

The Problem of Miracles: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective

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SUMMARY

Modern skepticism concerning the gospel miracles first asserted itself by denying the miraculous nature of the events. Soon, however, the historicity of the events themselves was denied. Behind this skepticism lay the broad conception of a Newtonian world-machine, the arguments of Spinoza against the possibility of miracles, and the arguments of Hume against the identification of miracles. Counterpoised to these attacks were the defenses of miracles written by Le Clerc, Clarke, Less, Paley, and others. An assessment of the debate shows that, *contra* the Newtonian conception, miracles should not be understood as violations of the laws of nature, but as naturally impossible events. *Contra* Spinoza, admission of miracles would not serve to subvert natural law, and the possibility that a miracle is a result of an unknown natural law is minimized when the miracles are numerous, various, momentous, and unique. *Contra* Hume, it is question-begging or invalid to claim that uniform experience is against miracles.

THE PROBLEM OF MIRACLES: A HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Nineteenth Century Collapse of Belief in Miracles

There are two steps to follow in establishing that a miracle has occurred, according to the Göttingen professor of theology Gottfried Less in his *Wahrheit der christlichen Religion* (1758): first, one must determine the historicity of the event itself and, second, one must determine the miraculous character of that event. [1] During the ensuing century, the viability of both of these steps came to be regarded with scepticism, resulting in the general collapse within German theology of the credibility of the gospel miracle stories.

Denial of the Miraculous Nature of Gospel Miracles

First to go was the second step. German Rationalists of the late seventeenth/early eighteenth centuries were willing, indeed, sometimes eager, to grant the historicity of the event itself, as called for in step one. But they were at pains to provide a purely natural explanation for the event, thus undercutting step two. Given that events with supernatural causes do not occur, there simply had to be some account available in terms of merely natural causes. Thus Karl Bahrdt, in his *Ausführung des Plans und Zwecks Jesu* (1784-92) explains the feeding of the 5000 by postulating a secret store of bread which Jesus and his disciples distributed to the multitude; Jesus' walking on the water was effected by a platform floating just beneath the surface; his raising the dead was

actually reanimation from a coma, thus preventing premature burial. This last explanation provided the key to explaining Jesus' own resurrection. By the end of the eighteenth century, the theft hypothesis, so dear to Deism, had apparently pretty much lost conviction, and a new explanation was needed. This German Rationalism found in the apparent death (*Scheintod*) theory. According to Bahrdt, Jesus' death and resurrection were a hoax engineered by Jesus himself to convince people that he was the Messiah.

But the dean of the natural explanation school was certainly H. E. G. Paulus, professor of theology at Heidelberg. In his *Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (1800-02)*, *Das Leben Jesu, als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums (1828)*, and *Exegetisches Handbuch über die drei ersten Evangelien (1830)*, he perfected the art of explaining naturalistically the miraculous elements in the gospels while retaining a close adherence to the letter of the text. A pantheist who accepted Spinoza's dictum, '*Deus sive Natura*,' Paulus rejected all miracles *a priori*. Although he staunchly insisted that the main point of his *Leben Jesu* was not to explain away miracles, [2] it is nevertheless true that he expended a great deal of effort doing precisely this, and it is chiefly for this effort that he is remembered. According to Paulus, miracles are not the important thing, but rather the spirit of Jesus as seen in his thought and actions. [3] It is the person of Jesus in his moral character and courage that is truly miraculous. '*Das Wunderbare von Jesus ist er selbst.*' [4] The true meaning of Christianity is to be found in the teachings of Jesus, which, Paulus says, are self-evidently true, as demonstrated by their inner spirituality. In any case, literal miracles, even if they had occurred, would contribute nothing toward grounding the Christian truth. 'The main point is already certain in advance, that the most inexplicable changes in the course of Nature can neither overturn nor prove any spiritual truth, since it cannot be seen from any event of Nature for what spiritual purpose it should so happen and not otherwise.' [5] Once a person has grasped the spiritual truth of Jesus' person and teaching, miracles become superfluous anyway. 'The proof from miracles itself always demands first, as it must, that the claims should be worthy of God and not contrary to reason. If this be the case, then a miracle is no longer necessary as a proof for them.' [6] Paulus's *a priori* rejection of the miraculous is perhaps best seen in his response to the objection, why all this effort to explain away the extraordinary as something within the order of nature? [7] He answers, in order to find the more probable explanation; and, he adds, the more probable explanation is that which can be made easier to believe. Since for post-Enlightenment thinkers, miracles had ceased to be believable, a natural explanation would always be preferred. When Paulus states further that probability always depends on whether an effect can

be derived from the causes at hand, [8] then the presuppositional nature of his anti-supernaturalism becomes clear. For now the most probable explanation is seen by definition to be a purely natural explanation; hence, his efforts to explain away the miraculous.

It is noteworthy that Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, followed Paulus's lead in these regards. Schleiermacher remained rationalistic with respect to the denial of miracles, and he attached no religious importance to the resurrection of Jesus. In his lectures of 1832, *Der Christus des Glaubens und der Jesus der Geschichte*, he passively accepts Paulus's theory of Jesus' merely apparent death, stating that it is unimportant whether the death and resurrection were real or apparent. Schleiermacher himself believed that Jesus' resurrection was only a resuscitation and that he continued to live physically with the disciples for a time after this event.

Denial of the Historicity of Gospel Miracles

Just three years after Schleiermacher's lectures, however, a work appeared which sounded the death knell for the natural explanation school and also served to undercut the first step of Less's procedure: David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*. In its consistent application of mythological explanations to the New Testament, Strauss's work obviated any need to concede the historicity of the gospel miracles even *qua* events. Strauss rejected the conspiratorial theories typified by the Deist Hermann Samuel Reimarus as characteristic of the eighteenth century's simplistic, naive approach to matters of religious belief. In his helpful treatise, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus und seine Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (1861), Strauss describes the prior century's reductionistic attitude toward revealed religion: 'All positive religions without exception are works of deception: that was the opinion that the eighteenth century cherished within its heart, even if it did not always pronounce it as frankly as did Reimarus.' [9] Thus, whenever miraculous events were encountered in the Scriptures, these were facily explained away as lies or hoaxes deliberately perpetrated by the persons involved. This sort of explanation completely misunderstands the nature of religious commitment and devotion, charges Strauss. Only the eighteenth century could have conjoined deliberate deception with the apostles' religious zeal; for these are two incompatible things. The nineteenth century considers it a foregone conclusion that no historically permanent religion was ever founded through deception, but that all were founded by people who were themselves convinced. Christianity cannot, therefore, be passed off as simply a hoax. When Reimarus says that Christianity is not a divine revelation, but a human fraud, we know today that this is an error, that Christianity is not a fraud. But the rejection of Reimarus's hypothesis does not entail embracing the supernaturalists' explanation. Reimarus's '*Nein*' to the traditional view remains

'Nein,' but his 'Ja' to deception must yield to a better answer.

That answer was not to be found in the natural explanation school epitomized by Paulus. The contrived and artificial character of so many of these explanations was painfully apparent, and the proffered explanations were no more believable than the miracles themselves. Moreover, the natural system of interpretation, while it sought to preserve the historical certainty of the narrative, nevertheless lost its ideal truth. For example, if the transfiguration were, as Paulus claimed, an accidental, optical phenomenon and the two men either images of a dream or simply unknown persons, then what, asks Strauss, is the significance of the narrative? What was the motive for preserving in the church's memory a story so void of ideas and barren of inference, resting upon a delusion? Strauss believed that the natural explanation school abandoned the substance to save the form, whereas his alternative would, by renouncing the historical facticity of the narrative, rescue and preserve the idea which resides in it and which alone constitutes its vitality and spirit.

This alternative Strauss found in the mythological interpretation of the gospels. According to this view, the miraculous events recorded in the gospels never occurred, but are the product of religious imagination and legend, and, hence, require no historical explanation as the Supernaturalists, Deists, and Rationalists assumed. Although Strauss had his predecessors in employing the concept of myth to explain particular elements in the Scriptural narratives, he was the first to compose a wholesale account of the life of Jesus utilizing mythological explanation as the key hermeneutical method. According to Strauss himself, up until the time of his writing, myth had been applied to the childhood and ascension stories of Jesus' life, but not the life of Jesus itself; this yielded a framework in which ' . . . the entrance to the gospel history was through the decorated portal of mythus, and the exit was similar to it, whilst the intermediate space was still traversed by the crooked and toilsome paths of natural interpretations.' In his *Leben Jesu*, Strauss sought to show in detail how all supernatural events in the gospels can be explained as either myth, legend, or redactional additions.

Strauss claimed to operate without any religious or dogmatic presuppositions; he ascribed this neutrality to the influence of his philosophical studies. Nevertheless, it is clear that Strauss did operate on the basis of certain philosophical (if we wish not to call these religious or dogmatic) presuppositions, such as the impossibility of miracles. As an acknowledged pantheist and in later life a materialist, Strauss proceeded, like the Rationalists before him, from the assumption that miracles are impossible in principle. According to Strauss, this is not a presupposition requiring proof; on the contrary, to affirm that miracles are possible is a presupposition which requires proof.

[11] God acts immediately on the universe only as a whole, but not on any particular part; on any particular part he acts only mediately through the causal laws of all other parts of nature. Hence, with regard to the resurrection, God's interposition in the regular course of nature is 'irreconcilable with enlightened ideas of the relation of God to the world.' [12] Thus, any purportedly historical account of miraculous events must be dismissed out of hand; 'indeed no just notion of the true nature of history is possible without a perception of the inviolability of the chain of finite causes, and of the impossibility of miracles. [13] Thus, although Strauss rejected the Rationalist hermeneutic of natural explanation in favor of the mythological, he remained rationalistic in his rejection of the miraculous.

Strauss's application of the category of myth to the miraculous element in the gospels proved a decisive turning point. According to Schweitzer in his history of the Life of Jesus movement *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (1906), the critical study of the life of Jesus falls into two periods with Strauss. 'The dominant interest in the first is the question of miracle. What terms are possible between a historical treatment and the acceptance of supernatural events? With the advent of Strauss, this problem found a solution, viz., that these events have no rightful place in history, but are simply mythical elements in the sources. [14] By the mid-1860's the question of miracles had lost all importance. Schweitzer explains,

That does not mean that the problem of miracle is solved. From the historical point of view it is really impossible to solve it, since we are not able to reconstruct the process by which a series of miracle stories arose, or a series of historical occurrences were transformed into miracle stories, and these narratives must simply be left with a question mark standing against them. What has been gained is only that the exclusion of miracle from our view of history has been universally recognized as a principle of criticism, so that miracle no longer concerns the historian either positively or negatively. Scientific theologians of the present day who desire to show their 'sensitivity,' ask no more than that two or three little miracles may be left to them--in the stories of the childhood perhaps, or in the narratives of the resurrection. And these miracles are, moreover, so far scientific that they have at least no relation to those in the text, but are merely spiritless, miserable little toy dogs of criticism, flea-bitten by rationalism, too insignificant to do historical science any harm, especially as their owners honestly pay the tax upon them by the way in which they speak, write, and are silent about Strauss. [15]

Until Strauss it had been pretty generally agreed that the events in question had actually occurred--it was just a matter of explaining how they took place. But with Strauss, the miraculous events

recorded in the gospels never in fact happened: the narratives are unhistorical tales determined by myth and legend.

Strauss's work completely altered the whole tone and course of German theology. By rejecting on the one hand the conspiratorial theory of Reimarus and on the other the natural explanation theory of Paulus, and by proposing a third explanation of the gospel narratives in terms of myth, legend, and redaction, Strauss in effect dissolved the central dilemma of eighteenth century orthodoxy's argument for the miracles of Jesus: that if the miracles be denied, then the apostles must be written off as either deceivers or deceived, neither of which is plausible. The evangelists were now seen to be neither deceivers nor deceived, but rather they stood at the end of a long process in which the original events were re-shaped through mythological and legendary influences. The dissolution of the orthodox dilemma did not logically imply that the Supernaturalist view was therefore false. But this Strauss not only took to have been shown by Reimarus-inspired objections concerning contradictions and inconsistencies in the narratives, but for him this was simply given by definition in his criteria for discerning mythological motifs, which were in turn predicated upon the *a priori* presupposition of the impossibility of miracles. Any event which stood outside the inviolable chain of natural causes and effects was *ipso facto* unhistorical and therefore to be mythologically accounted for. In Strauss's later *Glaubenslehre*, he explains in some detail *die Auflösung des Wunderbegriffs*, recounting the arguments of Spinoza, Hume, and Lessing to show that the concept has now become obsolete. [16] This was the legacy which Strauss bequeathed to his successors. The same naturalistic assumption that guided Strauss's historical investigations also determines, for example, the influential work of Rudolf Bultmann in our own century. [17] Bultmann's approach to the New Testament was guided by, among others, two underlying presuppositions: (1) the existence of a full-blown pre-Christian Gnosticism and (2) the impossibility of miracles. While he sought to present evidence in support of (1), he simply assumed (2). Like Strauss he seemed to regard the impossibility of miracles as a presupposition not requiring proof, and many contemporary scholars would also appear to accept a similar position. Pesch asserts that the central task of dogmatic theology today is to show how Jesus can be the central figure of God's revelation without presupposing 'a "theistic-supernaturalistic model of revelation and mediation," which is no longer acceptable to our thought. [18] According to Hans Frei, reasons for rejecting as unhistorical reports which run contrary to our general experience of natural, historical, or psychological occurrences 'have become standard explanation of the criteria that go into making unprejudiced ("presuppositionless") assessments of what is likely to have

taken place in the past, and what is not. [19] Such a perspective makes it impossible even to regard the gospel miracles as events of history, much less to establish them as such.

The Eighteenth Century Crucible

The scepticism of the last and present centuries concerning miracles grew out of what Burns has called 'the Great Debate on Miracles' during the Deist controversy of the seventeenth and especially eighteenth centuries. [20] It would be well, therefore, to return to that great divide in order to rediscover and assess the rational foundations of contemporary criticism's rejection of the miraculous.

The Newtonian World-Machine

The backdrop for the eighteenth century debate was the widespread world-view of Newtonian mechanism. Under Newton's pervasive influence, the creation had come to be regarded as the world-machine governed by eternal and inexorable laws. Indeed, this complex and harmoniously functioning system was thought to constitute the surest evidence that God exists. Diderot wrote, It is not from the metaphysician that atheism has received its most vital attack. . . . If this dangerous hypothesis is tottering at the present day, it is to experimental physics that the result is due. It is only in the works of Newton, of Muschenbroeck, of Hartzoecker, and of Nieuwentit, that satisfactory proofs have been found of the existence of a reign of sovereign intelligence. Thanks to the works of these great men, the world is no longer a God; it is a machine with its wheels, its cords, its pulleys, its springs, and its weights. [21]

Given such a picture of the world, it is not surprising that miracles were characterized as violations of the laws of nature. For the same evidence that pointed to a cosmic intelligence also served to promote belief in a Deity who master-minded the great creation but who took no personal interest in the petty affairs of men. It simply seemed incredible to think that God would intervene on this tiny planet on behalf of some people living in Judea. Voltaire exemplified this incredulous attitude. In his *Dictionary* article on miracles, he asserts that a miracle is, properly speaking, something admirable; hence, 'The stupendous order of nature, the revolution of a hundred millions of worlds around millions of suns, the activity of light, the life of animals, all are grand and perpetual miracles. [22] But according to accepted usage, 'A miracle is the violation of mathematical, divine, immutable, eternal laws [23] ; therefore, it is a contradiction in terms. But, it is said, God can suspend these laws if he wishes. But why should he wish so to disfigure this immense machine? It is said, on behalf of mankind. But is it not 'the most absurd of all extravagances to imagine that the

infinite Supreme Being would on behalf of three or four hundred emmets on this little atom of mud 'derange the operation of the vast machinery that moves the universe? [24]Voltaire's God, indeed the God of all Deists, was the cosmic architect who engineered and built the machine, but who would not be bothered to interfere in the trivial affairs of man. In this light miracles simply became unbelievable.

Benedict de Spinoza

The philosophical attack on miracles, however, antedated Newton's *Principia* (1687). As early as 1670 Benedict de Spinoza in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* had argued against the possibility of miracles and their evidential value. [25] He attempts to establish four points: (1) nothing happens contrary to the eternal and unchangeable order of nature; (2) miracles do not suffice to prove God's existence; (3) biblical 'miracles' are natural events; and (4) the Bible often uses metaphorical language concerning natural events so that these appear miraculous. I shall leave (3) and (4) to my colleagues in biblical studies, but the first two contentions merit closer exposition here. (1) Spinoza argues that all that God wills or determines is characterized by eternal necessity and truth. Because there is no difference between God's understanding and will, it is the same to say God knows or wills a thing. Therefore the laws of Nature flow from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature. So should some event occur which is contrary to these laws, that would mean the divine understanding and will are in contradiction with the divine nature. To say God does something contrary to the laws of Nature is to say God does something contrary to his own nature, which is absurd. Therefore, everything that happens flows necessarily from the eternal truth and necessity of the divine nature. What is called a miracle is merely an event that exceeds the limits of human knowledge of natural law. (2) Spinoza maintains, in rationalist tradition, that a proof for the existence of God must be absolutely certain. But if events could occur to overthrow the laws of Nature, then nothing is certain, and we are reduced to scepticism. Miracles are thus counter-productive; the way in which we are certain of God's existence is through the unchangeable order of Nature. By admitting miracles, which break the laws of Nature, warns Spinoza, we create doubts about the existence of God and are led into the arms of atheism! And at any rate, an event contrary to the laws of Nature would not warrant the conclusion to God's existence: the existence of a lesser being with enough power to produce the effect would suffice. Finally, a miracle is simply a work of Nature beyond man's ken. Just because an event cannot be explained by us, with our limited knowledge of Nature's laws, does not mean that God is the cause in any supernatural sense.

David Hume

If Spinoza attacked the possibility of the *occurrence* of a miracle, Hume attacked the possibility of the *identification* of a miracle. In his essay 'Of Miracles,' which constitutes the tenth chapter of his *Enquiry*, Hume presses a two-pronged attack against the identification of a miracle in the form of an 'Even if . . . , but in fact . . .' counterfactual judgment. [26] That is to say, in the first portion of the essay, he argues against the identification of any event as a miracle while granting certain concessions, then in the second half he argues on the basis of what he thinks is in fact the case. We may differentiate the two prongs of his argument by referring to the first as his 'in principle' argument and to the second as his 'in fact' argument. The wise man, he begins, proportions his belief to the evidence. To decide between two hypotheses, one must balance the experiments for each against those for the other in order to determine which is probably true; should the results be one hundred to one in favor of the first hypothesis, then it is a pretty safe bet that the first is correct. When the evidence makes a conclusion virtually certain, then we may speak of a 'proof,' and the wise man will give whole-hearted belief to that conclusion. When the evidence renders a conclusion only more likely than not, then we may speak of a 'probability,' and the wise man will accept the conclusion as true with a degree of confidence proportionate to the probability. So it is with human testimony. One weighs the reports of others according to their conformity with the usual results of observation and experience; thus, the more unusual the fact reported, the less credible the testimony is. Now, Hume argues, even if we concede that the testimony for a particular miracle amounts to a *full proof*, it is still in principle impossible to identify that event as a miracle. For standing opposed to this proof is an equally full proof, namely the evidence for the unchangeable laws of nature, that the event in question is not a miracle. 'A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, a proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. [27] Thus the testimony of the uniform experience of mankind stands on one side of the scales against the testimony in any particular case that a transgression of that experience has occurred. Thus, proof stands against proof, and the scales are evenly balanced. Since the evidence does not incline in either direction, the wise man cannot believe in a miracle with any degree of confidence. Indeed, Hume continues, no testimony could establish that a miracle has taken place unless the falsehood of that testimony would be an even greater miracle than the fact it seeks to establish. And even then the force of the evidence would only be the difference between the two.

But in fact the evidence for miracles does not amount to a full proof. Indeed, the evidence is so poor, it does not amount even to a probability. Therefore, the decisive weight falls on the side of the scale containing the full proof for the regularity of nature, a weight so heavy that no evidence for a purported miracle could hope to counterbalance it. Hume supplies four reasons, which are a catalogue of typical Deist objections to miracles, why in fact the evidence for miracles is so negligible: (1) No miracle in history is attested by a sufficient number of men of good sense and education, of unimpeachable integrity so as to preclude deceit, of such standing and reputation so that they would have a good deal to lose by lying, and in sufficiently public a manner. (2) People crave the miraculous and will believe absurd stories, as the multitude of false miracles shows. (3) Miracles only occur among barbarous peoples. (4) All religions have their own miracles and therefore cancel each other out in that they support irreconcilable doctrines. Hume adduces three examples: Vespasian's healing of two men as related by Tacitus, a healing reported by Cardinal de Reutz, and the healings at the tomb of the Abbé Paris. The evidence for miracles, therefore, does not even begin to approach the proof of the inviolability of nature's laws. Hume concludes that miracle can never be the foundation for any system of religion.

The Defense of Miracles

Orthodox defenders were not lax in responding to the objections of Spinoza and Hume, as well as to the popular Newtonian world view in general. Let us consider first some of the replies to Spinoza's arguments against the impossibility of miracles and then some of the responses to Hume's case against the identification of miracles.

1. Response to Spinoza

In his *Sentimens de quelques théologiens* (1685) Jean Le Clerc attempted to present an apologetic for Christianity that would be invulnerable to Spinoza's criticisms. He not only tried to answer Spinoza's biblical criticism but also his philosophical objections. Against these Le Clerc maintains that the empirical evidence for the miracles and the resurrection of Christ is more perspicuous and evidently true than Spinoza's abstract reasoning. [28] Le Clerc's point would seem to be that the back of this *a priori*, philosophical speculation is simply broken under the weight of the evidence. For Le Clerc empirical argument takes precedence over speculative argument. But he also rebuffs Spinoza's specific tenets. Against the allegation that miracles are simply natural events, Le Clerc insists that no one will be convinced that Jesus' resurrection and ascension could happen as naturally as a man's birth. Nor is it convincing to say Jesus' miracles could be the result of

unknown natural laws, he continues, for why, then, are not more of these effects produced and how is it that at the very instant Jesus commanded a paralyzed man to walk 'the Laws of Nature (unknown to us) were prepared and ready to cause the . . . Paralytic Man to walk'? [29] Both of these considerations show that the miraculous facts of the gospel, which can be established historically, are indeed of divine origin.

Considerable analysis was brought to the concept of miracle by Samuel Clarke in his Boyle lectures *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth Christian Revelation* (1705). He points out that to the power of God all events--miraculous or not--are alike. Furthermore, it is possible that created beings, including angels and demons, may have the power to produce any event, with the sole exception of *creatio ex nihilo*. [30] Reflecting Newtonian influence, Clarke asserts that matter has only the power to continue in its present state, be it rest or motion. Anything that is *done* in the world is done either by God or by created intelligent beings. The so-called natural forces of matter, such as gravitation, are properly speaking the effect of God's acting on matter at every moment. The implication of this is that the so-called 'course of nature' is a fiction; what we discern as the course of nature is nothing else than God's will, producing certain effects in a continual and uniform manner. [31] Thus, a miracle is not against the course of nature, which really does not exist, except only insofar as it is an unusual event which God does. [32] Thus, the regular 'works' of nature prove the being and attributes of God, and miracles prove the interposition of God into the regular order in which he acts. [33] Now from the miracle itself as an isolated event, it is impossible to determine whether it was performed immediately by God or by an angel or by a demonic spirit. Clarke insists that miracles done by demonic spirits are 'true and real' miracles that occur because God does not restrain the demonic spirit from acting at that point. [34] The means of distinguishing between demonic miracles and miracles wrought mediately or immediately by God is the *doctrinal* context in which the miracle occurs:

If the doctrine attested by miracles, be in itself *impious*, or manifestly *tending to promote Vice*; then without all question the Miracles . . . are neither wrought by God himself, nor by his Commission; because our natural knowledge of the Attributes of God, and of the necessary difference between good and evil, is greatly of more force to prove any such doctrine to be false, than any Miracles in the World can be to prove it true [35]

Should the doctrine be neutral in itself, but another person performs greater miracles within a context of doctrine contrary to the first, then the latter is to be accepted as the miracle of divine

origin. [36] Thus, the correct theological definition of a miracle is this: 'a work effected in a manner unusual, or different from the common and regular method of Providence, by the interposition either of God himself, or of some intelligent Agent superior to Man, for the proof or Evidence of some particular Doctrine, or in attestation to the Authority of some particular Person. [37] The relationship between doctrine and miracle is that miracle proves that a higher power is involved, and the doctrinal context of the miracle enables us to discern the source of the miracle as either God or Satan. Thus, the miracles prove the doctrine, but ' . . . at least the *indifference* of the Doctrine, is a necessary Condition or Circumstance, without which the *Doctrine* is not capable of being proved by any Miracles. [38] When applied to Jesus' miracles, this criterion proves that Jesus was 'a Teacher sent from God' and that he has 'a Divine Comission. [39]

In his *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrétienne* (1730-88), Jacob Vernet also seeks to answer the objection that any miracle is impossible because it is contrary to the order of Nature. [40] He defines a miracle as 'a striking work which is outside the ordinary course of Nature and which is done by God's all-mighty will, such that witnesses thereof regard it as extraordinary and supernatural. [41] Vernet does not, like Clarke, deny that there is a course of nature, but he does insist that the so-called course or order of nature is really composed of incidental states of events, not necessary or essential states. They depend on the will of God, and it is only the constant and uniform procession of the normal course of nature that leads us to think it is invariable. God does not change nature's course entirely, but can make exceptions to the general rules when he deems it important. These miracles serve to show that the course of nature 'is not the effect of a blind necessity, but of a free Cause who interrupts and suspends it when he pleases. [42] It might also be objected that the miracles are the result of a yet undiscovered operation of Nature itself. [43] Vernet replies that when the miracles are diverse and numerous, this possibility is minimized because it is hardly possible that all these unknown, marvelous operations should occur at the same time. Perhaps a single, isolated miracle might be so explained away, but not a series of miracles of different sorts.

In Claude François Houtteville's *La religion chrétienne prouvée par les faits* (1740), the Abbé argues against Spinoza that miracles are possible. [44] A miracle he defines as 'a striking action superior to all finite power,' or more commonly, as 'a singular event produced outside the chain of natural causes. [45] Given the existence of God, one sees immediately that miracles are possible, for a perfect Being who created the world also conserves it in being, and all the laws of its operation are directed by his sovereign hand. Against Spinoza's charge that miracles are impossible because

natural law is the necessary decree of God's nature, and God's nature is immutable, Houtteville rejoins that natural law is not necessary, that God is free to establish whatever laws he wills. Moreover, God can change his decrees when he wishes. And even if he could not, miracles could be part of God's eternal plan and decree for the universe just as much as natural laws, so that the occurrence of a miracle in no way represents a change of mind or decree on God's part. Houtteville even suggests that miracles are not contrary to nature, but only to what we know of nature. From God's perspective, they may conform to certain laws unknown to us.

Thus, the orthodox response to Spinoza's objections was quite multi-faceted. Hume's objections also elicited a variegated response.

2. Response to Hume

Although it was against Woolston's attacks on miracles that Thomas Sherlock wrote his *Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* (1729), the counsel for Woolston presents an argument against miracles that is anticipatory of Hume. Woolston's attorney argues that because Jesus' resurrection violates the course of Nature, no human testimony could possibly establish it, since it has the whole witness of nature against it. To this Sherlock replies: (1) If testimony is admitted only when the matter is deemed possible according to our conceptions, then many natural matters of fact would be excluded. [46] For example, a man living in a hot climate would never believe in that case testimony from others that water could exist in a solid state as ice. [47] (2) The resurrection is simply a matter of sense perception. [48] If we met a man who claimed to have been dead, we would be suspicious. But of what? --not that he is now alive, for this contradicts all our senses, but that he was ever dead. But would we say it is impossible to prove by human testimony that this man died a year ago? Such evidence is admitted in any court of law. Conversely, if we saw a man executed and later heard the man had come to life again, we would suspect, not that he was dead, but that he was alive again. But would we say that it is impossible for human testimony to prove that a man is alive? The reason we are suspicious in these cases is not because the matter itself does not admit of being proved by evidence, but only because we are more inclined to believe our own senses rather than reports of others which go contrary to our pre-conceived opinions of what can and cannot happen. Thus, considered as a fact, the resurrection requires no greater ability in the witnesses than to be able to distinguish between a dead man and a living man. Sherlock does admit that in such miraculous cases we may require more evidence than usual, but it is absurd to say that such cases admit of no evidence. (3) The resurrection contradicts neither right reason nor the laws of nature. [49] Sherlock takes yet a third course from Clarke and Vernet. The so-called

course of Nature arises from the prejudices and imaginations of men. Our senses tell us what the usual course of things is, but we go beyond our senses when we conclude that it cannot be otherwise. The uniform course of things runs contrary to resurrection, but that does not prove it to be absolutely impossible. The same Power that gave life to dead matter at first can give it to a dead body again; the latter feat is no greater than the former.

Gottfried Less in his *Wahrheit der christlichen Religion* (1758) discusses at length Hume's objections to miracles. Less defines a miracle as a work beyond the power of all creatures. [50] Of course, a miracle is such only in a context; healing itself, for instance, is not necessarily a miracle unless no natural means are employed. Also there are two types of miracles: (1) first degree miracles, which are wrought by the immediate power of God, and (2) second degree miracles, which are above any human power but are wrought by finite spiritual beings such as angels. First degree miracles are incapable of being proved because we never know whether a finite spiritual being might not be at work. Thus, only second degree miracles can be proved to have occurred.

So understood, miracles are possible. [51] Because God is the Lord of nature and can make events happen, it follows that miracles are physically possible. And because miracles are a part of God's eternal plan to confirm his teaching, they are morally possible. But did the gospel miracles occur? Although Hume discounts the testimony of the apostles because they were unlearned men, it is clear that to prove merely that something happened (for example, a disease's being healed by sheer verbal command) one need be no scholar but simply have five good senses and common sense. In fact, the New Testament witnesses fulfill even Hume's conditions for credibility of reports of miracles. [52] Thus, Hume should concede the historical certainty of the gospel miracles *qua* events.

But were these events miracles? Less now turns to a refutation of Hume's objections to establishing miracles by historical testimony. [53] Hume's principal argument is that testimony to miracles has the experience of the world and the centuries against it. In response, Less argues: (1) Because nature is the freely willed order of God, a miracle is just as possible as any event. Therefore, it is just as believable as any event. (2) Testimony to an event cannot be refuted by experiences and observations. Otherwise we would never be justified in believing anything outside our present experience; no new discoveries would be possible. (3) There is no contradiction between experience and Christian miracles. Miracles are different events (*contraria*) from experience in general, but not contradictory events (*contradictoria*) to experience in general. [54] The contradiction to the testimony that under the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Jesus

raised certain persons from the dead and himself so rose three days after his death must necessarily be the exact opposite of this statement, namely, that Jesus never raised anyone from the dead and never himself so rose. This latter has to be proved to destroy the gospel testimony. It is hardly enough to assert that experience in general says that dead men do not rise, for with this the Christian testimony is in full agreement. Only when the exact opposite is proved to be true can Christian testimony be said to contradict experience. Hume's other objections are easily dismissed: (1) No miracle has a sufficient number of witnesses. This is false with regard to the gospel miracles, for they were publicly performed. (2) People tend to believe and report miraculous stories without proper scrutiny. This shows only that our scrutiny of such stories ought to be cautious and careful. (3) Miracles originate among ignorant and barbaric peoples. This cannot be said to describe Jesus' miracles, which took place under Roman civilization in the capital city of the Jews. (4) All religions have their miracles. This is in fact not true, for no other religion purports to prove its teachings through miracles, and there are no religious miracles outside Jewish-Christian miracles. Less later examines in considerable detail the miracles alleged by Hume to have equal footing with Christian miracles, particularly the miracles at the tomb of the Abbé Paris. [55] In all these cases, the evidence that miracles have occurred never approaches the standard of the evidence for the gospel miracles. Therefore, none of Hume's objections can overturn the evidence for the gospel miracles.

William Paley's *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794) is primarily a studious investigation of the historical evidence for Christianity from miracles, and Paley's preliminary considerations to his investigation aim at an across-the-board refutation of Hume's objections. Paley makes it clear from the beginning that he presupposes the existence of the God proved by the teleological argument. [56] Given the existence of God, miracles are not incredible. [57] For why should it be thought incredible that God should want to reveal himself in the natural world to men, and how could this be done without involving a miraculous element? Any antecedent improbability in miracles adduced in support of revelation is not such that sound historical testimony cannot surmount it. This, says Paley, suffices to answer 'a modern objection to miracles,' which he later identifies as that of David Hume. [58] The presupposition of Hume's argument, he continues, is that '... it is contrary to experience that a miracle should be true, but not contrary to experience that testimony should be false. [59] Like Less, Paley argues that the narrative of a fact can be said to be contrary to experience only if we, being at the time and place in question, were to see that the alleged event did not in fact take place. What Hume really means by 'contrary to experience' is

simply the want of similar experiences. (To say a miracle is contrary to universal experience is obviously question-begging.) But in this case, the improbability arising from our want of similar experiences is equal to the probability that, given the event as true, we should also have similar experiences. But suppose Christianity was inaugurated by miracles; what probability is there then that we today must also have such experiences? It is clear that any such probability is negligible; hence, any improbability arising from our lack of such experience is also negligible. A miracle is not like a scientific experiment capable of being subsumed under a law and repeated, for then it would not be contrary to nature as such and would cease to be a miracle. The objection to miracle from want of similar experiences presupposes either (1) that the course of nature is invariable or (2) that if it can be varied, these variations must be frequent and general. But if the course of nature be the agency of an intelligent Being, should we not expect him to interrupt his appointed order only seldom on occasions of great importance? As to the cause of miracle, this is simply the volition of Deity, of whose existence and power we have independent proof. As to determining whether a miracle has in fact occurred, Paley considers Hume's account of the matter to be a fair one: which in any given case is more probable, that the miracle be true or that the testimony be false? But in saying this, Paley adds, we must not take the miracle out of the theistic and historical context in which it occurred, nor can we ignore the question of how the evidence and testimony arose. The real problem with Hume's scepticism becomes clear when we apply it to a test case: suppose twelve men, whom I know to be honest and reasonable persons, were to assert that they personally saw a miraculous event in which it was impossible that they had been tricked; further, the governor called them before him for an inquiry and told them that if they did not confess the imposture they would be tied up to a gibbet; and they all went to their deaths rather than say they were lying. According to Hume, I should still not believe them. But such incredulity, states Paley, would not be defended by any skeptic in the world.

Paley maintains against Hume's 'in fact' argument that no parallel to the gospel miracles exists in history. [60] Paley examines closely Hume's three examples and concludes that it is idle to compare such cases with the evidence for the miracles of the gospels. [61] In none of these cases is it unequivocal that a miracle has occurred. Even in other unexplained instances, it is still true that there is no evidence that the witnesses have passed their lives in labor, danger, and suffering voluntarily undergone in attestation to the truth of the accounts they delivered. Thus, the circumstance of the gospel history is without parallel.

Spinoza's arguments for the impossibility of miracles and Hume's arguments against the

identification of miracles were thus contested from various standpoints. It is noteworthy that virtually all of the Christian thinkers presupposed the existence of God in their arguments. It was not a case of theism versus atheism, but of Christian theism versus Deism. In that sense they did not try to found a system of religion on miracles; rather they argued that given the existence of God, miracles are possible and that no *a priori* barrier exists to the discovery of actual miracles on the basis of historical testimony.

Assessment of the Debate

Natural Law and Miracles

It will be remembered that the world view that formed the backdrop to the Deist controversy was a model of the universe as a Newtonian world-machine that bound even the hands of God. So ironclad a view of natural law is, however, untenable. Natural law is today understood essentially as *description*, not *prescription*. This does not mean that it cannot serve as a basis for prediction, for it does; but our formulation of a natural law is never so certain as to be beyond reformulation under the force of observed facts. Thus an event cannot be ruled out simply because it does not accord with the regular pattern of events. The advance of modern physics over the Newtonian world-machine is not that natural law does not exist, but that our formulation of it is not absolutely final. After all, even quantum physics does not mean to assert that matter and energy do not possess certain properties, such that anything and everything can happen; even indeterminacy occurs within statistical limits and concerns only the microscopic level. On the macroscopic level, firm natural laws do obtain. [62] But the knowledge of these properties and laws is derived from and based on experience. The laws of nature are thus not 'laws' in the rigid, prescriptive sense, but inductive generalizations.

This would appear to bring some comfort to the modern believer in miracles, for now he may argue that one cannot rule out *a priori* the fact that a certain event has occurred which does not conform to known natural law, since our formulation of natural law is never final and so must take account of the fact in question. It seems to me, however, that while this more descriptive understanding of natural law re-opens the door of possibility to certain anomalous events in the world, it does not help much in settling the question of miracles. The advantage gained is that one cannot rule out the occurrence of a certain event *a priori*, but the evidence for it must be weighed. The defender of miracles has thus at least gained a hearing. But one is still operating under the assumption, it would appear, that if the event really did run contrary to natural law, then it would be impossible for

it to have occurred. The defender of miracles appeals to the fact that our natural laws are only inductive generalizations and so never certain, in order to gain admittance for his anomalous event; but presumably if an omniscient mind knew with certainty the precise formulations of the natural laws describing our universe then he would know *a priori* whether the event was or was not actually possible, since a true law of nature could not be violated.

As Bilynskyj argues, whether one adopts a regularity theory of natural law (according to which laws are simply descriptive of events and have no special modal quality) or a necessitarian theory (according to which natural laws are not merely descriptive of events but possess a special sort of modality determining nomic necessity/possibility), still so long as natural laws are conceived of as universal inductive generalizations the notion of a 'violation of a law of nature' is incoherent. [63] For on the regularity theory, since a law is a generalized description of *whatever* occurs, it follows that an event which occurs cannot violate a law. And on the necessitarian theory, since laws are universal generalizations which state what is physically necessary, a violation of a law cannot occur if the generalization is to remain truly universal. So long as laws are conceived of as universal generalizations, it is logically impossible to have a violation of a true law of nature.

Suppose that one attempts to rescue the notion of a 'violation' by introducing into the law certain *ceteris paribus* conditions, for example, that the law holds only if either (1) there are no other causally relevant natural forces interfering, or (2) there are no other causally relevant natural or supernatural forces interfering. Now clearly, (1) will not do the trick, for even if there were no natural forces interfering, the events predicted by the law might not occur because God would interfere. Hence, the alleged law, as a purportedly universal generalization, would not be true, and so a law of nature would not be violated should God interfere. But if, as (2) suggests, we include supernatural forces among the *ceteris paribus* conditions, it is equally impossible to violate the law. For now the statement of the law itself includes the condition that what the law predicts will occur only if God does not intervene, so that if he does the law is not violated. Hence, so long as natural laws are construed as universal generalizations about events, it is incoherent to speak of miracles as 'violations' of such laws.

The upshot of Bilynskyj's discussion is that either natural laws ought not to be construed as universal generalizations about events or that miracles should not be characterized as violations of nature's laws. He opts for the first alternative, arguing that laws of nature are really about the dispositional properties of things based on the kinds of things they are. [64] He observes that most laws today, when taken as universal generalizations, are literally not true. They must include

certain *ceteris paribus* clauses about conditions which seldom or perhaps never obtain, so that laws become subjunctive conditionals concerning what would occur under certain idealized conditions. But that means that laws are true counterfactuals with no application to the real world. Moreover, if laws are merely descriptive generalizations, then they do not really explain anything; rather than telling why some event occurs, they only serve to tell us how things are. Bilynskyj therefore proposes that natural laws ought to be formulated as singular statements about certain kinds of things and their dispositional properties: things of kind *A* have a disposition to manifest quality *F* in conditions *C*, in virtue of being of nature *N*. [65] Laws can be stated, however, as universal dispositions, for example, 'All potassium has a disposition to ignite when exposed to oxygen.' On this understanding, to assert that an event is physically impossible is not to say that it is a violation of a law of nature, since dispositional laws are not violated when the predisposed behavior does not occur; rather an event *F* is not produced at a time *t* by the powers (dispositions) of the natural agents which are causally relevant to *F* at *t*. [66] Accordingly, a miracle is an act of God which is physically impossible and religiously significant. [67] On Bilynskyj's version of the proper form of natural laws, then, miracles turn out to be physically impossible, but still not violations of those laws.

I have a great deal of sympathy for Bilynskyj's understanding of natural law and physical impossibility. So as not to create unnecessary stumbling blocks, however, the defender of miracles might ask whether one might not be able to retain the standard necessitarian theory of natural laws as universal generalizations, while jettisoning the old characterization of miracles as 'violations of the laws of nature' in favor of 'events which lie outside the productive capacity of nature.' That is to say, why may we not take a necessitarian theory of natural law according to which laws contain *ceteris paribus* conditions precluding the interference of both natural and supernatural forces and hold that a miracle is not, therefore, a violation of a law of nature, but an event which cannot be accounted for wholly by reference to relevant natural forces? Natural laws are not violated by such events because they state what will occur only if God does not intervene; nevertheless, the events are still naturally impossible because the relevant natural causal forces do not suffice to bring about the event. Bilynskyj's objections to this view do not seem insuperable. [68] He thinks that on such a view it becomes difficult to distinguish between miracles and God's general providence, since according to the latter doctrine every event has in a sense a supernatural cause. This misgiving does not seem insurmountable, however, for we might construe God's providence as Bilynskyj himself does, as God's conservation of (and, we might add, concurrence with) all

secondary causes and effects in being, while reserving only his immediate and extra-concurrent causal activity in the world for inclusion in a law's *ceteris paribus* conditions. Bilynskyj also objects that the physical impossibility of a miracle is the reason we attribute it to supernatural causation, not *vice versa*. To define physical impossibility in terms of supernatural causation thwarts the motivation for having the concept of physical impossibility in the first place. But my suggestion is not to define physical impossibility in terms of supernatural causation, but, as Bilynskyj himself does, in terms of what cannot be brought about wholly by natural causes. One may argue that some event *E* is not a violation of a natural law, but that *E* is naturally impossible. Therefore, it requires a supernatural cause. It seems to me, therefore, that even on the necessitarian theory of natural law, we may rid ourselves of the incoherent notion of 'violation of the laws of nature' and retain the concept of the naturally impossible as the proper characterization of miracle.

So although an initial advantage has been won by the construal of natural laws as descriptive, not prescriptive, this advantage evaporates unless one abandons the incoherent characterization of a miracle as a 'violation of a law of nature' and adopts instead the notion of an event which is naturally impossible. Now the question which must be asked is how an event could occur which lies outside the productive capacity of natural causes. It would seem to be of no avail to answer with Clarke that matter has no properties and that the pattern of events is simply God's acting consistently, for, contrary to his assertion, physics does hold that matter possesses certain properties and that certain forces such as gravitation and electromagnetism are real operating forces in the world. Bilynskyj points out that Clarke's view entails a thorough-going occasionalism, according to which fire does not really burn nor water quench, which runs strongly counter to common sense. [69] Nor will it seem to help to answer with Sherlock and Houtteville that nature may contain within itself the power to produce events contrary to its normal operation, for this would not seem to be the case when the properties of matter and energy are sufficiently well-known so as to preclude to a reasonably high degree of certainty the occurrence of the event in question. Moreover, though this might secure the possibility of the event, so as to permit a historical investigation, it at the same time reduces the event to a freak of nature, the result of pure chance, not an act of God. It seems most reasonable to agree with modern science that events like the feeding of the 5000, the cleansing of the leper, and Jesus' resurrection really do lie outside the capability of natural causes.

But that being admitted, what has actually been proved? All that the scientist conceivably has the right to say is that such an event is naturally impossible. But with that conclusion the defender of

miracles may readily agree. We must not confuse the realms of logical and natural possibility. Is the occurrence of a miracle logically impossible? No, for such an event involves no logical contradiction. Is the occurrence naturally impossible? Yes, for it cannot be produced by natural causes; indeed, this is a tautology, since to lie outside the productive capacity of natural causes is to be naturally impossible.

The question is: what could conceivably make miracles not just logically possible, but really, historically possible? Clearly the answer is the personal God of theism. For if a personal God exists, then he serves as the transcendent cause to produce events in the universe which are incapable of being produced by causes within the universe (that is to say, events which are naturally impossible. But it is to such a personal, transcendent God that the orthodox defenders of miracles appealed. Given a God who conserves the world in being moment by moment (Vernet, Houtteville), who is omnipotent (Clarke), and free to act as He wills (Vernet, Less), the orthodox thinkers seem to be entirely justified in asserting that miracles are really possible. The question is whether given such a God miracles are possible, and the answer seems obviously, yes. It must be remembered that even their Deist opponents did not dispute God's existence, and Clarke and Paley offered elaborate defenses for their theism. But more than that: if the existence of such a God is even *possible*, then one must be open to the historical possibility of miracles. Only an atheist can deny the historical possibility of miracles, for even an agnostic must grant that if it is possible that a transcendent, personal God exists, then it is equally possible that He has acted in the universe. Hence, it seems that the orthodox protagonists in the classical debate argued in the main correctly against their Newtonian opponents and that their response has been only strengthened by the contemporary understanding of natural law.

Spinoza

1. First objection

With regard to Spinoza's objections to miracles, the orthodox thinkers seem to have again argued cogently. Turning to his first objection, that nothing happens contrary to the eternal and unchangeable order of nature, it must be remembered that Spinoza's system is a pantheistic one, in which God and nature are interchangeable terms. When we keep this in mind, it is little wonder that he argued against miracles on the basis of the unchangeable order of nature, for, there being no ontological distinction between God and the world, a violation of nature's laws is a violation of the being of God. But, of course, the question is not whether miracles are possible on a pantheistic

basis, but whether they are possible on a theistic basis. If God is personal and ontologically distinct from the world, there seems to be no reason why even a total alteration of the laws of nature should in any way affect God's being. There would seem to be no reason why God could not have established a different set of laws for this universe nor why he could not now change them. Vernet correctly argues against Spinoza that nature's laws are freely willed by God and are therefore subject to change. Contrary to Spinoza, the properties of matter and energy do not flow from the being of God with inexorable necessity, but are the result of his choice. Hence, he does not violate his own nature should he choose to produce an event in the world which is not the result of the immanent causes operating in the universe. Houtteville and Less also argued soundly against Spinoza that if God willed from eternity to produce a miracle at some point in time, then there is no change on God's part, either in his being or decrees. Thus, Spinoza's objection to miracles on the basis of the unchangeableness of nature is system-dependent upon pantheism.

2. Second Objection

Spinoza's second objection, it will be remembered, was that miracles do not suffice to prove God's existence. So stated, the objection found no foothold in the apologies of most orthodox thinkers, for virtually all of them used miracles, not as a proof for the existence of God, but as a proof of his action in the world. Thus, the objection was strictly speaking irrelevant. But Spinoza's supporting reasoning was pertinent to their arguments. His main point appears to have been that a proof for God's existence must be absolutely certain. Since, therefore, we conclude to the existence of God on the basis of the immutable laws of nature, anything that impugned those laws would make us doubt God's existence. Underlying this reasoning would appear to be two assumptions: (1) a proof for God's existence must be demonstratively certain and (2) God's existence is inferred from natural laws. The Christian thinkers denied respectively both of these assumptions. The first is based on Spinoza's rationalism, which prevents him from recognizing the cogency of an argument unless he can affix his *Q. E. D.* at the argument's conclusion. His more empirically minded opponents, however, saw no reason to think that an argument which was not deductively demonstrative could not provide sufficient warrant for theism. Paley, for example, tried to give overwhelming empirical evidence in his *Natural Theology* for God as the designer of the universe; though not achieving demonstrative certainty, the argument's aim was to make it much more plausible to believe in God than not. The demise of Spinozistic rationalism seems to be sufficient testimony that subsequent generations have not shared Spinoza's concern for geometric certainty. The second assumption, for its part, would not have relevance for someone who argued for God's

existence by other means. For example, Clarke, while espousing the same concern for demonstrative certainty as Spinoza, based his theism on cosmological and ontological arguments. Hence, the objection that miracles rendered natural law uncertain, even if true, would not strike against Clarke.

But is the objection in fact true? Spinoza seemed to think that the admission of a genuine miracle would serve to overthrow the natural law pre-empted by the miracle. If one retains the old 'violation' concept of miracle, this is certainly true. But if we abandon that notion, as I have suggested, in favor of the naturally impossible, then we can see that Clarke and Paley were correct in arguing that a miracle does not serve to abrogate the regularity of nature in general; it only shows the intervention of God at that point in the natural causal nexus. As Swinburne has argued, a natural law is not abolished because of one exception; the counter-instance must occur repeatedly whenever the conditions for it are present. [70] If an event occurs which is contrary to a law of nature and we have reasons to believe that this event would not occur again under similar circumstances, then the law in question will not be abandoned. One may regard an anomalous event as repeatable if another formulation of the natural law better accounts for the event in question, and if it is no more complex than the original law. If any doubt exists, the scientist may conduct experiments to determine which formulation of the law proves more successful in predicting future phenomena. In a similar way, one would have good reason to regard an event as a non-repeatable counter-instance to a law if the reformulated law were much more complicated than the original without yielding better new predictions or by predicting future phenomena unsuccessfully where the original formulation predicted successfully. If the original formulation remains successful in predicting all new phenomena as the data accumulate, while no reformulation does any better in predicting the phenomena and explaining the event in question, then the event should be regarded as a non-repeatable counter-instance to the law. Hence, a miraculous event would not serve to upset the natural law:

We have to some extent good evidence about what are the laws of nature, and some of them are so well-established and account for so many data that any modifications to them which suggest to account for the odd counter-instance would be so clumsy and *ad hoc* as to upset the whole structure of science. In such cases the evidence is strong that if the purported counter-instance occurred it was a violation of the laws of nature. [71]

Swinburne unfortunately retains the violation concept of miracle, which would invalidate his argument; but if we conceive of a miracle as a naturally impossible event, he is on target in

reasoning that the admission of such an event would not lead to the abandonment of a natural law. Spinoza's fear, therefore, that miracles would destroy natural laws seems unjustified. In fact Spinoza's argument, if taken seriously, would prove a positive impediment to science, for on his principles not even repeatable counter-instances to a natural law could be allowed, since these would impugn the present natural law. In other words, Spinoza assumes we have the final formulation of the natural laws known to us. While he will admit that there may be unknown natural laws, he cannot permit the revision of known laws. But such a position is unscientific. If one adjusted Spinoza's position to admit the possible revision of a natural law by repeatable counter-instances, then any argument for miracles based on those laws would, of course, share in the uncertainty of our formulations. If, however, we were confident that a particular formulation of a law were genuinely descriptive of reality, then the occurrence of an event shown by the law to be naturally impossible could not overthrow this law. Rather than lead us away from God, such a situation could lead us to see the hand of God in that event, for there would be no other way it could be produced. And that was precisely the position of the orthodox defenders of miracles.

Spinoza's sub-contention that a miracle need not prove God's existence, but only the existence of a lesser being, was not effective against most defenders of miracles quite simply because they were not trying to prove the existence of God. Having either proved or presupposed the existence of God, they used miracles chiefly to prove Christian theism was true. On the other hand, the protagonists in the classical debate over miracles were greatly concerned about the possibility of demonic miracles and how to identify a truly divine miracle. Their answer to this problem constitutes one of their most important and enduring contributions to the discussion of miracles. They argued that the doctrinal context of the miracle makes it clear whether the miracle is truly from God. Thus, they drew attention to the context in which the miracle occurred as the basis for the interpretation of that miracle. This is extremely important, for a miracle without a context is inherently ambiguous. But in the case of Jesus' miracles and resurrection the context is religiously significant: they occur in the context of and as the climax to Jesus' own unparalleled life, teaching, and personal claim to authority, and served as signs of the inbreaking of the Kingdom. Here is a context of events that, as Paley rightly emphasized, is unique in the history of mankind. It ought, therefore, to give us serious pause, whereas some isolated scientific anomaly might occasion only curiosity. In this way the religious context of a miracle furnishes us with the proper interpretation of that miracle.

Spinoza's concern with lesser divine beings, such as angels and demons, would probably not

trouble too many twentieth century minds. It would be very odd, indeed, were an atheist to grant the miracles and resurrection of Jesus as historical and miraculous events and yet assert that perhaps only an angel wrought them. Finite spirit beings are usually conceived to exist only within a wider theistic framework, such that to infer directly that God is responsible for such events would not appear to many to be an unwarranted inference. In this way, then, contrary to Spinoza's allegation, miracles *taken within their religious context* could, it seems, provide an adequate justification for a Christian theism.

Spinoza's final sub-point, that a miracle may simply be the effect of an unknown cause in nature, does not properly strike against the possibility of the *occurrence* of a miracle, but against the *identification* of the occurrence of a miracle. Granted that miracles are possible, how can we know when one has occurred? This is admittedly a very thorny problem, and undoubtedly most of our reserve over against purported miracles stems from an underlying suspicion that the event is somehow naturally explicable, even though we do not know how. The problem has been persuasively formulated in modern times by Antony Flew:

Protagonists of the supernatural, and opponents too, take it for granted that we all possess some natural (as opposed to revealed) way of knowing that and where the unassisted potentialities of nature (as opposed to a postulated supernature) are more restricted than the potentialities which, in fact, we find to be realized or realizable in the universe around us.

This is a very old and apparently very easy and tempting assumption. . . . Nevertheless, the assumption is entirely unwarranted. We simply do not have, and could not have, any natural (as opposed to revealed) criterion which enables us to say, when faced with something which is found to have actually happened, that here we have an achievement which nature, left to her own unaided devices, could never encompass. The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for proclaiming that the particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden. [72]

The response of Sherlock and Houtteville that an unknown law of nature may be God's means of acting is surely inadequate, for it may equally be the case that the event in question is no act of God at all, but a product of entirely natural but unknown causes. Le Clerc and Vernet have taken a better tack: when the miracles occur precisely at a momentous time (say, a man's leprosy vanishing when Jesus spoke the words, 'Be clean') and do not recur regularly in history and when

the miracles in question are various and numerous, the chance of their being the result of unknown natural properties seems negligible. If the miracles were naturally caused, one would expect them to occur repeatedly and not by coincidence at just the proper moments in Jesus' ministry. And though an isolated miracle might be dismissed as the effect of an unknown operation of nature, Vernet seems to be correct in regarding this possibility as minimal when the entire scope of Jesus' miracles is surveyed.

A final remark on Spinoza's reasoning ought to be made. The objection does not, like Hume's, spring from the nature of historical investigation; rather it could be pressed by witnesses of Jesus' miracles and resurrection appearances themselves. But in this case, the objection loses all conviction: for can we imagine, say, doubting Thomas, when confronted with the risen Jesus, studiously considering whether some unknown natural cause might have produced what he experienced? There comes a point when the back of scepticism is broken by the sheer reality of a wonder before us. At any rate, had Jesus himself been confronted with such scepticism, would he not have attributed it to hardness of heart in his opponent? Having shown the historical credibility of the gospel accounts of Jesus' miracles, should that be possible, a defender of miracles might simply leave the question of their miraculous nature to be settled between his hearer and God. Perhaps Pascal was right in maintaining that God has given evidence sufficiently clear for those with an open heart, but sufficiently vague so as not to compel those whose hearts are closed.

Hume

1. 'In principle' argument

Hume's 'in principle' argument against the identification of a miracle, for its part, seems either question-begging or mistaken. [73] To say that uniform experience is against miracles is implicitly to assume that the miracles in question did not occur. Otherwise the experience could not be said to be truly uniform. Thus, to say uniform experience stands against miracles begs the question. If, however, we relax the term 'uniform' to mean simply 'general' or 'usual,' then the argument fails of cogency. For then it is no longer incompatible that general experience be that miracles do not occur and that the gospel miracles did occur. Hume seems to confuse the realms of science and history: the general experience of mankind has allowed us to formulate certain laws which describe the physical universe. That dead men do not rise is, for example, a generally observed pattern in our experience. But at most this only shows that a resurrection is naturally impossible. That is a matter of science. But it does not prove that such a naturally impossible event has never occurred.

That is a matter of history. As Less and Paley pointed out, the testimony in history for the general pattern of events cannot overturn good testimony for any particular event. Since they are not *contradictoria*, they cannot even be weighed in the same scale. Thus, Hume's argument, if it is not simply question-begging, rests on a sort of category mistake.

Moreover, as Sherlock argued, since a miracle is just as much a matter of sense perception as any other event, it is, in principle, provable by historical testimony in the same way as a non-miraculous event. *Qua* history, they stand exactly on a par. It is contrary to sound historical methodology to suppress particular testimony out of regard for general testimony. In the case of the resurrection, for example, if the testimony which we have in the New Testament makes it probable that Jesus' tomb was really found empty on the first day of the week by some of his women followers and that he later appeared to his disciples in a non-hallucinatory fashion, then it is bad historical methodology to argue that this testimony *must* be somehow false because historical evidence shows that all other men have always remained dead in their graves. Nor can it be argued that the testimony must be false because such an event is naturally impossible, for it may well be the case that history proves that a naturally impossible event has, in fact, occurred. As Paley contended, Hume's argument could lead us into situations where we would be led to deny the testimony of the most reliable of witnesses to an event because of general considerations, a situation which results in an unrealistic scepticism. In fact, as Sherlock and Less correctly contended, this would apply to non-miraculous events as well. There are all sorts of events which make up the stuff of popular books on unexplained mysteries (such as levitation, disappearing persons, spontaneous human combustions and so forth) which have not been scientifically explained, but, judging by their pointless nature, sporadic occurrence, and lack of any religious context, are probably not miracles. It would be folly for a historian to deny the occurrence of such events in the face of good eyewitness evidence to the contrary simply because they do not fit with known natural laws. Yet Hume's principle would require the historian to say that these events never actually occurred. The fact is, the historian does, in certain cases, seem able to determine the facticity of a historical event without knowing how or whether it accords with natural laws.

Finally, it might be urged against Hume's 'in principle' argument, if God's existence is possible, then as Paley argued, he may have chosen to reveal himself decisively in history at one point, and there is no probability that we should experience the same events today. Hence, the occurrence of those events uniquely in the past cannot be dismissed because such events are not experienced at other times. As long as God's existence is possible, then it is equally possible that he has acted

uniquely at a point in history, in which case the question simply becomes whether such an event did take place. But then it is a question of evidence, not of principle, as Hume maintained.

Antony Flew, while acknowledging the failure of Hume's argument, has sought to reformulate a successful version of the argument against the identification of a miracle:

. . . it is only and precisely by presuming that the laws that hold today held in the past and by employing as canons all our knowledge--or presumed knowledge--of what is probable or improbable, possible or impossible, that we can rationally interpret the detritus of the past as evidence and from it construct our account of what actually happened. But in this context, what is impossible is what is physically, as opposed to logically, impossible. And 'physical impossibility' is, and surely has to be, defined in terms of inconsistency with a true law of nature.

. . . our sole ground for characterizing a reported occurrence as miraculous is at the same time a sufficient reason for calling it physically impossible. [74]

Now this objection actually seems to be inconsistent with the final point of Spinoza's second objection against miracles, which Flew also sought to defend. There, it will be remembered, it was asserted that our knowledge of nature is so incomplete that we can never regard any event whatsoever as miraculous, since it could be the effect of an unknown law of nature. This would compel us to take a totally open attitude toward the possibility of any given event, for virtually anything would be possible in nature. We should never be entitled to say an event is naturally impossible. But now Hume's objection asserts precisely the opposite, namely, that our knowledge of natural law is so complete that we can not only determine which events would be naturally impossible, but we are able to impose this over the past to expunge such events from the record. The two positions are incompatible. Flew thus seems to have worked himself into a dilemma: either naturally impossible events can be specified or not. If they can, then such an event's occurring could be identified as a miracle. If they cannot, then we must be open to anything's happening in history. Flew cannot have it both ways: he cannot line up behind both Spinoza and Hume. Now I have contended that naturally impossible events can sometimes be specified and that an event such as Jesus' feeding the 5000 ought to be regarded as naturally impossible. Does that mean therefore, as Flew alleges, that it must be regarded *a priori* as unhistorical? Not at all; Flew has made an unjustifiable identification between natural (or in his terms, physical) possibility and actual, historical possibility. The assumption here is that naturally impossible events cannot occur, or in other words, that miracles cannot happen, which is question-begging, since this is

precisely the point to be proved. Flew's argument really boils down to the assertion that in order to study history, one must assume the impossibility of miracles. To this question we shall now turn.

In recent times the classical debate over the identification of miracles has continued in the dispute over principles of historical methodology. It has been contended that the historical method is inherently restricted to non-miraculous events; for example, D. E. Nineham asserts,

It is of the essence of the modern historian's method and criteria that they are applicable only to purely human phenomena, and to human phenomena of a normal, that is non-miraculous, non-unique, character. It followed that any picture of Jesus that could consistently approve itself to an historical investigator using these criteria, must *a priori* be of a purely human figure and it must be bounded by his death. [75]

On what basis can it be said that the historical method applies only to non-miraculous phenomena? According to Carl Becker, it is because that method presupposes that the past is not dissimilar to our present experience:

History rests on testimony, but the qualitative value of testimony is determined in the last analysis by tested and accepted experience . . . the historian knows well that no amount of testimony is ever permitted to establish as a past reality a thing that cannot be found in present reality. . . . In every case the witness may have a perfect character--all that goes for nothing . . .

. . . We must have a past that is the product of all the present. With sources that say it was not so, we will have nothing to do; better still, we will make them say it was so. [76]

Becker's historical relativism allows him to reshape the past with impunity so that it is made to accord with our experience of the present. The result is that miracles must be expunged by the historian, for these are not found in the experience of his own generation. [77] According to this outlook, historians must adopt as a methodological principle a sort of 'historical naturalism' that excludes the supernatural.

This viewpoint is simply a restatement of Ernst Troeltsch's principle of analogy. [78] According to Troeltsch, one of the most basic of historiographical principles is that the past does not differ essentially from the present. Though events of the past are of course not the same events as those of the present, they must be the same *in kind* if historical investigation is to be possible. Troeltsch realized that this principle was incompatible with miraculous events and that any history written on this principle will be sceptical with regard to the historicity of the events of the gospels.

Pannenberg, however, has persuasively argued that Troeltsch's principle of analogy cannot be legitimately employed to banish from the realm of history all non-analogous events. [79] Properly defined, analogy means that in a situation which is unclear, the facts ought to be understood in terms of known experience; but Troeltsch has elevated the principle to constrict all past events to purely natural events. But that an event bursts all analogies cannot be used to dispute its historicity. When, for example, myths, legends, illusions, and the like are dismissed as unhistorical, it is not because they are unusual, but because they are analogous to present forms of consciousness having no objective referent. When an event is said to have occurred for which no analogy exists, its reality cannot be automatically dismissed; to do this we should require an analogy to some known form of consciousness lacking an objective referent that would suffice to explain the situation. Pannenberg has thus upended Troeltsch's principle of analogy such that it is not the *want* of an analogy that shows an event to be unhistorical, but the *presence* of a positive analogy to known thought forms that shows a purportedly miraculous event to be unhistorical. Thus, he has elsewhere affirmed that if the Easter traditions were shown to be essentially secondary constructions analogous to common comparative religious models, the Easter appearances were shown to correspond completely to the model of hallucinations, and the empty tomb tradition were evaluated as a late legend, then the resurrection would be subject to evaluation as unhistorical. [80] In this way, the lack of an analogy to present experience says nothing for or against the historicity of an event. Troeltsch's formulation of the principle of analogy attempts to squeeze the past into the mold of the present without providing any warrant for doing so. As Richard Niebuhr has protested, Troeltsch's principle really destroys genuine historical reasoning, since the historian must be open to the uniqueness of the events of the past and cannot exclude *a priori* the possibility of events like the resurrection simply because they do not conform to his present experience. [81] But Pannenberg's formulation of the principle preserves the analogous nature of the past to the present or to the known, thus making the investigation of history possible, without thereby sacrificing the integrity of the past or distorting it.

This means that there seems to be no *in principle* philosophical objection to establishing the occurrence of a miracle by means of historical research. According to Pannenberg, a theological interpretation of history will be tested positively by 'its ability to take into account all known historical details' and negatively by 'the proof that without its specific assertions the accessible information would not be at all or would be only incompletely explicable. [82] More exactly, Bilynskyj proposes four criteria for identifying some event *E* as a miracle: (1) the evidence for the

occurrence of E 's at least as good as the evidence for other acceptable but unusual events similarly distant in space and time from the point of inquiry; (2) an account of the natures and/or powers of the causally relevant natural factors necessary to explain E would be clumsy and *ad hoc*; (3) there is no evidence for one or more of the natural causes which could produce E except for the inexplicability of E itself; and (4) there is some justification for a supernatural explanation of E , apart from the inexplicability of E . [83] The historian ought first perhaps, as a methodological principle, to seek natural causes of the events under investigation; but when no natural causes can be found that plausibly account for the data and a supernatural hypothesis presents itself as part of the historical context in which the events occurred, then it would not seem to be illicit to prefer the supernatural explanation.

2. 'In fact' arguments

If, then, there seems to be no 'in principle' argument against establishing miracles by means of the historical method, what may be said concerning Hume's four 'in fact' arguments against miracles? All of Hume's arguments have force; but the fact remains that these general considerations cannot be used to pronounce on the historicity of any particular miracle. They only serve to make us cautious in our investigation. Hume's fourth point does seek to preclude any investigation by asserting that the miracles of various religions cancel each other out. Less, Campbell, and Paley argued fairly convincingly, however, against his three specific examples of purported miracles, but limits of space require that I simply refer the reader to their extended discussions. In any case, it still remains an *empirical* question whether a miracle supporting a counter-Christian claim is equally or better attested than Jesus' miracles and resurrection. There is no way to settle the issue apart from an investigation.

Conclusion

It seems to me, therefore, that the lesson to be learned from the classical debate over miracles, a lesson that has been reinforced by contemporary scientific and philosophical thought, is that the presupposition of the impossibility of miracles should, contrary to the assumption of nineteenth and for the most part twentieth century biblical criticism, play no role in determining the historicity of any event. While many scholars still operate under such an assumption, there seems now to be a growing recognition that such a presupposition is illegitimate. The presupposition against the possibility of miracles survives in theology only as a hangover from an earlier Deist age and ought to be once for all abandoned. [84]

Footnotes:

[1]

Gottfried Less, *Wahrheit der christlichen Religion*, 4th ed. (Göttingen & Bremen: Georg Ludewig Forster, 1776) 260-62.

[2]

Heinrich Eberh. Gottlob Paulus, *Das Leben Jesu, als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums*, 2 vols. (Heidelberg: C. F. Winter, 1826) 2.2, xi.

[3]

Ibid., 2.2, xlv.

[4]

Ibid., 2.2, xi.

[5]

Ibid.

[6]

Ibid., 2.2, xlv.

[7]

Ibid., 1, 283-84.

[8]

Ibid., 1, 284.

[9]

David Friedrich Strauss, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus und seine Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1862) 271.

[10]

Idem, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot, ed. with an Introduction by Peter C. Hodgson (London: SCM, 1973) 64.

[11]

Ibid., 80.

[\[12\]](#)

Ibid., 736.

[\[13\]](#)

Ibid., 75.

[\[14\]](#)

Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 3rd ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954) 10.

[\[15\]](#)

Ibid., 11 0-11.

[\[16\]](#)

David Friedrich Strauss, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kämpfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft* (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, 1840) 224-53.

[\[17\]](#)

Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology,' in *Kerygma and Myth*, 2 vols., ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch, trans. R. E. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1953) 2, 1-44. Bultmann's *a priori* assumption of history and the universe as a closed system is especially evident in idem, 'Bultmann Replies to his Critics,' in *ibid.*, 1, 197. According to Niebuhr, Bultmann retained uncriticized the nineteenth century idea of nature and history as a closed system. (Richard R. Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957] 60-61.)

[\[18\]](#)

Rudolf Pesch, 'Die Entstehung des Glaubens an den Auferstandenen,' *ThQ* 153 (1973) 227.

[\[19\]](#)

Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) 240.

[\[20\]](#)

Three helpful discussions of this debate are John S. Lawton, *Miracles and Revelation* (New York:

Association Press, 1959); R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles* (London: Associated University Presses, 1981); Colin Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

[\[21\]](#)

Denis Diderot, 'Philosophical Thoughts,' in *Diderot's Early Philosophical Works*, trans. Margaret Jourdain (Chicago: Open Court, 1916) pensée 18.

[\[22\]](#)

Marie François Arrouet de Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Paris: Garnier, 1967) s.v. 'Miracles'.

[\[23\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[24\]](#)

Ibid.

[\[25\]](#)

Benedict de Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus* 6.

[\[26\]](#)

David Hume, 'An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding,' in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby- Bigge, 3rd ed. rev. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 10.1, 90; 10.11, 92 (pp. 114, 116). For a lengthy discussion of this essay, see Burns, *Debate*, 131-75. Remarkably, Burns does not see the counterfactual nature of Hume's argument, so that on Burns's exposition the essay tends to fall into two unconnected halves, with far too much emphasis by Burns on the second half. The same oversight hampers the discussion by Brown, *Miracles*, 79-100.

[\[27\]](#)

Hume, 'Enquiry,' 10.11, 101 (p. 131).

[\[28\]](#)

Jean Le Clerc, *Five Letters Concerning the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (London: 1690) 235. The *Sentimens* was translated into English under this title.

[\[29\]](#)

Ibid., 235-36.

[\[30\]](#)

Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (London: W. Botham, 1706) 351-52.

[\[31\]](#)

Ibid., 354-55.

[\[32\]](#)

Ibid., 356-57.

[\[33\]](#)

Ibid., 359.

[\[34\]](#)

Ibid., 361.

[\[35\]](#)

Ibid., 362-63. Notice that Clarke does not arbitrarily exclude certain doctrines as incapable of being proved, but he presupposes what he has already argued concerning natural theology and ethics.

Cf. *ibid.*, 369-70.

[\[36\]](#)

Ibid., 363-64.

[\[37\]](#)

Ibid., 367.

[\[38\]](#)

Ibid., 368-69.

[\[39\]](#)

Ibid., 368. The foregoing exposition makes evident how gross a distortion of Clarke's view is presented by Burns, *Debate*, 96-103, who ascribes to Clarke an 'extreme evidentialism' whereby

miracles divorced from their doctrinal context are proof of Christianity. In fact, Clarke is entirely one with the typical orthodox response to Deism. Following Burns in his misinterpretation of Clarke is Brown, *Miracles*, 56-57.

[\[40\]](#)

J. Alph. Turretin, *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrétienne*, 2nd ed., 7 vols., trans. J. Vernet (Genève: Henri-Albert Gosse, 1745-55) 5, 235. Vernet translated the first volume written by Turretin in Latin and proceeded to add several volumes of his own. Vernet has Spinoza particularly in mind here.

[\[41\]](#)

Ibid., 5, 2-3.

[\[42\]](#)

Ibid., 5, 24.

[\[43\]](#)

Ibid., 5, 272.

[\[44\]](#)

Claude François Houtteville, *La religion chrétienne prouvée par les faits*, 3 vols. (Paris: Mercler & Boudet, 1740) 1, 32-50.

[\[45\]](#)

Ibid., 1, 33.

[\[46\]](#)

Thomas Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* (London: J. Roberts, 1729) 60.

[\[47\]](#)

Originally mentioned by John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 4.15, 5 and taken up by Hume in a footnote in his essay on miracles, this example was regarded as the Achilles heel of Hume's argument, for Hume had to admit that on his principles the man in the tropics should not in fact believe the testimony of travelers concerning ice.

[\[48\]](#)

Sherlock, *Tryal*, 60-62.

[\[49\]](#)

Ibid., 63-64.

[\[50\]](#)

Less, *Wahrheit*, 243.

[\[51\]](#)

Ibid., 254-60.

[\[52\]](#)

Ibid., 280-84.

[\[53\]](#)

Ibid., 366-75.

[\[54\]](#)

Campbell in his *Dissertation On Miracles* (1762) makes the same point: 'The two thousand instances formerly known, and the single instance attested, as they relate to different facts, though of a contrary nature, are not contradictory. There is no inconsistency in believing both.' (George Campbell, *The Works of George Campbell*, 6 vols. [London: Thomas Tegg, 1840] 1, 23.)

[\[55\]](#)

Less, *Wahrheit*, 471-549; see also discussion in Campbell, *Dissertation*, 88-116.

[\[56\]](#)

William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, 2 vols., 5th ed. (London: R. Faulder, 1796; repr. Westmead: Gregg International Publishers, 1970) 1, 2-3. Cf. 2, 409. For Paley's classic exposition of the teleological argument, see his *Natural Theology* (1802).

[\[57\]](#)

Idem, *Evidences*, 1, 3- 15,

[\[58\]](#)

Ibid., 1, 5,7.

[\[59\]](#)

Ibid., 1, 6

[\[60\]](#)

Ibid., 1, 329-83.

[\[61\]](#)

Ibid., 1, 369-83.

[\[62\]](#)

Even with regard to quantum laws, one may plausibly speak of events which are naturally impossible. See Mary Hesse, 'Miracles and the Laws of Nature,' in *Miracles*, ed. C. F. D. Moule (London: Mowbray, 1965) 38.

[\[63\]](#)

Stephen S. Bilynskyj, 'God, Nature, and the Concept of Miracle' (Ph.D. Diss.: Notre Dame, 1982) 10-42.

[\[64\]](#)

Ibid., 46-53.

[\[65\]](#)

Ibid., 117.

[\[66\]](#)

Ibid., 138.

[\[67\]](#)

Ibid., 146.

[\[68\]](#)

Ibid., 43-44.

[\[69\]](#)

Ibid., 86-97; for further criticism see 97-101.

[\[70\]](#)

R. G. Swinburne, 'Miracles,' *PQ* 18 (1968) 321.

[\[71\]](#)

Ibid., 323.

[\[72\]](#)

Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. 'Miracles,' by Antony Flew.

[\[73\]](#)

For a penetrating critique of Hume's reasoning see George I. Mavrodes, 'Testimony and the Resurrection,' paper read at 'Christianity Challenges the University,' Dallas, Tex.; Feb. 7- 10, 1985. He points out that the propositions 'Miracles are not common in the world' and 'Jesus performed miracles' are not epistemological alternatives, so that the evidence for each may amount to a full proof and each be simultaneously believed by a rational person. Of course, 'There are no miracles in the world' is an epistemological alternative to 'Jesus performed miracles,' but we have no grounds for assuming the former to be true. My lack of experiencing a miracle first-hand does not serve to make the universal statement probable because there is no probability that I should experience a miracle myself. In his comment on Mavrodes's paper, Antony Flew admitted the failure of Hume's argument, but pressed the objection from his *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article discussed below concerning historiographical naturalism.

[\[74\]](#)

Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. 'Miracles'.

[\[75\]](#)

D. E. Nineham, 'Some Reflections on the Present Position with regard to *The Jesus of History*,' *CQR* 166 (1965) 6-7.

[\[76\]](#)

Carl Becker, 'Detachment and the Writing of History,' in *Detachment and the Writing of History*, ed. Phil L. Snyder (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958; Westport, Conn.: Green, 1972) 12-13.

[\[77\]](#)

Ibid., 14. For an incisive critique of historical relativism and its dictum that 'the past is the product of

the present,' see Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

[\[78\]](#)

Ernst Troeltsch, 'über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie,' in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1913) 2, 729-53. Cf. Bradley's principle of uniformity (F. H. Bradley, *The Presuppositions of Critical History*, ed. Lionel Rubinoff [Chicago: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1968], 100) and its critique at the hands of R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. T. M. Know (Oxford: University Press, 1956) 139.

[\[79\]](#)

Wolfgang Pannenberg, 'Redemptive Event and History,' in idem, *Basic Questions in Theology*, 2 vols., trans. G. H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 1, 40-50.

[\[80\]](#)

Idem, cited in James M. Robinson, 'Revelation as Word and History,' in *New Frontiers in Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson & John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 3, 33.

[\[81\]](#)

Niebuhr, *Resurrection*, 170.

[\[82\]](#)

Pannenberg, 'Redemptive Event and History,' 1, 78.

[\[83\]](#)

Bilynskyj, 'Miracles,' 222.

[\[84\]](#)

Portions of this research were carried out at Cambridge University and the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München under a fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. For a fuller and more meticulously documented account, see my *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus during the Deist Controversy* (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1986).