cannot be verified and therefore is not empirically knowable. Here, where he differs with Locke and Berkeley, we can see Hume's major effect on empiricism. He postulated that commonly accepted beliefs such as the reality of the external world and even the existence of the self cannot be proven to be true. As will be shown below, Hume pointed out that certainty will more likely come from abstract reasoning (such as mathematics, logic, or tautologies), while knowledge is derived from empirical data. Even then, we must rely on probable knowledge and not proven certainties.

One of Hume's best-known teachings was that cause and effect cannot be proven to be true, in spite of the long-held belief on the part of most men that certain effects follow naturally from certain causes. In Hume's thinking, we observe these successive events, but we cannot find the necessary link between them. Cause and effect can only be accepted by instinct or by faith.

Hume directed stern rebukes at rationalists and deists who believed that reason could penetrate metaphysical issues such as the existence of God and other theological truths. In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* he voiced doubts concerning some aspects of the traditional theistic proofs. In *The Natural History of Religion* he asserted that the earliest religion of humankind was not a monotheism characterized by fundamental rational principles, but rather a polytheism that evolved into monotheism. This view challenged a cornerstone of deistic thought. In denying the supremacy of reason, Hume called into question the very basis of rationalism and deism.

Hume also rejected much of the ethics developed by the rationalists when he denied that natural law provides any basis for morals. In yet another critique he maintained that immortality cannot be proven because there is no way to demonstrate the existence of an immaterial soul.

Hume agreed with Spinoza and some of the deists in rejecting miracles and special revelation. Few thinkers have created more doubt concerning the tenets of Christianity than Hume.

In short, Hume believed that there are definite limits in epistemology, and these limits even affect areas that had come to be regarded as truth or knowledge. Throughout it is important to note his usage of probability. Although many have held that Hume *denied* such concepts as cause and effect, theistic arguments, absolute ethics, and immortality, it is more likely that he proclaimed such could not be *known* to be true in the sense of proof. Thus, while such teachings *could* be true (and they can be accepted by instinct, habit, or faith), the crux of the matter is that we cannot *know* them to be true. Although this appears to be less of a frontal assault, herein lies much of Hume's influence.

BASIC PREMISES IN HUME'S VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

Hume rejected the claim that Scripture is inspired and is thereby an authoritative revelation of God to humanity. There were at least two reasons for this denial of inspiration. One concerns the *particulars* in Scripture, and the other has to do with Scripture as a *whole*. Hume denied the *particular evidences* for Scripture when he asserted that, according to the canons of probability, miracles and prophecy cannot be used as supernatural indications of the inspiration of Scripture. He rejected the inspiration of Scripture as a *whole* by judging that it was not a work of abstract reasoning, and that it could not be verified by empirical testing. Therefore, according to Hume, the Scriptures "contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."⁵ Thus, since neither particular evidences nor the Scripture as a whole can be accepted as inspired, the Bible cannot be considered a reliable basis for knowledge. There is no way to know that Scripture contains God's words for humankind.

We will examine these two premises in more detail. This is not to say that Hume's other views are not relevant here. However, in these two ideas Hume was taking direct aim at the veracity of Scripture. These two premises have been a major factor in the rejection of the inspiration of Scripture in the twentieth century.

Concerning Miracles

Hume's essay "Of Miracles" is part of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1751), one of his major works. In this essay

he defines a miracle as "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent" (Hume's emphasis). Hume asserts that the laws of nature are themselves proof against miracles:

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.⁶

Not only would the occurrence of miracles entail a breaking of nature's laws by the will of God (or some other invisible agent), but such occurrences are extremely improbable. The twofold evidence supplied by the laws of nature and man's experience of these laws provides a proof against a miracle. To state it another way, Hume believes that miracles have not occurred, for they are disproven by the superior evidence of the uniformity of nature's laws, as witnessed by the experience of mankind.⁷

To support this major argument, Hume introduces four subsidiary points.⁸ First, he asserts that no miracle has ever been attested by a sufficient number of competent witnesses who are beyond reproach, suspicion, or delusion.

Second, people like to speak of extraordinary and unique events and to spread tales about them. In fact, even if a story is false, people will continue to lie about it in order to promote their own vanity or some personal cause.

Third, miracles usually occur among barbarous and ignorant peoples. And lying is a possible explanation in these cases also.

Fourth, the miracles in the various world religions supposedly support the teachings of that religion. But since such miracles and teachings conflict with those of other religions, they oppose and cancel out each other, leaving no instances of valid supernatural events.

Hume sought in this way to remove the evidential basis for all miracles and to show that reports of miracles are untrustworthy. He realized that by casting doubt on miracles and prophecy, a form of miracle, he was also destroying Christianity's claim that Scripture is an inspired revelation from God, since no evidence would then remain to support such beliefs.

In the concluding paragraphs of his essay, Hume adds that Christianity is founded on faith and cannot be defended by reason.⁹

Concerning Scripture as a Whole

Hume ends the *Enquiry* with a brief and almost entirely unexplained but very important statement:

If we take in our hand any volume—of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance—let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing except sophistry and illusion (Hume's emphasis).¹⁰

For Hume, then, theology is not a subject concerning which we can gain verifiable knowledge. Only assertions that involve abstract reasoning—such as mathematics, logic, and statements that are true by definition—or assertions that correspond to empirical data can be said to be knowable. If something is not true by definition or by evidence based on human experience, it cannot be known to be true.

Therefore, the Scriptures cannot be used for drawing objective epistemological conclusions. Hume insisted that theological matters cannot be known to be true. The Scriptures can be believed by faith alone. This belief was very influential in later philosophical discussions.

HUME'S INFLUENCE ON THE DENIAL OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

The Rejection of Miracles

Hume published the best known and most influential attack against miracles in the history of intellectual thought. According to John Herman Randall, Jr., this philosophical protest was so influential that it was the determining force in causing religious liberals from Hume's time to the present to reject miracles.¹¹ Wilbur M. Smith contends that Hume's work was the strongest argument ever raised contrary to belief in miracles.¹² Nineteenth-century liberalism and twentieth-century existentialism and postexistential trends relied on Hume's critique as the reasoning behind the rejection of miracles.

The nineteenth-century theological school of thought known as liberalism depended heavily on Hume's reasoning for the rejection of the miraculous. Perhaps the best example of this is found in the ideas of the German theologian David Strauss

(1808–1874). In his hotly debated work *A New Life of Jesus*, Strauss claimed that because Hume's essay had completely disproven the possibility of miracles, there was no longer any question in his mind that events that contradict nature's laws do not occur.¹³

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), often referred to as the father of liberalism, followed Hume's assertion that miracles are reported most often in areas where there is little knowledge of nature's laws. Supernatural occurrences must be rejected because they destroy the concept of nature and because there are no known examples of them.¹⁴

Heinrich Paulus (1761–1851), a German rationalist who desired to judge theology by the criteria of reason, also denied that miracles were actual supernatural events. He held that the eyewitnesses of such events in Scripture were not aware of the laws of nature. For those who know these laws, the actual event remains, but not the miraculous element in it. Scholars must therefore discover the natural causes of so-called miracles.¹⁵

German theologian Bruno Bauer (1809–1882) agreed with Strauss that nature would be mocked if miracles occurred, since its laws would be violated. Therefore, such events must be rejected, for nature's laws cannot be denied.¹⁶

French scholar Ernst Renan (1823–1892) stated that Jesus accepted miracles as common occurrences, believing that they were not at all out of the ordinary. Jesus' belief was conditioned by the thought of His day and He was simply not aware that nature followed certain laws. In this sense, Jesus fell prey to ancient assumptions.¹⁷

For German theologian Otto Pflieger (1839–1908), science had made great strides in its pursuit of knowledge over the past centuries. One of its achievements was recognizing that nature's laws have such regularity they cannot be changed or violated.¹⁸

Adolf Harnack (1851–1930), one of the last major scholars of nineteenth-century liberalism, held a view similar to that of his contemporaries. For ancient peoples miracles appeared to be common occurrences, because these people did not know about the existence of the laws of nature. But modern people cannot accept any events that interrupt these laws. Such events simply do not occur, and we cannot believe accounts of them.¹⁹

In documenting this influence of Hume's essay, it is not being asserted that no other Enlightenment thinkers before him ever

used similar arguments. Rather, as asserted by Randall, Strauss, and others, liberals followed Hume's thought as the definitive statement on this subject.

In rejecting miracles, nineteenth-century liberal theologians not only followed Hume's insistence that the laws of nature cannot be violated, but they also accepted Hume's suggestion that naturalistic alternatives to miraculous events are more probable than the actual miracles.²⁰ These theologians explained accounts of supernatural intervention in one of two ways.

Some scholars, following views such as those of Paulus, offered rationalistic alternatives to "supposed" miracles. The most common technique was to accept the general framework of the circumstances and surroundings of a miracle as being historical, but then to provide a naturalistic explanation for the actual miraculous element. Others, following Strauss, treated the entire account, including the nonmiraculous circumstances, as having little or no basis at all in history. Almost the entire account was believed to be an expression of mythology meant to convey a message.

Although Paulus's views gained acceptance by nineteenth-century liberals, Strauss's mythological explanation was deemed to be more sophisticated by later critical scholars. In the twentieth century the mythological approach found a strong proponent in Rudolf Bultmann.

This dismissal of miracles, revealing a definite reliance on Hume's essay, is not only a characteristic of nineteenth-century theological thought. As already mentioned, twentieth-century existentialism and contemporary postexistential trends reveal a similar dependence.

For German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), modern man is too advanced to accept any literal concept of miracles. In this day of increased knowledge, the ancient world view cannot be comprehended literally. Because of the contemporary understanding of the laws of nature, what used to be considered miraculous is so no longer. Miracles should therefore be demythologized, or reinterpreted existentially, in order for modern man to grasp the truth being expressed by the myth.²¹

According to Paul Tillich (1886-1965), events that are supernatural interferences with nature's laws cannot be accepted. Such a view, he claimed, distorts the workings of God. A miracle

may be interpreted as an unusual or astonishing event as long as it is not believed to contradict natural laws.²²

English theologian John A. T. Robinson (1919-) concurred with the idea that the modern world view has no place for mythological concepts. Accordingly, miracles and other myths must be rejected as being contrary to nature's laws. Supernatural intervention is just not comprehensible in literal terms to modern man. The truth embedded in such concepts is what should be grasped.²³

American theologians Harvey Cox and Lawrence Burkholder directly cite Hume's essay as the major reason for the twentieth-century rejection of miracles. Burkholder expresses some reservations about a total acceptance of Hume's thesis but admits its strong influence on his own views. Cox notes that he and other scholars have been so profoundly affected by Hume's essay that they are unable to accept the literal reality of miracles.²⁴

This brief survey has shown that both nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical scholars as a whole utilized Hume's essay to reject and reinterpret miracles. Several explicitly mentioned Hume's work as the key reason for this rejection. Without doubt, Hume's essay rejecting miracles on epistemological bases has exerted more influence on the scholarly world than has any other writing on this subject.

The Empirical Testing of Scripture

Hume's application of his epistemology to Scripture as a whole also exerted much influence on nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy. To Hume, a statement must contain abstract reasoning or empirical data in order to be known to be true. Theology is subject to this empirical testing. The development of this empirical test became a chief inspiration for twentieth-century logical positivism and linguistic analysis.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) further clarified Hume's twofold distinction between abstract reasoning and experimental reasoning. Statements that are true by definition he termed *analytical*. Assertions that are true by empirical observation he termed *synthetical*.²⁵ Like Hume, Kant also concluded that metaphysical issues cannot be known, since they cannot be tested by empirical methods. Religious beliefs can be established, to be sure, but by the exercise of practical reason and not by sense data.

French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) agreed with Kant that religious beliefs cannot be established by empirical verification. But Comte went further in insisting that traditional metaphysics be eliminated. For Comte, history is characterized by three major periods of thought. Ancient man utilized *theological* reasoning, endeavoring to lean on God and supernatural interferences for an understanding of the world. Then man passed through the *metaphysical* period, when abstract reasoning was believed to be the chief means of acquiring knowledge. Modern man, however, has reached the *positive* period, when scientific methodology is the key to knowledge. Humanity thus has reached the point where reliance on metaphysical speculation is no longer needed. Rather than waste time on theological issues, concerning which we cannot really gain knowledge, we should concentrate on what is scientifically verifiable. In this way, then, Comte said, religious issues are outdated and illegitimate avenues of inquiry.²⁶

In the early twentieth century empirical verification became an even more crucial issue. Austrian philosopher (and later Cambridge University professor) Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) stressed the importance of the study of language. In his famous *Tractatus* he argued that a careful analysis of language and thought is the chief occupation of philosophy. Many philosophers dealt with meaningless issues that are not open to verification, such as metaphysical questions. For Wittgenstein, we can only speak of what we know and otherwise we must remain silent.²⁷

Another Austrian philosopher, Moritz Schlick (1882–1936), shared similar views. Schlick was the founder of the Vienna Circle, a group of philosophers who were convinced of the need to analyze language. According to Schlick, the major goal for philosophy is to clarify the meanings of assertions, thereby providing an empirical reference point for knowledge. Many meaningless debates in philosophy could thus be solved because of their lack of an empirical criterion of meaning.²⁸

The teachings of Wittgenstein, Schlick, and the Vienna Circle influenced the development of the school of thought known as logical positivism. Logical positivism was popularized by the English philosopher A. J. Ayer (1910–), especially through his work *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). Ayer held that a sentence can be said to be significant in any factual way only if it can be

either verified or falsified according to empirical criteria. If such a conclusion is not possible and if the sentence is not tautological, then it is meaningless.²⁹

Emerging from this discussion was the concept known as the *verification principle*. Factually meaningful statements are either analytical, and thereby true by definition, or they are synthetic, that is, capable of empirical validation. Analytic statements include assertions of pure logic, mathematics, and other tautological statements. They provide no new knowledge concerning the factual world. Synthetic statements are capable of experiential verification (or falsification). If statements fall into neither of these two categories, then they are pronounced factually meaningless.³⁰ Ayer states that his verification principle is an outgrowth of Hume's thoughts on this subject.³¹

The verification principle was not designed to be a test of truth, as such, but rather an indicator of the *meaningfulness* of statements. By applying such criteria to philosophy and clarifying both the purpose and methodology of the philosopher, Ayer concluded, many of the traditional debates could be by-passed as meaningless. Theological and ethical assertions, according to this standard, are literally meaningless because they cannot be verified or falsified. However, such statements were sometimes granted an emotive (but not factual) value.

Interestingly enough, Ayer used his standard also against the statements of atheists and agnostics. Since any proposition about God is said to be nonsensical, no meaningful statement can be made to affirm God's nonexistence or even to assert that knowledge about God is impossible. In short, all statements of any sort concerning God are nonsense, since they cannot be true by definition or by empirical verification.³²

Moral assertions are likewise said to lack any means by which they may be experientially tested, since they are not factual propositions. Rather, they express the speaker's personal sentiments. For instance, the statement "murder is wrong" is not factually testable and therefore cannot be proven to be either right or wrong. It only relates that the one making the statement believes that murder is wrong.³³

Ayer's verification principle is rejected by philosophers today, but many scholars still believe that the concept of verifiability or falsifiability is quite crucial. From such a concern developed the principle of falsification. Popularized by Antony Flew, this prin-

ciple has the advantage of being flexible while still providing a means of testing assertions.

According to Flew, whenever a statement is made, the conditions under which it would be false should be ascertained. In other words, before we can really know if a statement is valid, we must also know what facts would make it invalid.³⁴ Only after we know that no such probable negation exists can we contend that the original assertion is valid, providing there are also reasons to accept it as being true.

In spite of the popularity of logical positivism in the early twentieth century, it was plagued by several inherent weaknesses discussed in the Evaluation and Critique section below. Indeed, strictly speaking this school of thought no longer exists.³⁵ Philosophers of the last few decades have turned from logical positivism to a less rigid usage of related principles—linguistic analysis. It has modified the stricter and more dogmatic assumptions of its predecessor and has turned more attention to the subject of language analysis.³⁶

Along with the development of less rigid standards of verification, many linguistic analysts also became convinced that God-talk was not so meaningless after all. For instance, today many linguistic analysts are convinced that certain areas of theology are open to verification. Topics such as God's existence, immortality, and even miracles are discussed in a congenial light and are defended by some of these scholars.³⁷ This school of thought no longer presents a unified front against metaphysics. Analytic philosophers are divided over the question of whether such pursuits are verifiable.

To summarize: The ideas of David Hume have had a tremendous influence on the denial of biblical authority. His rejection of particular evidences for the inspiration of Scripture—miracles and prophecy—was accepted by the religious liberals of the nineteenth century and by the existential and postexistential scholars of the twentieth century. Hume's assertion that theological works must be judged according to whether their statements are true either by definition or by empirical investigation influenced a number of philosophers, especially the Vienna Circle and logical positivists of the first half of the twentieth century. Following logical positivism, linguistic analysis has developed and, although less rigid in its evaluation of metaphysics, it still bears the stamp of David Hume's ideas.

EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE

The Rejection of Miracles

In spite of the continuing influence of Hume's essay "On Miracles," I am convinced that there are at least five valid criticisms that invalidate Hume's entire argument.

The first criticism is that in his definitive statements concerning miracles and in his subsequent comparison of these events to humankind's experience of the laws of nature, Hume commits a number of errors in logic. For instance, he states:

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 (Hume's italics).³⁸

It is evident that Hume does not begin his study with an impartial look at the facts. Earlier we saw that he defines miracles so that they are totally opposed from the outset by what he terms "firm and unalterable experience" and "uniform experience." In this quotation he continues to postulate that *all* experience favors the absence of miracles. In addition, he *specifically* states that if all experience does not oppose such events, then they cannot even be called miracles. He concludes by stating that this is a proof against the miraculous.

In his book *Miracles* C. S. Lewis notes that Hume can know that all experience favors his argument only by knowing in advance that all evidence in favor of miracle claims is false. But since he refuses to investigate miracles, he can know that these claims are false only by assuming that they do not happen. This is clearly circular reasoning, for Hume's position is certainly not evident a priori.³⁹

The alternative to the approach taken by Hume is to examine miracles that claim strong experiential support. While speaking of Christ's miracles, Hume fails to investigate the exceptionally good evidence for the chief miracle claim of Christianity—the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not valid to rule out an opponent's view by defining one's own position to be true while ignoring evidence to the contrary.

Strangely enough, he even refers to his argument as a proof against the miraculous when, once again, he assumes that which

he neglects to prove, namely, that uniform experience and all other data rest against all miracles. He cannot annul experiential claims for such events by utilizing faulty definitions, by assuming the evidence needed to prove one's view (and by doing so circularly), and by not examining the empirical, evidential claims in favor of the miraculous.

Hume's position is an unproven assumption and cannot disprove miracles. It is most noteworthy that even critical theologians admit that Hume argues circularly in this essay.⁴⁰

The second criticism is that Hume's conclusion that humankind's experience of the laws of nature provides superior evidence against miracles in no way eliminates the possibility of the occasional intervention of a power still superior to these laws.

At the outset it must be agreed that there are natural laws. But although these are known by scientific inquiry to exist, such laws do not dictate whether occasional abnormalities can occur. In other words, the mere existence of such laws proves nothing concerning whether there is a God who is capable of temporarily suspending them. Thus, Hume should be less concerned with nature itself and more concerned with whether such a Being has indeed broken into nature from the outside.

Hume's concept describes what would happen *if* there is no intervention into nature by God. However, since it is *possible* that God exists and that He has sufficient power to temporarily suspend the laws of nature, no amount of arguing from naturalistic premises inside a system can ever disprove the possibility that God has performed a recognizable event in nature from outside of it. Therefore, the proper question here is not the internal query of the strength of the laws of nature. Rather, the proper question concerns the possibility that God, by utilizing superior strength, temporarily suspended nature's laws in order to cause such events to occur. It is readily evident that no matter how strong this natural system is, it is useless to rest one's case on it if there is a stronger Force.

A valid means of arriving at an answer to this issue of whether miracles have occurred would be to establish the validity of a theistic universe. By whatever means this is established, the endeavor would assign much importance to an investigation of the historical facts surrounding a claimed miracle—such as Jesus' resurrection—in order to ascertain the probability of that event occurring in history and being performed by God. It follows that

if the evidence points to a probable miracle, recognized as being performed by God, then such evidence is actually *superior* to the laws of nature *at that moment*, for it would reveal that natural law can be temporarily set aside by a superior Force. This is simply because, in order to occur, a miracle would involve God's temporary suspension of those laws.⁴¹

It should be noted here that it has *not* been concluded that miracles have occurred. It is not the purpose of this essay to provide such an apologetic. It has only been pointed out that historical investigation of a miracle claim in a theistic universe might provide evidence that such an event may have happened. As such, an interference with the laws of nature might be the most probable solution.

The third criticism of Hume's thesis is that he ignores a group of purported miracles that even he admits have outstanding evidence in their favor, namely, the alleged miracles of the Jansenists of eighteenth-century France. After introducing the case for the Jansenist miracles, Hume evaluates the type of evidence they offer, seemingly according to his four supportive criteria.⁴²

In answer to the first criterion—that miracles must be attested by an adequate amount of witnesses in order to insure their validity—Hume admits that many of these Jansenist miracles “were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction.”

Concerning the second criterion—that people like to gossip and even lie about wonderful events—Hume admits that among these witnesses were “determined enemies to those opinions” who were not able to disprove the Jansenist claims.

Although the third criterion states that miracles occur among ignorant and barbarous nations, Hume explains that the Jansenist miracles occurred “in a learned age, and on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world.”⁴³

Hume's fourth criterion states that the miracle claims of many different religions cancel out rival ideologies. But such a criterion would be valid only if all miracle claims were *true*. That one religion may back its revelation claims with invalid “miracles” is no reason to reject a religion possessing valid claims. Inept systems cannot cancel a religion that may be supported by evidence that is shown to be probable. Since obviously not all miracle claims are valid, historical investigation into evidential claims in

a theistic universe is needed to ascertain if any religion has a probable basis.

Hume himself felt that the Jansenist claims had very strong positive evidence in their favor. How, then, does Hume respond to the concluding evaluation of the Jansenist miracles? He states:

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 sufficient refutation.⁴⁴

It is evident that Hume dismisses these claims not because of an insufficient basis of testimony, but because of the assumed impossibility of all miracles. Therefore, even such claims that are judged to have strong evidence are simply ignored. Again, in a clear example of circular reasoning, Hume assumes a conclusion because he has already decided in advance that "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle. . . ."

The fourth criticism of Hume's argument is that his four supportive criteria are invalid on historical grounds and cannot be applied to historical investigation.

How many accepted historical events were established by such unquestionably good witnesses as to guard against all error and suspicion? How much history is prejudiced by the fact that the one reporting had much to gain, such as Julius Caesar's accounts of his military victories? Are the Roman wars with the Gauls to be judged fictitious? How much history took place among ignorant and barbarous nations? Do we rule out all of ancient history on this account?

Clearly, by the standards that Hume used to judge miracles, history itself would be in question. However, it is well recognized that historical events can be known to a good degree of probability in spite of such questions. In fact, few scholars of the eighteenth century recognized this better than Hume, who is quite well known as a historian⁴⁵ as well as a philosopher. Yet, Hume did not subject his historical endeavors to these philosophical criteria. The criteria he described as being applicable to records of miracles he would not apply to history as a whole. The results would obviously be self-defeating for such a scholar who was also involved in the writing of history. But it is

equally reasonable to reject the application of these criteria to historical accounts of miracles as well.

The fifth and last criticism of Hume's stance on the question of miracles is that, although Hume rejected the knowledge of cause and effect, his argument against miracles clearly depends on the uniformity of the laws of nature. C. S. Lewis notes that such a concept of uniformity rests on some form of causal argument. Hume must assume that the small part of nature that man does know is the same as that part of nature that man does not know. He must also assume that nature in the future will follow its past pattern and vice versa.⁴⁶ But how can these principles be known to be true? Thus, the fact that miracles may not be occurring at this present time does not indicate that they have not happened in the past or that they will not happen tomorrow.

It is interesting that Hume fully realized that this was the case, since he taught in other works that the past can provide no basis (other than custom) for statements concerning the future. Nothing can be known to be true concerning the future on the basis of past conformity. Certainly no proof from past experience can provide a knowledge of such a transition to the present or future.⁴⁷

However, Hume abandoned this belief when he asserted that the uniformity of nature's laws could be used as a *proof* against miracles. He thereby violated both his own philosophical principle and the need to ascertain if this is a theistic universe in which miracles occur in history. Therefore, his argument can by no means rule out present or future miracles, to say nothing of any evidence for past miraculous events.

We thus conclude our overall critique by asserting that Hume's method of rejecting miracles must itself be rejected.

As noted above, Hume's essay was also the chief inspiration for the modern rejection of miracles. Updating Hume's reasoning and placing it in contemporary garb, it became popular to argue, for instance, that no evidence is sufficient to establish a miracle, since anything occurring in nature must be a natural event. Related approaches are taken by scholars such as Alastair McKinnon⁴⁸ and Patrick Nowell-Smith.⁴⁹ Another example is Flew's position that miracles are nonrepeatable events, whereas the scientifically established laws of nature are repeatable and therefore more readily verifiable. Therefore, the scientific is given precedence over the historical, and whenever an event

suspends the laws of nature, the law is simply expanded to include such events, therefore leaving only nonmiraculous, natural occurrences.⁵⁰ Such scholars additionally argue that a miracle could not be recognized as such even if one did occur. But it must likewise be concluded that those who reject miracles based on Hume's reasoning (including such modern renditions) must also be said to have done so invalidly. Although not following Hume's exact arguments, there are at least three points at which the critique given above also applies generally to these approaches today.

First, it is an improper procedure to define miracles incorrectly or to arbitrarily attempt to mount up the facts against them so that no evidence could establish their occurrence. It is thus clearly invalid to automatically state that any event in nature must be a natural event. That conclusion can be reached only if the possibility that God caused the event has already been ruled out. And that can only be established by an investigation of the facts. As remarked by C. S. Lewis, when such has not been done, the naturalist can only *assume* his position by arguing circularly, for such a position is certainly not evident a priori.⁵¹ Thus, one cannot assume that naturalism is the correct position by such circular reasoning any more than theists can state the case so that all such occurrences in question could be called miracles. Such approaches cannot properly solve this issue.

Such naturalistic theses also fall prey to the second critique of Hume. It was pointed out that one cannot determine, even by viewing the scientific evidence for the laws of nature, whether God intervened by a superior power to perform miracles. It should be obvious here that if a miracle has occurred, it cannot be called a natural event just because it happened in nature or because science has established these laws. Indeed, miracles *must* normally happen in nature if men are going to know of them at all. But the crucial question of the *cause* of the event, which is the most important factor, is not determined by such naturalistic approaches. *God* could still have *caused* such an event to occur in nature by exerting power superior to that of the natural laws. Therefore, our earlier point should be remembered—if probable evidence does indicate that a recognizable miracle has occurred in a theistic universe, then it provides *superior* evidence because it indicates that the laws of nature, however strong or scientifically verified, were temporarily suspended.

We noted above that Hume neglected to examine the possibility that God exists and that He acted in history to perform a miracle. This criticism also applies to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century reworkings of Hume's thesis, because if there is probable evidence for a recognizable miracle having occurred in a theistic universe, it cannot be dismissed simply by calling it a natural event. Neither can these events be dismissed by referring to the scientific verification of the laws of nature and then by expanding or adjusting these laws accordingly. This has already been shown in our previous two points and we will now present a third point against these naturalistic approaches.

It is true that if a miracle repeatedly occurs in a predictable manner under certain conditions, then it is probably more appropriate to attempt to adjust the law than to continue to call it a supernatural event. There are, however, several indications that an original law is correct and that a real miracle may have occurred and that it is recognizable as such. For instance, if a given law applies in all instances except the one in question, we have a good indication that the law is valid, especially since science relies so much on repeatability. Additionally, it may be virtually impossible to arrive at a new law that allows for the event, since it is so contrary to known reality. Also, a new law may endeavor to account for an event at the expense of allowing so many abnormalities that the original purpose behind the law is lost—in other words, it is no longer workable, due to its being qualified to such a large extent.⁵²

Therefore, if a probable event had certain characteristics, a good case could be made for it being a miracle. The strongest example would be an event that had at least four features. First, this occurrence would be nonrepeatable; second, it would be contrary to at least one law of nature; third, this would be the only known exception to this law; fourth, there would be no viable means by which to change the law without losing the law's purpose or workability, especially when the event is so contrary to known reality.

This is not to say that occurrences without such characteristics cannot be miraculous. Rather, it is being asserted that events that do have all four features present a much stronger case, as well as providing additional pointers as to its recognizability as a miracle.

This brings us back to our major critique, which asserts that

the facts must be examined in order to determine if such events have actually happened. I suggest that a strong refutation of both Hume and those who generally accept his thesis is that the resurrection of Jesus can be said, according to probability, to be an actual historical event performed by God in a theistic universe. Jesus' resurrection fulfills the four criteria listed above. The raising of Jesus was a nonrepeatable event and was definitely contrary to the natural laws governing the process called death. This event is the only probable exception to these laws and there is no known means to modify or change them. The universal law of death is that a dead person does not rise by any known natural means, especially in a glorified body, as reported by the eyewitnesses. Interestingly enough, Hume explicitly stated that the resurrection of a dead man would be a true miracle, necessitating the involvement of supernatural powers.⁵³

The purpose here is not to present an apologetic for Jesus' resurrection and for a Christian theistic world view, but to show that, as a probable historical event, this thesis offers a final and substantial criticism of Hume's position and also disproves those who have followed Hume's thesis. It is obvious that if a miracle has occurred, then the laws of nature *were* temporarily suspended, and positions to the contrary are incorrect.

Here we conclude our critique of Hume's essay against miracles and the views of those who have followed along similar lines of thought. Five criticisms were leveled at Hume and three criticisms were reapplied to contemporary approaches which follow Hume. In conclusion, it was found that miracles cannot be ruled out a priori. The possibility must be allowed that in a theistic universe God could have temporarily suspended the laws of nature by a superior power in order to perform a miracle; therefore, we must investigate the evidence to ascertain if such an event has occurred.

The Use of Empirical Criteria

Hume not only greatly influenced the rejecting of particular miraculous evidences for the inspiration of Scripture; he also doubted inspiration as a whole by suggesting that any theological work, such as the Bible, should be tested to see whether it contains abstract reasoning (and is thereby true by definition) or experimental reasoning (and is true by empirical data). If

neither test applies, then the work is said to be factually meaningless. This testing by means of empirical criteria also influenced philosophers, especially the logical positivists of the early twentieth century. In spite of the popularity of various types of empirical testing, we will note three criticisms that reveal that strict applications of this methodology are invalid.

The major problem for logical positivism was that the verification principle could not be verified. In other words, it failed its own test. This principle obviously cannot be true by abstract reasoning. First, such a position cannot be defined to be true. Second, tautological statements are said to reveal no real information about the world, whereas the verification principle is plainly intended to communicate a standard of meaningfulness. Nor can this principle be true by empirical testing, because sense data cannot prove that the only valid way to gain knowledge is by empiricism. In short, there was no way to verify the verification principle itself. Thus, positivism failed by its own epistemological standard. By endeavoring to show that theology was factually invalid, positivism factually invalidated itself.

It is interesting that Ayer agreed with this criticism and modified the verification principle in later years.⁵⁴ This criticism is generally accepted today, so that, strictly speaking, logical positivism no longer exists as a philosophical school of thought.⁵⁵

This criticism applies not only to Hume and to logical positivists but also to other philosophers who advocate that, except for statements that are true by definition, only empirically verifiable truths are meaningful. This includes the views of Comte, Schlick, and the Vienna Circle. In fact, this critique applies to any view that asserts that the only (or the chief) means of acquiring knowledge is by sense data. Briefly stated, there is no way to demonstrate that this is the only (or major) approach to epistemological issues. There is no way to prove that empirical investigation occupies such an exclusive (or semiexclusive) position.

Our second major criticism of these positions is that the possibility of miracles is often still rejected through the influence of Hume's essay. In other words, these philosophers have followed Hume in dismissing miracles not only because of the empirical criteria just discussed (criticism number one) but also because of man's experience of the laws of nature as seen earlier in this chapter. An example has already been noted above in the ap-

proach of Flew. However, it has been shown how Hume's reasoning against miracles (and those who follow him) is a second failure to explain away the miraculous. It should now be obvious that such attempts are still invalid for reasons such as those set forth earlier.

The third major criticism of such naturalistic hypotheses is that, once the strict application of empirical criteria is found to be faulty, theological issues can no longer be judged to be meaningless. Even Ayer admits that statements that cannot be said to be true either by definition or by empirical data may still be meaningful. In fact, he explicitly asserts that metaphysical statements cannot be eliminated without in-depth analyses of particular supportive arguments.⁵⁶

Once again, establishing a theistic universe relegates much meaning to an investigation of history to ascertain if recognizable miracles have occurred. Such is a meaningful endeavor. Interestingly, if the resurrection of Jesus was shown to be historically valid, this would be a decision in favor of an empirical event, established by the sense experience of the earliest eyewitnesses. Thus, even by the standards of a strict empiricism, there would be a solid miraculous basis for Christianity. If this or other miracles were shown to be historically (and empirically) valid, they would also constitute a final refutation of such views, as noted earlier.

Therefore, Hume's empirical criterion of testing is also not a valid procedure. Strict applications of such empirical standards of verification are clearly invalid. Indeed, some linguistic analysts do believe that metaphysical issues are not only meaningful but verifiable, as mentioned above.

To be sure, the philosophy of David Hume has been instrumental in causing many of the contemporary doubts concerning the inerrancy of the Scripture. His twofold support of errancy in the form of his essay against miracles and his proposal for empirical testing especially influenced nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophical and theological schools of thought. It is possible that his influence in this area is unparalleled in the history of philosophy. Yet, it is plain that both of these lines of argument, having been themselves disproven, have failed to disprove either the inspiration of the Scriptures or the miraculous element contained in it.

Thus we conclude this essay by asserting that both Hume's

position against miracles and his strict use of empirical testing are invalid. Several criticisms have been applied to each concept, revealing that they are abortive attempts to dismiss the inspiration of Scripture, as are modern renditions of similar argumentation. It was not our purpose here to construct a positive apologetic for inspiration or for God's existence, miracles, eternal life, or other aspects of theology that have been called into question by such methods. Yet such an apologetic is a distinct possibility, especially when such critical attempts fail.⁵⁷