

# A Critique of David Hume's *a priori* Argument against Miracles

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David Hume's argument against miracles in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* is one of the most influential texts ever written on the subject. It gained a broad audience throughout Europe and America soon after its first appearance in 1748 and attracted a great deal of discussion.<sup>1</sup> Kant was well acquainted with the arguments of the *Enquiry*.

In spite of this notoriety, much of the discussion of Hume's critique of miracles, both at that time and since, has taken place with very little reference to the rest of the book. Taking Section X by itself has led various religious apologists to produce heavy volumes seriously weighing evidence for and against different events advanced as miracles. In reality, these discussions have usually missed the major point of what Hume was saying. Hume himself is at least partly responsible for this, since the approach he takes in the section on miracles appears self-contained.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is a major error to see this chapter in isolation and treat it separately from the surrounding discussion. It is only by placing his polemic against miracles securely in the framework of Hume's general discussion that we can understand the real force of his argument. What was Hume actually trying to do in the *Enquiry*?

## 3.1 The Goal of the *Enquiry*

### A Mental Geography

The *Enquiry* is deceptively simple on the surface but astonishingly subtle in its depths. On the surface of things, it seems Hume's purpose in writing the book was to discuss primarily an *epistemological* problem: the nature of human knowledge. The majority of commentators and analysts have pursued this epistemological trail, and there are good reasons to do so. However, while proposing an answer to the questions of the *source* and

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<sup>1</sup> Within a short time, the German theologian Gottfried Less, for example, considered Hume's arguments important enough to dispute them extensively. See: Gottfried Less, *Wahrheit der christlichen Religion*, 4. Auflage. (Göttingen & Bremen: Georg Ludwig Forster, 1776), 260-62.

<sup>2</sup> A decade earlier, he had actually written a draft of the chapter with the thought of including it in his *Treatise* but he later decided otherwise. See: Gawlick and Kreimendahl, *Hume in der deutschen Aufklärung*, 51.

*reliability* of our knowledge, Hume subtly brings in another level of reflection and proceeds to elaborate an implicit *ontology*. His interest was in "the proper *objects* of our intellectual faculties".<sup>3</sup> As Kant was to do after him, Hume tried to indirectly answer the question of *what there is in the world* by describing *how* we know and thus *what* we can know.

Hume structured the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* around the basic metaphor of *topography* and Section X, *Of Miracles*, is one of the clearest applications of this analogy. It will be helpful to briefly examine what Hume was up to.

His purpose, he writes at the beginning of the book, is to lay out a map of the operations of the mind *and* its proper objects, a *mental geography*.<sup>4</sup> He attempts to chart what is, and is not, the rightful territory of human reason. In distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate objects of thinking, he seeks to mark the border between areas suitable to rational exploration and discussion and those that play, like will o' the wisps, beyond the borders of rationality. He wants to free to free rational thought once and for all from these confused questions.<sup>5</sup> However, it is worth noting here that this *exclusion* of particular questions from rational discourse has born dubious fruit. As we shall see, Hume's attempt to excommunicate miracles from scientific discussion brought with it huge consequences for other areas of rational discussion.

At first glance, the early sections of the *Enquiry* seem to set out a simple dichotomy between legitimate and illegitimate objects of thought. But on closer examination one sees that Hume was wrestling with a similar tension in his system to the one that we saw at the beginning of his earlier work. In the *Treatise*, he had denied any criteria for distinguishing sensory impressions, the simple ideas and the impressions and ideas of reflection other than the *intensity* and *simplicity* of the impression present in the mind. He struggled then to build a bridge between his theory of

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<sup>3</sup> I.e. the "ideas". *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 108 (Section IX). (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>4</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding in Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3. Ed. Ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 13 (Section I).

<sup>5</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 12-13 (Section I).

ideas and some kind of rational basis for the dependability of our knowledge of the world.

An analogous difficulty arises in the *Enquiry* when Hume attempts to map out what is and is not the proper province of human reasoning. Since ideas are the only material available to the reason, what distinguishes those ideas that are “real” and legitimate candidates for human enquiry and objects of serious rational investigation, from the potentially infinite number of fictions that the creative imagination can construct from the stock of ideas available to it?<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, what about things that lie outside the sphere of our direct experience? What can we accept upon the testimony of others? Since the mind displays unlimited inventiveness in generating “all the varieties of fiction and vision” how can one distinguish between misplaced trust in a “fiction” generated by the imagination (one’s own and others’) and warranted “belief” in matters of fact and real existence?<sup>7</sup>

Consistent with his position of ten years earlier in the *Treatise*, Hume delineates belief from imagination *subjectively* on the basis of varying degrees of intensity of the impression they make on the mind:

“Belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain.”<sup>8</sup>

But without an interface between the knowing subject and the world of objects that can be *tested*, this leaves the question of what are the legitimate objects of reason unanswered.

<sup>6</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 47 (Section V, Part II).

<sup>7</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 47-48 (Section V, Part II). By “belief” Hume had in mind a conception that had more authority than just the ideas of reflection that the imagination can combine in a completely arbitrary way to create a fantasy. Hume observes: “The imagination has the command over all its ideas, and can join and mix and vary them, in all the ways possible. It may conceive fictitious objects with all the circumstances of place and time.” *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 49 (Section V, Part II). Anthony Flew discusses the problem of Hume’s concept of *belief* in Anthony Flew, *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 100ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 49 (Section V, Part II).

Antique maps from the early centuries of modern exploration show three regions: there are the clear areas of the charted lands which have been investigated and plotted; there are unexplored “white zones”, particularly in the interior of Africa and the Americas; then, at the outer edges of the map are strange places where waves foam and one reads the caption: “Here dwell dragons”. The task Hume set himself in the *Enquiry* was to devise a way to distinguish these three territories in the world of thinking.

We will begin our scrutiny of Hume’s case against miracles with his attempt to outline the charted regions of rational thought, the “proper province of human reason”, then we will take a look at the white zones or what he called “extraordinary phenomena”; finally, we will see what he puts off the chart, with the dragons in “fairy land”.

## The Proper Province of Human Reason

Applying his metaphor of mental geography, Hume approaches the question of what is the “proper province of human reason” by clearly distinguishing between *logically* possible states and events and what he calls “matter of fact or real existence”.<sup>9</sup> He grants that the contrary of every matter of fact is *logically* possible, but the challenge is to establish “any *real* existence and matter of fact” if the “present testimony (i.e. direct input) of our senses or the records of our memory (‘perceptions of the memory’)” is lacking.<sup>10</sup> On what basis should we accept the existence of things and events that lie outside the circle of our direct experience? I.e., what can we reckon as belonging to the “real world” and what should we view as merely a product of the creativity of human imagination and put outside the “real world”?

The way to know, Hume seems to say, is to examine the evidence. Any event that claims to belong to reality and matters of fact, it appears, can step up as a candidate to be evaluated. But when one looks closer, things are not quite so straight-forward as that. Hume imposes a limit at precisely this point in his argument that is very easy to miss.

He first notes, correctly I believe, that the existence of things cannot be eliminated willy-nilly by means of *a priori* reasoning, without looking at the evidence:

<sup>9</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 46 (Section V, Part I).

<sup>10</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 25-26 (Section IV, Part I).

“Whatever is intelligible, and can be distinctly conceived, implies no contradiction, and can never be proved false by any demonstrative argument of abstract reasoning *a priori*.”<sup>11</sup>

So far, so good. But this does *not*, as one might expect, really open the field of rational discourse to every proposition which makes a claim to be a matter of fact. Hume takes back a major portion of the objectivity he had just affirmed and subtly introduces a new *a priori* screening process. Each candidate for warranty as a matter of fact or real existence, he claims, must first be vetted to see whether it fulfills certain criteria before it can be admitted into the arena of actual evaluation on the basis of evidence. What must characterize it? First and foremost, any “candidate” for real existence must belong, says Hume, to a cause-effect relationship.<sup>12</sup>

### **(1) The Cause and Effect Relationship**

Hume argues that although we do not know the ultimate reason why things work as they do and we are ignorant of the real cause of any event,<sup>13</sup> the cause and effect relationship gives us our one and only basis to make judgments concerning matters of fact. Thus, no event can be seriously considered as a candidate for real existence and being a matter of fact that does not stand in a cause-effect relationship. This seems rather imprecise. What is Hume really driving at?

Our knowledge of the cause-effect relationship, he asserts, is based upon experience. But what entitles us to take the step from past experience to evaluation of things we have not directly experienced and even prediction of future events? Hume is clear in his answer. There is, he says, at the root of all our reasoning about empirical reality a presupposition that has, strictly speaking, no rational justification. That is the assumption of the *uniformity* of natural causes (the principle of uniformity).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 35 (Section IV, Part II). In regard to “what can be distinctly conceived” cf. Descartes’ *clara et distincta*.

<sup>12</sup> In the following analysis I make grateful use of the work of Michael P. Levine, *Hume and the Problem of Miracles: A Solution*. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 56 (Section VI).

<sup>14</sup> Barry Stroud, *Hume*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 55ff.

“All inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past. . . . If there be any suspicion that the course of nature may change, and that the past may be no rule for the future, all experience becomes useless, and can give rise to no inference or conclusion.”<sup>15</sup>

There is a very strong *ontological* presupposition hidden here. There is a “uniformity observable in the operations of nature”,<sup>16</sup> and although the actual constitution of each and every cause is wrapped in darkness to us, we come to know the laws of nature, its “common course”<sup>17</sup>, on the basis of *experience*. Thus, events that are alleged to be legitimate objects of our reasoning (things that may *really* exist – matters of fact) must be within the scope of the *laws of nature*, which we come to know – once again – by experience. We can only make valid extrapolations about reality, Hume claims, on the basis of this presupposition. This presupposition is for Hume a starting-point for all reasoning whatsoever about the world. He already had articulated this position clearly in his first *Treatise*: “If reason determin’d us, it wou’d proceed upon that principle, *that instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same.*”<sup>18</sup>

### **(2) The Principle of Uniformity**

Actually, there are *two* principles that Hume formulates here. The first says that the process of thinking is based upon previous experience (an entirely reasonable assumption); the second, that the course of all events is always uniform.<sup>19</sup> Stroud shows that the *second* principle is actually a case of circular reasoning. Hume admits that no “logic”, no “process of argument” can anchor down this presupposition rationally.<sup>20</sup> So, what

<sup>15</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 37-38 (Section IV, Part II).

<sup>16</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 84 (Section VIII).

<sup>17</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 28 (Section IV, Part I).

<sup>18</sup> *Treatise*, 89 (Book I, Part III, Section VI).

<sup>19</sup> Barry Stroud, *Hume*, 54-55.

<sup>20</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 38 (Section IV, Part II). Cf. “In all reasonings from experience, there is a step taken by the mind which is not (*continued on next page*)

Hume really has in mind when he says that all candidates for “real existence” and “matters of fact” must stand in a cause-effect relationship that impacts the senses,<sup>21</sup> is that they must fit into a conception of nature based upon the presumption of exceptionless uniformity. That is, of course, a major *a priori* restriction of the possibility of rational discourse.

Hume used the assumption of exceptionless uniformity not simply as a praxis-oriented heuristic, a starting-point for further theory-development, but as a basis for a calculus of probability by which the reports of purported events could be prejudged *before* the evidence was appraised as to whether or not they actually occurred.

Modern philosophy of science readily acknowledges the importance of preliminary assumptions in the process of thought.<sup>22</sup> A presupposition or heuristic of general uniformity is unobjectionable if it is not put in a privileged position and immunized against criticism and as long as it does not arbitrarily hinder theory-construction. But in Hume's system the assumption of the uniformity of natural causes holds a favored place.

He sees this presupposition as the categorical basis of our knowledge about the world.

Why is this principle so important to the Scotsman? If one begins with the premise that only *perceptions* have ontological status, then nature becomes an unknown entity. If the assumption of the uniform course of nature were not in place, then nature could produce everything that is *logically* possible. Since that is obviously not the case, Hume concludes in Section VI, *Of Probability*, that there is no other possible basis for rational thought:

“Being determined by custom to transfer the past to the future, in all our inferences; where the past has been entirely regular and uniform, we expect the event with the greatest assurance and leave no room for any contrary supposition.”<sup>23</sup>

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supported by any argument or process of the understanding.” *Enquiry*, 41 (Section V, Part I).

<sup>21</sup> I.e., in the framework of Hume's concept of causality, it must be either a perceivable *cause* or a perceivable *effect*.

<sup>22</sup> See: Hans Albert, *Kritik der reinen Erkenntnislehre* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1987), 70–93. Alberts describes a rational heuristic as a “Kunstlehre der Erkenntnispraxis” (aesthetic of knowledge). (p. 6).

<sup>23</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 58 (Section VI).

This may be an accurate description of the actual psychology of the researcher, but Hume wants this fact to be more than just an empirical description of how we learn. He makes the presupposition of uniformity a prescriptive norm of all reasoning about matters of fact and real existence. It is part and parcel of his proneness to reduce all philosophical topics to psychological questions.

It seems strange that the great proponent of empiricism would tolerate such an essentially *a priori* element at the very heart of his approach. Hume himself was dissatisfied with leaving the assumption of uniformity as a pure presupposition.<sup>24</sup> Why then did he tolerate it and essentially immunize the hypothesis against criticism? The logical structure of his concept of causality forced him to do so. First of all, one must note his very narrow concept of what a *cause* is. For Hume, causation is no more and no less than the regular conjunction of two *impressions*. In light of this, the assumption that the chain of events in nature is strictly uniform provides a guardrail that saves one from falling into a wild and wooly world where real and logical possibility are coextensive, a world of anything-can-happen-and-it-probably-does. Such a world is obviously not a place where real knowledge and learning would be possible at all. I think Hume was alarmed at what he saw as the threat of a deluge of skepticism if there is no reliable way to audit our impressions and ideas. There is, based upon his conception of the monism of ideas, no real way to monitor the interchange between the subject and an outside reality. How can one have confidence in the general dependability of one's perceptions in such a situation? I propose that this concern led Hume to elect a presupposition of absolute uniformity.

### ***(3) An Alternative to a priori Uniformity***

There was an alternative path that Hume could have taken. He could have opted for a unwavering fallibilism in which there is no special, privileged refuge of knowledge. The premise of uniformity in nature would then have simply been a starting point, a heuristic for theory-building and not a Procrustean bed. But Hume shielded the premise from criticism and linked it with a monism of ideas. This led the newly-developing

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<sup>24</sup> “As an agent, I am quite satisfied in the point but as a philosopher, who has some share of curiosity, I will not say scepticism, I want to learn the foundation of this inference.” *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 38 (Section IV, Part II).

philosophy of science in a false direction. By denying the possibility of falsifying the premise of uniformity, Hume sowed the fatal concept that there are presuppositions in theory-building that are not open to criticism.

It was then only a small step for Kant, as we shall see shortly, to expand this starting point into the deadly premise that rejects any elements of theory-building that exceed the boundaries of our ability to imagine and “construct” them. The limits of our capacity of “construction” and visualization thus constitute the limits of our knowledge.

Hume gave the hypothesis of exceptionless uniformity in nature the role of an epistemological guarantor of empiricism. This was an *a priori* ontological assumption that arbitrarily restricted can or cannot be part of rational discussion. The Scotsman himself at least glanced in the other direction, even if he did not pursue it.

“It is certain that the most ignorant and stupid peasants – nay infants, nay even brute beasts – improve by experience, and learn the qualities of natural objects, by observing the effects which result from them.”<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, Hume did not pursue this. It would have meant modifying and expanding his concept of causality, something that was unacceptable to him, given his commitment to his theory of ideas. It was left to Thomas Reid to pursue the possibility of a critical-rationalism based upon the role of learning in rational life. This was surely a more promising road for philosophy of science to take! Instead of a baseless *a priori*, one could begin with a heuristic that can be rationally corrected or modified. This builds a solid starting point for theory-construction that is not arbitrarily limited. The assumption of uniformity then takes on the role of a pragmatic but modifiable heuristic.

#### **(4) Laws of Nature**

But such a move would also entail a different view of what constitutes a “law of nature” than the one proposed by Hume.

A law of nature, says Hume, is a structure in the world “established by nature in her operations”,<sup>26</sup> determined by a firm, unalterable, and

<sup>25</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 39 (Section IV, Part II).

<sup>26</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 31 (Section IV, Part I).

uniform experience.<sup>27</sup> This is linked with the conviction that “there (is) no such thing as Chance in the world”.<sup>28</sup>

We discover such structures by experience and articulate true lawlike propositions or formulae about the world. These inductively attained generalizations take the form of universal propositions about events that allow for no exceptions.<sup>29</sup> A law of nature is thus an unchangeable generalization. Everything that happens must concur with it.

#### *Necessity and the Laws of Nature*

It is important to note here, though, that while laws of nature are characterized by exceptionless and universal regularity, for Hume they are *not* linked with necessity. Put in modern terms, laws of nature as stated in law-like propositions or formulae have no modal quality, they assert no necessary connection between events or objects. This position is a consequence of Hume’s repudiation of necessity as a quality in nature and his transferal of it to intelligent consciousness.<sup>30</sup> According to him, necessity is a *mental* phenomenon that is based upon the *constant* (i.e., uniform) behavior of nature and the sense we have in our mind of being forced to make a connection between two things. We are compelled, as it were, to move in our thinking from one object to another. The mind is “determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the

<sup>27</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 114-115 (Section X, Part I).

<sup>28</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 56 (Section VI). Cf. the comment of Philo in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: “Chance has no place, on any hypothesis. . . . Everything is surely governed by steady, inviolable laws. And were the inmost essence of things laid open to us, we should then discover a science, of which, at present, we can have no idea. Instead of admiring the order of natural beings, we should clearly see that it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition.” (Part 6).

<sup>29</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 55 (Section V, Part II). One point of clarification is in order here: Hume does not distinguish clearly between *de re* and *de dicto*, between laws of nature and the sentences that express them. This is not a trivial point, but in our analysis only needs to be mentioned.

<sup>30</sup> “Necessity of any action, whether of matter or of mind, is not, properly speaking, a quality in the agent, but in the thinking or intelligent being, who may consider the action; and it consists chiefly in the determination of his thoughts to infer the existence of that action from some preceding objects.” *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 94n (Section VIII, Part I).

other".<sup>31</sup> Based upon the premise of the uniformity of nature, this constitutes the entire sum and substance of *necessity*, both in nature and in mental events.<sup>32</sup>

### *Violations of the Laws of Nature?*

We shall investigate Hume's argument against miracles in a moment and take a closer look in our last chapter at what has become known as the *regularity theory* of laws of nature. Nevertheless, it is worth glancing briefly at a significant consequence of his view about laws of nature.

If it is the case that a law of nature is a universal generalization about the *actual course of nature*, then a violation of such a law is a logical impossibility; a law of nature is then, by definition, exceptionless and a miracle (understood, as Hume does, as a violation of a law of nature) is clearly *logically impossible*.<sup>33</sup>

Opponents of Hume have sometimes accused him of circular reasoning at precisely this point. His argument seems at first glance to beg the question along the following lines:<sup>34</sup>

- (1) Laws of nature express exceptionless regularities.
- (2) There are no exceptions to a law of nature.

In defense of Hume, one could perhaps reconstruct this as an *inductive* argument: there is good evidence, he might say, for (1) and since (1) entails (2) the conclusion is valid.<sup>35</sup> But Hume *presupposes* that the laws of nature are exceptionless regularities. Thus, his argument does come very close to being circular.

A related issue is whether the regularity theory of what constitutes a law of nature stands or not. We will look at this question in Chapter 8; suffice it say here that I do *not* believe that the regularity theory of the laws of nature (at least as Hume articulated it) can be successfully

<sup>31</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 82 (Section VIII, Part I).

<sup>32</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 93-94 (Section VIII, Part I).

<sup>33</sup> To be completely fair to Hume's *a posteriori* commitment, one would have to say more accurately that a "law of nature" could be violated precisely once and only once; at that point it would cease to be a law of nature. See: Michael P. Levine, *Hume and the Problem of Miracles*, 21-22.

<sup>34</sup> See Stephen S. Bilynskyj, *God, Nature, and the Concept of Miracle* (xxx), 14ff. for an excellent discussion of this issue.

<sup>35</sup> Flew attempts to reconstruct Hume's argument in this direction. See: Anthony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 204-205

defended. Either the theory must be significantly modified or rejected outright for an alternative one.

### **(5) Summary**

What is, then, the "proper province of human reason" according to Hume? It is limited to those things and events that we directly experience and have in our memories plus a narrowly limited set of *some* things that lie outside the circle of our direct experience. These categories can include *only* those things that stand in a cause-effect relationship and do not contradict the "laws of nature" (based upon the presupposition of the exceptionless uniformity of nature. This, Hume contends, is the *terra firma* of reason and human understanding. Viewed from this perspective, it is only a small step from Hume to Kant's full-blown transcendental philosophy.

But what about other two regions of mental geography? We turn our attention first to the "white areas" of the map.

### **Irregular Events and Extraordinary Phenomena**

It was as obvious to Hume as it is to any other careful observer that nature does not, in fact, always appear uniform. Things occur on the border of the legitimate regions of human reason that are not easy to explain. How should one deal with them? Hume discusses two categories of such occurrences, "irregular events" and "extraordinary phenomena".

#### **(1) Hidden Causes**

*Irregular events* occur when an expected effect does not take place in spite of the presence of its usual cause. When these incidents occur in the course of nature, the "vulgar. . . attribute the uncertainty of events to. . . an uncertainty in the causes." The proper response, though, is to assume "the secret operation of contrary causes". Such an assumption of hidden parameters, says Hume, is justified because a) it is clear there is a vast variety of unknown forces and principles in nature and b) closer observation always leads to the discovery that "contrariety of effects always betrays a contrariety of causes."<sup>36</sup>

Now, this seems a reasonable approach to take. In the absence of special qualifying factors, one should use a theory-immanent strategy in dealing with anomalies that do not fit in the theoretical framework. The

<sup>36</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 86-87 (Section VIII, Part I).

absence of knowledge of the unknown factors is not equal to the absence of the factors themselves.

Hume is surely correct in recommending a heuristic that generally assumes that a hidden parameter is involved; as he puts it, in the case of the non-appearance of a particular expected effect one assumes that it “proceeds from the secret opposition of contrary causes. [...] Therefore, the irregular events. . . can be no proof that the laws of nature are not observed with the greatest regularity in its internal operations and government”<sup>37</sup>

## (2) *Extraordinary Phenomena*

What about other situations, though, when an effect is present for which “the generality of mankind. . . find themselves at a loss to assign a proper cause, and to explain the manner in which the effect is produced by it”<sup>38</sup> Extraordinary phenomena that appear miraculous and supernatural such as earthquakes and pestilence occur and “prodigies” of various kinds are discovered. The usual response, Hume says, is to attribute the event to “some invisible intelligent principle”, a *deus ex machina*. Some philosophers, though, go even farther. They argue for a thorough-going *occasionalism* which sees the divine will as the immediate and sole cause of each and every event which appears in nature, even the most familiar.<sup>39</sup> These philosophers allow for no principle of order behind the structure and development of the universe other than the *fiat* decision of God. They hold that the regularities of nature have no basis other than the habitual decisions of God. Nature merely reflects God’s case-by-case decision, how he wishes to act in relation to the world.<sup>40</sup>

### *Hume's Objections to Occasionalism*

Hume raises three objections to such a sweeping occasionalism.<sup>41</sup>

a) First, he says, “it robs nature, and all created beings, of every power”. If the world and “all the wheels of that stupendous machine” require

constant adjustment every moment, this calls into question the wisdom of the Creator.

b) Second, conclusions that are so “extraordinary, and so remote from common life and experience” must raise an initial skepticism in anyone acquainted with the weakness and limits of human reason. The application of analogies and probabilities used in normal contexts is precluded because “*the subject lies entirely out of the sphere of experience*”.<sup>42</sup>

c) Finally, Hume says, while we may indeed be ignorant in singular situations of the actual causes involved and the mechanism by which they operate, we must confess just as great an ignorance of the actual manner or force by which a Supreme Being could act upon matter.

Each of these objections touch upon several classic issues related to the question of miracles: occasionalism and what has been called “secondary causation”, the boundaries of theory-making versus the boundaries of experience, and the question of the interface between God and the world. It is clearly impossible to discuss all of these questions here in depth, but there are several points that must be at least briefly touched upon.

### *Occasionalism and Secondary Causation in Scholasticism*

Hume’s first objection to occasionalism would have earned the support of the school-men. Together with most standard theists, the philosopher-theologians of the Middle Ages were generally no friends of occasionalism. Most theists would want to distinguish between the statement that God is somehow acting in every event and the assertion that every single event is an act of God. Aquinas, for instance, understood occasionalism to be the belief that God’s working in everything means that God alone does everything without intermediaries and rejected this position.<sup>43</sup> He discusses this concept in his *Summa Theologiae* 1a.105,5, and addresses the issue of whether God is active in each and every agent cause (*utrum Deus operetur in omni operante*) and in what sense. While the occasionalist would argue that fire does not give heat, but God in the fire etc., Thomas’ reply is remarkably similar to that which Hume gives.

<sup>37</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 87 (Section VIII, Part I). Hume’s example deals with the absence of expected effects in the medical area.

<sup>38</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 69 (Section VII, Part I).

<sup>39</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 69-70 (Section VII, Part I).

<sup>40</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 70-71 (Section VII, Part I).

<sup>41</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 71-72 (Section VII, Part I).

<sup>42</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 72 (Section VII, Part I).

<sup>43</sup> He attributes this (via Maimonides) to certain Islamic theologians. See *De potentia* III,7.

He argues that occasionalism is mistaken because it robs the creation of any basis for cause and effect. This would, in turn, imply a lack of power in God (*quod pertinet ad impotentiam creantis*), since the power of any agent (*agens*) lies in its power to pass on a causal capability. The apparently active powers of creatures would then be meaningless and there would be no reason for them having received such powers. Thus, Aquinas argues, God's acting in creatures must be understood as taking place in such a way that they themselves still exercise their own power (*res propriam habeant operationem*).<sup>44</sup>

Whether or not Thomas' criticism is very convincing or not, the similarity to Hume's objection is evident. This is, of course, the famous doctrine of *secondary causation*. The classic scholastic position was: "God does act sufficiently within things. . . (but) that does not imply that the activity of secondary causes is superfluous."<sup>45</sup> For Thomas this had an aesthetic dimension:

"(God) employs secondary causes to maintain the beauty of order in things, and to share even with creatures the dignity of being causes."<sup>46</sup>

It is, of course, an open question whether Hume proposed this objection seriously or with tongue in cheek and a glance toward the choir; for whatever reason, he stands with the saints on this issue.

### *God's "Action" in Theism*

There is a whole thicket of philosophical problems that the topic of secondary causation plunges us into, each just as complex as the next. To state but one: what is meant when one speaks of an "action" by God? Some concept of the action of God plays a fundamental part in almost all forms of theism; it is assumed in every outward expression of faith that God is present and active. Prayer, thanksgiving, praise, and confessing the creed are all based upon a concept that God "listens" and "acts" in link with the world and his people. But how is it possible to transfer to God such terms as "action", that are so obviously connected to human experience? Is such a concept even coherent? Because this particular issue

<sup>44</sup> *S.T.* 1a.105,5r.

<sup>45</sup> *S.T.* 1a.105,5r. "Deus sufficienter operatur in rebus. . . nec propter hoc superfluit operatio secundorum agentium."

<sup>46</sup> *S.T.* 1a.23,8ad2. ". . . utitur causis mediis ut ordinis pulchritudo servetur in rebus, et ut etiam creaturis dignitatem causalitatis communicet."

touches the topic of miracles so directly, I would like to make a couple of brief observations:

1) *Semantically*, it is perfectly legitimate to use everyday language to refer to objects and events in a more specialized context. The day of total rejection of ordinary broad-spectrum terminology in a "theoretical" framework is over. Many philosophers are willing to grant that it is perfectly legitimate to start with the tool-kit of ordinary language when beginning to think about something; Hilary Putnam, for instance: "Frequently, . . . the term [at the beginning of theory-building] will be a common-language term whose new technical use is in some respects quite continuous with the ordinary use."<sup>47</sup>

2) *Basic Beliefs* are present in every theory-construction. For classic theism, God's agency is just such a "basic belief", a fundamental orientation that carries with it theoretical and practical implications. It is a fundamental way of looking at reality and, within classic theism, not reducible. If this belief were shown to be non-coherent, then standard theism would have to be abandoned.

3) *Divine agency* can be viewed as a *metaphor*, but one that theists take to be *referential*, referencing conditions and events and not just standing in for the feelings and attitude of the speaker.

In classic theism, there is a distinction made between the knowledge of God (*scientia dei*) and the will of God (*voluntas dei*). This is not the place to discuss the coherence of theism, but it appears to me that this distinction is indeed necessary if one is to speak meaningfully of God "acting". There are various ways that philosophers of religion have approached the relationship between divine knowledge and divine will. Perhaps the most coherent approach is the concept of God's choice of a possible world.<sup>48</sup>

### *Are the Boundaries of Experience the Boundaries of Knowledge?*

The assumption behind Hume's second argument is dubious. He reacts to the occasionalist's claim by saying that analogies and probabilities used in normal contexts cannot be used because "*the subject lies entirely out of the sphere of experience*" (i.e., outside the segment of reality that creates

<sup>47</sup> Hilary Putnam, "What theories are not." in *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1: Mathematics, Matter and Method*. 2ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), 226.

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, William L. Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

*perceptions* in us. Hume is actually saying that the boundaries of experience make up the boundaries of our *knowledge*. Here his skepticism, based upon a monism of ideas, begins to clearly show itself. We already noted the artificial limit which Hume's theory of ideas places upon theory-making. He attempts here again to restrict genuine knowledge to direct observations and the perceptions that arise from these impulses. Inferences are also admissible for him if they are based upon observations from the past that have left their mark in the memory, but any theory construction beyond this moves outside the boundaries of the proper territory of reason.<sup>49</sup>

This is clearly a far too narrow perspective! Human beings are learners. Together with the skeptics of all times, Hume asks: "How do you know that?" and "How can you justify the knowledge you claim to have of the world?" With these questions, he attempts to limit true knowledge to direct observations and the perceptions that result from them. However, between pure instinct and formal deduction lies the whole realm of "learning".<sup>50</sup> Proposals and models (i.e., theories!) can be corrected and sharpened on the basis of feedback from the world external to our mind. (Radical skeptics still possess, in spite of their skepticism, the precise information about the world and its objects that enables them to set their thoughts down on paper. The success of any human action is based upon the success of the epistemological process.)

As we saw in the previous chapter, because language is part of the "toolkit" of *Homo sapiens*; the process of *theory-making* also has social dimensions. Thus, a model or theory can be passed on and tested via inter-subjective communication. In a language community, a clash of theories results and those theories ultimately survive that prove themselves most successful in empirical praxis. It is not just the external world that gives us direct feedback about our models but other people put our theory to the test.

Hume is basically correct in his critique of the occasionalist's dream, but his monism of ideas leads him too far in his rejection of any theory-building that surpasses direct observation and experience. That is precisely the area where theory construction begins to bear the mostly

<sup>49</sup> The contradiction in regard to his assumption of the uniformity of nature is obvious.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Anthony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 80.

valuable fruit! In areas as diverse as particle physics and cosmology, molecular biology and brain research, theory-building enables us to gain knowledge of things that we cannot perceive because we simply lack the sensory organs to do so!

### *God's Interaction with the World*

Hume argues that we possess no knowledge of the exact mechanism of God's acts. Yet, traditional theism asserts an *interaction* between God and the physical world. What this interface involves is an important topic in the discussion between philosophy of science and classic theism. If God acts in particular, special ways in the world – in response to prayers, for instance – then this activity must not be limited to the "gaps" in the contemporary scientific account of the world. Such gaps almost inevitably close as science progresses and God becomes "unemployed". There are various philosophical proposals by theists on the table as to how this issue could be addressed; suffice it to say here that it *is* an important topic.<sup>51</sup>

### **(3) Constructing Models and Analogies**

It is time we return to our main question, though. Hume says that extraordinary phenomena that are not easy to explain occur on the border of the legitimate regions of human reason. But, he asks, how are we to evaluate whether to accept the accounts of them, if we have no personal experience of what is reported?

Hume once again applies his presupposition of uniformity. He insists that we can reason concerning matters of fact on the basis of a type of "analogy" of past experience.<sup>52</sup> This procedure is based, however, entirely upon our psychological associations:

"We transfer all the different events, in the same proportion as they have appeared in the past, and conceive one to have existed a hundred times, for instance, another ten times, and another once."<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance: Steven D. Crain, "Divine Action in a World of Chaos: An Evaluation of John Polkinghorn's Model of Special Divine Action." in *Faith and Philosophy* 14(1997):41–61.

<sup>52</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 104ff. (Section IX).

<sup>53</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 58 (Section VI).

Hume then proceeds to suggest a calculus of probability on the basis of these psychological associations whereby the feeling of “belief” is born from experiences of the past and one grants an object “preference above the contrary event, which is not supported by an equal number of experiments, and recurs not so frequently to the thought in transferring the past to the future”.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, Hume ends up making the curious attempt to ground the laws of nature on habitual psychological associations. Flew rightly describes the effort as “paralytic”.<sup>55</sup>

He fails to provide the necessary basis for his presupposition of the essential uniformity of nature. Antony Flew correctly observes that “if a law of nature really was no more than an epitome and an extrapolation of a long and uninterruptedly uniform series of observations, then an exception to the law – a breach in the uniformity of the series – could be only an unusual, and no doubt unexpected, event.”<sup>56</sup>

We shall return again to the effort to formulate an algebra of probability for weighing evidence in our last chapter. But we must glance briefly at one additional point Hume tries to make Section X.

“In our reasonings concerning matter of fact, there are all imaginable degrees of assurance. [...] A wise man, therefore,” says Hume, “proportions his belief to the evidence.”<sup>57</sup> This seems to be a reasonable proposition. But the next step he takes is peculiar. Some conclusions, he argues, are based upon “infallible experience”. In such cases, the wise person “expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event. In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: he weighs the opposite experiments [Hume means *experience*]: he considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: to that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgement, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call *probability*.”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 58 (Section VI).

<sup>55</sup> Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 205.

<sup>56</sup> Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 204–205.

<sup>57</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 110 (Section XI).

<sup>58</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 110-111 (Section XI) (Emphasis Hume's.)

Since Hume had earlier defined *proofs* as “meaning such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition”,<sup>59</sup> one is left with the odd claim that one's past experience is an infallible guide to all future experience and that this provides a basis for the outright rejection of any testimony to the occurrence of an event that would falsify our carefully formulated expectation. This seems entirely absurd from the standpoint of *a posteriori* reasoning. How does one know this before all experience? To capriciously reject the account of an event beyond the range of our observations simply because such a counter example would falsify the universal generalization we have formulated (based upon our observations!) would be totally arbitrary and bigoted, as Flew correctly notes.<sup>60</sup>

Why, then, did Hume propose such a notion? Startling as it may appear at first glance, I suggest that he was feeling his way toward a type of “transcendental” necessity of the kind Kant later made the center of his critical philosophy. Hume was prepared, in spite of his basic empiricism, to use his presupposition of the uniformity of nature to exclude certain classes of phenomena from the domain of rational investigation.

His basic approach was to reject *a priori* arguments in the realm of empirical judgments (matters of fact and questions of real existence). But he made *one exception*: he rejected certain classes of explanation and said they were not even possible objects of rational investigation, including those accounts that would imply a supernatural agency. Hume attempts to justify this by arguing that the only foundation of our reasoning about empirical matters is the cause-effect relationship. Any explanation that entails the suspension of this relationship is *a priori* disqualified from consideration.

This clearly not an *empirical* argument. Hume was convinced, as Kant after him, that (given the truth of his theory of ideas!) there were certain presuppositions that provide a “transcendentally” necessary conceptual basis for our reasoning about the world. Without these, no valid reasoning can take place. Specifically, every “cause” must be the sort of thing that makes an impression on our senses. This eliminates *a priori* entire classes of possible objects and events from any ontology. In particular, anything connected with a non-natural agency is excluded from

<sup>59</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 56n (Section VI).

<sup>60</sup> See: Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 204.

the running. Hume thinks that cause-and-effect reasoning requires the presupposition of absolute uniformity to function. For him, this is the only way for a rational being to have knowledge of the world. If one accepts this account of the “transcendental” necessity of a naturalistic cause-effect relationship in reasoning about matters of real existence, then one must *also* accept the corollary presupposition of exceptionless uniformity in nature.

*Analogy* implies, then, for Hume thoroughgoing naturalism.

As Levine succinctly puts it:

“For Hume, *anything analogous* to our experience is at least analogous in the sense of suggesting that it too has a natural cause. In Hume’s sense of ‘experience’ we experience only that which occurs in nature, and judgments based on that experience cannot warrant positing causes outside that experience.”<sup>61</sup>

Without this *a priori* basis, Hume thinks we would be living in “fairy land”.

We must turn our attention at this point to the regions Hume considers the realm of fantasy, that region comparable to the sections of old maps where we are told dragons dwell.

### “Fairyland”

Hume calls thoroughgoing occasionalism “fairy land”,<sup>62</sup> but it is clear that he thinks other “fancied experiences” belong there too, as well as such questions as the “origin of worlds, or the economy of the intellectual system or region of spirits”. These “lie entirely beyond the reach of human capacity”.<sup>63</sup>

Hume makes clear from the very beginning of the *Enquiries* that he has the philosophical schools and religion of his day in mind.<sup>64</sup> He calls these

<sup>61</sup> Michael P. Levine, *Hume and the Problem of Miracles*, 32.

<sup>62</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 72 (Section VII).

<sup>63</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 81 (Section VIII, Part I).

<sup>64</sup> “The justest and most plausible objection against a considerable part of metaphysics, (is) that they are not properly a science, but arise either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity, which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding, or from the craft of popular superstitions.” *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 11 (Section I).

the “airy sciences” in contrast to the “proper province of human reason”.<sup>65</sup> The task Hume sets for himself, then, is nothing less than to free learning from these “abstruse questions”. His method? “To enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show, from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects.”<sup>66</sup>

We are now in a position to reconstruct what Hume is driving at:

There will always be, Hume maintains, contentious claims and questions that are beyond the boundaries of our direct experience. This includes “a considerable part” of metaphysics and also other areas of inquiry such as cosmology and cognition. Because these areas concern the world of real existences and matters of fact, though, they would have to be considered by means of what he calls “analogy” with actual experience.

Such analogical inferences, though, are based upon the cause-effect relationship because this relationship gives us the means of making judgments concerning matters of fact. The cause-effect relationship, in turn, rests upon the assumption of the absolute uniformity of causes as expressed in the laws of nature. These are, according to Hume, universal generalizations based upon observation of experience.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, because these areas of inquiry are not part of a cause-effect relationship, they do not really belong to the legitimate objects of our reasoning. They do not fit into Hume’s conception of laws of nature based upon the presumption of exceptionless uniformity and thus are not open to true analogous thinking and inquiry and are not even worthy of true rational consideration as matters of fact; they are not serious candidates for real existence.<sup>68</sup>

With this conception, Hume set the stage for the crucial tenth section of the *Enquiries*, the chapter “*Of Miracles*”.

<sup>65</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 12 (Section I).

<sup>66</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 12 (Section I).

<sup>67</sup> Kant speaks here of “intuitions” (*Anschauungen*). These play the same role in his system as “experience” and observation does here for Hume.

<sup>68</sup> It is enlightening to note the reaction to Hume’s approach as applied to history. See G. Streminger’s note about the reservations of the romantics and historians toward Hume’s *History of England* in *David Hume: Sein leben und Werk*, 489.

### 3.2 Mapping Miracles

Hume's chapter on miracles in the *Enquiries* has been a philosophical battleground from the day it was published. A great deal of the discussion has been taken up with what the Scotsman actually meant! This is not the place to do a detailed exegesis of the chapter; rather, I want to suggest a general interpretive approach that fits Hume's view of miracles into what we have seen about the general framework of his thinking.<sup>69</sup>

Hume divides the chapter into two sections; in the first he seems to concede the possibility of miracles but in the second he appears to retract that concession. A great deal of discussion has also gone on about whether Hume's argument against miracles in Part I is *a priori* or *a posteriori*. I suggest that the confusion arises from a failure to read the tenth chapter in the context of his stated purpose of outlining a mental geography. In the discussion on miracles, Hume is pursuing his "mental geography" project in a straightforward way. In Part One of Section X he introduces the concept of miracle and puts it in the framework of the project by discussing the issue of evidence in the evaluation of reports about *extraordinary phenomena*; then in the second subdivision he specifically locates alleged miracles in *fairyland*. He argues that they are not "proper objects of our intellectual faculties" because they are outside the realm of ideas and their relationships.

Embedded in chapter ten are three examples that make Hume's position clear.

#### The Dilemma of the Indian Prince

"Experience," says Hume, "is not altogether infallible, but in some cases is apt to lead us into errors."<sup>70</sup> Therefore, he says, all evidence derived from the alleged experience of other people must be judged by an "ultimate standard. . . derived from experience and observation."<sup>71</sup> This sounds consistently empiricist. Locke had written, "matter of fact is like

<sup>69</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Section X of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* see, for instance, Anthony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 171–213 and Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 13–23.

<sup>70</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 110 (Section X).

<sup>71</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 112 (Section X).

to find more or less belief."<sup>72</sup> But, asks Hume, what if the testimony in question concerns matters of an extraordinary or even miraculous nature, things which fall outside the province of our previous experience?

In view of the fallibility of human thinking, "a wise man proportions his believe to the evidence."<sup>73</sup> This seems like a reasonable statement. But what is admissible as evidence? That is the crux of the problem. We have already seen that, for Hume, thinking is based entirely upon experience and intuition; he denies that theory-making is a dependable partner in human reasoning concerning "matters of fact" and "real existence" unless linked directly to our experience.<sup>74</sup>

This creates a dilemma for Hume's empiricism, which he illustrates by citing the case of an Indian prince who refuses to believe testimony about "the effects of frost."<sup>75</sup> Hume rules that the prince "reasoned justly" and adds that "it naturally required very strong testimony to engage his assent to facts, that arose from a state of nature, with which he was unacquainted, and which bore so little analogy to those events, of which he had had constant and uniform experience." In a footnote, Hume explains that "the event follows contrary to the rules of analogy, and is such as a rational Indian would not look for."<sup>76</sup>

There are two points worth noting here:

Hume very specifically classifies such an event as "extraordinary" and rejects any possibility that it could be *miraculous*. It is not, he says, "contrary to uniform experience of the course of nature in cases where all the circumstances are the same."<sup>77</sup> We will return to this point later.

Second, it is very significant that the only type of evidence that Hume considers relevant in such a situation is personal experience or the *testimonial* evidence of witnesses.

But something is clearly amiss with this. Hume neglects to consider that not only *observation level* data but also *theory level* explanations can

<sup>72</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A. C. Fraser (Oxford: OUP, 1894), Book IV.15.5

<sup>73</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 110 (Section X).

<sup>74</sup> See Chapter 2 on Hume's view regarding "Matters of Fact".

<sup>75</sup> This example was a favorite of the empiricists. Locke used it in his *Essays* (Book IV.15.5) and so did Bishop Butler in *The Analogy of Religion* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1847), 38.

<sup>76</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 114n (Section X).

<sup>77</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 114n (Section X).

weigh in as evidence. Because of his commitment to his theory of ideas and what Flew calls “his theory of the psychology of learning from experience”, Hume makes no room for genuine *theoretical knowledge* about water (e.g., its composition and structure); thus, there is no way for the visitor from the North to *reason* with the Indian prince about things beyond the nobleman’s experience. All he can do is appeal for him to accept his testimony.

For Hume, our knowledge is limited by the boundaries of experience. Thus, the probability of a report of a matter of fact depends entirely upon the experience of the circle of listeners. But this surely places a completely unacceptable restriction on expanding our knowledge. Flew correctly criticizes Hume on this point, because his theory of the psychology of learning is not only an attempt to empirically describe the actual mechanisms of human learning, but also legislates *a priori* “the norms of experiential reasoning”.<sup>78</sup> But this is wrong-headed. The boundaries of our experience are surely *not* the boundaries of our possible knowledge. Such an attempt to set up limits of possible knowledge via a criterium of “analogy” is equivalent to Kant’s category of “possible experience”. The “course of nature” is thereby explicitly reduced to what can be sanctioned by “analogy” in the context of “a uniform experience”.<sup>79</sup>

A position like this is poisonous not only for metaphysics but also for much of natural science. The curvature of space-time or comprehensive statements about the nature of the universe stretch the suggested category of “analogy” and any possible experience of the uniform course of nature far beyond the breaking point. What is really going on here is that Hume has smuggled a hidden transcendental argument into the discussion and used it to set up *a priori* limits to empirical thinking. However, rational thought on questions regarding matters of fact and real existence cannot be arbitrarily limited, as Hume sought to do, to the level of observational data.

We have seen how Hume views the “extraordinary”, but the issue of the miraculous has still to be considered. So we now turn to the other two examples he introduces in the second part of chapter ten.

<sup>78</sup> Anthony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 175.

<sup>79</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 115 (Section X).

## Darkness at Noon and Elizabeth *resurrexit*

Hume gives two examples of events which illustrate for him the difference, on the one hand, between reports of extraordinary phenomena and, on the other, accounts of alleged miracles. Testimony about extraordinary phenomena can, under certain circumstances, be judged to be credible; reports about real miracles, Hume argues, should never be granted belief.

First, the extraordinary event:

“Suppose,” says Hume, “all authors, in all languages, agree, that, from the first of January 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days: suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: that all travellers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction: it is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived. The decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature, is an event rendered probable by so many analogies, that any phenomenon, which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform.” *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 127–28 (Section X).

There are four important points to note here.

First, Hume explicitly refers to this alleged incident as an *extraordinary event*. This is not just a verbal emphasis on the unusual nature of the occurrence, but an epistemological classification of the alleged happening as one of those things which are proper objects of reason. This is in stark contrast to the second example, which he categorically calls *miraculous*.

Second, Hume assumes a very extensive and uniform testimony to the alleged extraordinary happening. The tradition is also “still strong and lively” in society.

Third, the reason that Hume thinks the testimony to this event can be judged to be worthy of serious consideration – i.e., it “comes within reach of human testimony” – is that it is the kind of event that is “rendered probable by so many analogies”.

Finally, he considers it to be “evident” under such circumstances that a research program should “search for the causes” of the darkness.

Hume contrasts this with another imaginary scenario:

“Suppose, that all the historians who treat of England, should agree, that, on the first of January, 1600, Queen Elizabeth died; that both before and after her death she was seen by her physicians and the whole court. . . and that, after being interred a month, she again appeared, resumed the throne, and governed England for three years: I must confess that I should be surprised at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances, but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. I should not doubt of her pretended death, and of those other public circumstances that followed it: I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was, nor possibly could be real. You would in vain object to me the difficulty, and almost impossibility of deceiving the world in an affair of such consequence;. . . I would still reply, that the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence, than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature.” *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 128 (Section X).

Now, what difference between these two events leads Hume to think that the testimony regarding the former could be considered believable, while no amount of credible testimony concerning the latter could ever justify belief that a miracle had occurred?

The text itself gives us the answer: the second alleged event would constitute a striking violation of the laws of nature, and we have already seen that for Hume a law of nature is an invariable regularity. A “law of nature” states what in fact happens, based upon the assumption of the total uniformity of operation of laws of nature; consequently everything that happens must concur within the “reach” of these laws. If Hume’s theory of ideas (perceptual monism) is true, a miracle is a *logical* impossibility. One would know *a priori* that a supernatural cause could not generate a sensory impression in us.<sup>80</sup> It follows that a miraculous event would stand outside of any cause-and-effect relationship; thus, we would be literally *unable* (epistemologically) to grant it consideration as a candidate to be a matter of fact or real existence. Such an event would be *without analogy*, i.e. we would not be able to compare it with any other

<sup>80</sup> See: Michael P. Levine, *Hume and the Problem of Miracles*, 33.

*idea* because all ideas must arise from experience. That is the theory-immanent basis of Hume’s rejection of the possibility of a miracle and the heart of his skepticism about the construction of scientific theories. In the case of the purported resurrection of the Queen, Hume would even be willing to grant the factuality of the testimony of “her pretended death, and of those other public circumstances that followed it”, but he would insist that it was *not* a miracle but rather an “extraordinary event”. Presumably, in such a case he would follow the advice he gave in regard to the example of universal darkness and search for natural causes that could explain it. This still allows him room to revise his knowledge of nature itself. An extraordinary event could presumably arise from characteristics and processes of nature with which one is unacquainted.<sup>81</sup> In such a case, a revision of one’s view of the laws of nature might be required. But under no circumstances could a non-natural explanation be seriously considered, because that would cross the border of intuition and imagination. For Hume, any “causes” that go beyond the senses are excluded.

### 3.3 Concluding Thoughts

Hume’s fundamental theoretical rejection of miracles stands or falls with the three basic elements of his particular epistemology: his psychological theory of causation, the attendant presupposition of the absolute uniformity of natural causes and – behind both of these beliefs – his ideational monism.

We have established elsewhere (see: *Die Wunderkritik Immanuel Kants*) that there are strong reasons for rejecting his psychological theory of causation and ideational monism. The only grounds for accepting the presupposition of exceptionless uniformity in nature are linked to these. If one does not hold Hume’s ideational monism and takes a consistently critical position, there is no reason to hold to the *a priori* axiom of the exceptionless uniformity of the course of nature. I contend, therefore, that Hume’s attempt to reject the possibility of miracles *a priori* must be judged a failure. This does not, of course, prove that a miracle has actually ever taken place, but the court of reason may once again consider arguments on the subject. The *a priori* embargo can be lifted.

<sup>81</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 113 (Section X).