

On Miracles

A Paraphrase/Condensation of the David Hume Essay

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Part I

Tillotson's argument: The authority of the scripture is in the eyewitness account of the apostles. Accepting testimony of the evidence of their senses over the evidence of our own senses is relying on weaker evidence, and weaker evidence can never destroy stronger evidence.

I've another argument.

Experience should be our only guide in reasoning, but experience will show you that experience isn't infallible. Will there be better weather in June or December? Experience will tell you June, but it's possible that better weather happens in December. Experience then corrects itself – instead of a sure statement, you begin to assign degrees of assurance to statements.

A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence. When experience is infallible, assurance can be complete. In other cases, he considers which side produces the weightier evidence, and settles on the most probable he can determine. (Example: better weather in June or December? There may be four instances where weather was better in December, compared to 100 in June. Therefore, there's a high degree of probability in the weather being better in June.) To establish probability, you seek out experience and put the various experiences in balance.

No form of reasoning is more common, useful, or necessary than reasoning based on the testimony of other human beings. Any assurance we place in testimony is derived from our experience in the veracity of human testimony, and the evidence of facts that conform to that testimony. These factors either confirm or deny human testimony: a reliable memory, an inclination to truth, and shame when detected in a falsehood.

Evidence from human testimony, however, is not experience. It is established by experience, and must bow to experience in the reasonable man. **Testimonies may conflict, and so the ultimate standard is always experience.** Many things may arise that contradict testimony and we assign a degree of probability to testimony in light of the strength or weakness of what stands against it.

Testimony may contradict testimony. The character and number of witnesses may vary. The manner in which they testify (whether they have an interest in the case, whether they are too violent or hesitant in testimony) can speak against or for the testimony.

Suppose a fact presented by testimony is extraordinary and marvelous. The more extraordinary the fact, the weaker the testimony becomes as evidence. We only place credit in a witness when that witness demonstrates conformity to reality, to experience. But a fact that falls outside our experience conflicts with that experience. These two (our experience and the attested fact) spend their force on each other, and the victor then establishes itself to us only with its remaining force.

It is experience that justifies accepting testimony into our reasoning, and so experience speaks more strongly against the more extraordinary fact.

Note the byword of Rome: *I should not believe such a story were it told to me by Cato*. An incredible fact can invalidate great authority.

An Indian prince is said to have scoffed at the idea of frost, something so very far outside the realm of his experience. It took very strong testimony to persuade the prince of the reality of frost. Frost, you see, wasn't contrary to his experience, but it didn't conform to it.

Now suppose the affirmed fact isn't just extraordinary (frost to an Indian prince) but is in fact miraculous. Suppose further that the testimony is indeed a complete and full proof of said event. The strongest proof (experience or testimony) must prevail, though diminished by the force of its opposition.

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. Firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, and no more complete proof of experience against miracles can be made. Nothing is a miracle if it happens in the common course of nature. It is not a miracle if a person in good health should suddenly die; this is unusual, but still observed frequently. But it is a miracle if a dead man should come to life, because this has never been observed, in any age and country. To be a miracle, an event must have a uniform experience against it happening, but the uniform experience is the direct and complete proof against the existence of a miracle. To establish the occurrence of a miracle or even to make the miracle credible, a superior opposing proof must be presented.

No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony is of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact that it seeks to establish. Even here, there is a mutual destruction of evidentiary force, and the superior becomes probable only to the degree of force left unspent. If someone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I consider whether it is more probable that this person deceives or has been deceived, or whether the fact actually happened. **I weigh one miracle against the other**, and the superior evidence leads me to reject the greater miracle. Only if the falsehood of his testimony is more miraculous than the attested event will the man command my belief or opinion.

Part II

In the previous section, we supposed that testimony could produce a full and entire proof. We supposed that the evidentiary force of such a proof would be something to contend with. These suppositions are easily shown to be wrong.

1. **No miracle has ever been attested under conditions of full assurance in the testimony.** Such conditions include: enough witnesses with enough good sense, education, and learning to demonstrate an inability to deceive themselves; with such credit and reputation as to have a great deal to lose if detected in a deception; attesting to facts performed openly in a celebrated part of the world so as to render any detection of deception unavoidable. These factors are what produce a full assurance in the testimony of men.
2. The human appetite for hearing and telling the extraordinary and marvelous weighs against the establishment of the prodigy. The more novel the event, the stronger our passions and delight in hearing it. We love to hear the new

and the unfamiliar, and race to be the first to relay the latest gossip. **Any event that stirs our surprise and wonder, that gives us such great pleasure in the hearing, should awaken an equally strong suspicion in its veracity.** For example: two young people see each other twice, and the entire neighborhood has them married. The passions involved in spreading these rumors are the same passions, provoked to a higher degree, which cause us to believe and report religious miracles. (This inclination may be checked at times by sense and learning, but it can never be thoroughly banished from human nature.)

3. **Miracles seem to always abound among ignorant and barbarous nations.** If a civilized people give credence to the reports of miracles, they do so because they have received them from ignorant or barbarous ancestors. The stories of the origin of nations always happens in a time when natural laws are out of joint; but the closer we advance to modern times, the more events are explainable as natural laws, and the appetite for the unusual is exposed more frequently in that nation's history. The false prophet Alexander began his impostures among the weak-minded Paphlagonians, growing in stature from this fertile ground until he was even able to attract the attention of Marcus Aurelius. Had he moved to Athens to begin his false prophecy, the sharper minds there would have quickly spread word of his delusions.
4. **The various testimonies for miracles within the various religions of the world cancel each other out,** for they are all advanced to establish their particular religion to the exclusion of all others. One of the most attested miracles in pagan history is Vespasian's healing of a blind man by the prompting of the god Serapis, and after he unseated the Flavian dynasty, they could no longer fund an investigation into the matter. Even the Cardinal de Retz, when presented with a man who'd regained a lost limb, gave no credence to the report simply because such evidence carried falsehood on the face of it. What else could refute the cloud of witnesses to the miracles of Abbe Paris's tomb but the absolute impossibility of the events related? If two armies in antiquity claimed victory for the same battle, how could we determine the victor at our distance? The conflict of miracles between the different religions and factions is a similar problem.

When reading a report that favors the passions of the reporter, we do well to question the account. But what greater passion can there be to be seen as an ambassador from heaven? What dangers wouldn't you face to stand in that position? And if vanity and imagination had caught you up in the delusion, why would you stop at using a pious fraud to advance your holy agenda?

People are so ready to believe without question – the reports of history are littered with extraordinary tales both exposed in their infancy and allowed to languish after a period of acceptance. **Such stories, wherever they are found, are rightly explained by the known and natural principles of credulity and delusion.** This is far more reasonable than admitting a violation of established natural law.

Modern courts have difficulty in determining what happened a few weeks ago – is there a profitable way of determining the veracity of religious miracles in the past? At the first telling, the wise and learned think the matter too small to attend to. If the story grows large enough to be noticed, the records and witnesses have perished which might have exposed it as false. Only a close

examination of the testimony itself can detect the falsehood then, and most can't appreciate the delicacy of such a task.

No testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less a proof. Even if it could amount to a proof, it stands in conflict with an opposing proof – universal experience to the contrary. **Experience lends its support to human testimony, the same experience that assures us of the laws of nature.** When testimony and the laws of nature stand opposed, we can take the time to determine the amount that one cancels out the other, and embrace the probability that results one way or the other. But as you can see, **the evidentiary force of testimony to the miraculous is nullified in and of itself. No human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.**

Let me be perfectly clear. Suppose that all authors, in all languages, agreed that from the first of January 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days. Suppose further that the testimony remained lively, so that travelers around the globe brought back this story without variation. It would be better for scientists to search for the natural cause to this event than to doubt the testimony, for the decay, corruption and dissolution of nature is a probable thing.

Yet if all English historians agreed that on the first of January 1600, Queen Elizabeth died to the agreement of all who examined her, physicians, courtiers, one and all, and yet one month later she appeared alive, resumed her throne, and ruled for three further years, I wouldn't believe it at all. I wouldn't doubt that her death had been a pious fraud, nor would I doubt the events that followed from it, but I would assert that such a death and revival could not possibly be true. You might implore me to find some sense in why she would have done such a thing, and I would confess to being astonished. I have more experience, however, with the knavery and folly of men than to believe such a violation of the laws of nature.

Had such an event been the centerpiece for a new system of religion, I contend that it would be full proof of the deception without further cause of examination. The Being so invoked in the miracle might indeed be Almighty, but this gives the event no increased probability – the only experience we have had of such a Being is in the usual course of nature, in the laws we observe every day. Such observation of the Almighty obliges us to compare the violation of truth in the testimony of man with the violation of the laws of nature, to determine which is more probable. Since violations of truth are more common in the testimony to miracles than in any other area of testimony whatsoever, such testimony is greatly diminished in authority and makes us resolve never to lend any attention to it, no matter what the testimony asserts.

Lord Bacon agrees with these sentiments – he counsels caution in the face of the extraordinary, especially regarding the testimony that comes from religion.

Those disguised enemies of Christianity who would defend this religion on the principles of human reason are thus completely confounded. **Our most holy religion is founded on Faith, not Reason, and submitting our religion to a trial of Reason makes this quite plain.** Think of examining just the first five books of the Bible on such a basis, as if it were the product of a human author and not the received Word of God. We would then see them as the product of a barbarous and ignorant people, written from the accounts of their more barbarous

and ignorant ancestors, long after the events occurred. They partake of the same suspension of the laws of nature as the origins of pagan nations employ. They are full of prodigies and miracles. They tell of a state of the world and human nature entirely different from today – of the fall from that state – of men who live for a thousand years – of the destruction of the world by a flood – of the arbitrary choice of one people as the favorites of heaven – these people being the countrymen of the author – of their deliverance from bondage by prodigies the most astonishing imaginable...

I ask you which would be more extraordinary and miraculous to believe: the falsehood of such a human book supported by such testimony, or all the miracles such a book relates. This is what those who would defend Christianity by Reason would have us do.

This essay applies to prophecies as well, since they are miracles. Human nature cannot foretell future events, or otherwise prophecy could not serve as the argument for a divine mission or authority from heaven. We may conclude, then, that the Christian religion was not only advanced from the first with miracles, but cannot today be believed by any reasonable person without one. **Reason cannot commend it to us, but whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his heart**, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him the determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

The Shortest Version of This Essay Possible:

Experience allows us to accept testimony into our reasoning, but testimony to the miraculous undermines experience, the justification for accepting testimony. Therefore, reasonable people can reject miracles established only by testimony.