Humbling Hume: A Concise Way to Force Humeans and Neo-Humeans to Wrestle With the Evidence for Miracles

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Abstract. Consistency demands that neo-Humean skepticism toward second-hand reports of miracles must also apply to first-hand experiences, since the premises are equally applicable in both cases. Taking the neo-Humean argument to its logical conclusions, thought experiments allow us to imagine scenarios where someone would be judged irrational for believing in a miraculous event *that they personally experienced*. Thus, the argument leads to serious epistemic difficulties.

A better approach is to say that someone who experiences a miracle is indeed rational for believing it actually happened if he has good reasons for also believing that he was *in a good epistemic position* to judge whether or not the event really happened. This approach also justifies belief in second-hand miracle reports that are provided by credible witnesses.

Since the eighteenth century opponents of the miraculous have not focused so much on formulating arguments against miracles *per se* (such as Spinoza did in the seventeenth century) as they have focused on formulating arguments against *belief* in miracles. To put it more precisely, it is now more commonly argued that, whether miracles are possible or not, it is not rational to believe any reports of them. These arguments, therefore, are primarily concerned with epistemology, not with ontology. Those who employ them seek to do an end-run around the thorny question of whether or not miracles are metaphysically possible. Instead, they simply seek to argue that reports of miracles should never be believed, regardless of whether or not they are possible.

This is an extremely common strategy among sceptics. Indeed, it shows up in public, formal debates with surprising frequency. Many scholars, who have never employed this argument in their written work, quickly repair to it whenever they are publicly confronted with the evidence for a miraculous event like the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. To confirm its popularity, one only needs to listen to a small sample of the recorded debates in which Gary Habermas, William Lane Craig, or Michael Licona have argued in the affirmative for the resurrection. With astonishing regularity one hears their opponents repeating this argument, and frequently assuming that it is utterly unanswerable.

In its printed form, the most famous enunciation of this epistemological argument against miracles, by far, is David Hume's. But there were many notable variations in the twentieth century produced by Antony Flew, J.L. Mackie, and Simon Blackburn. Not surprisingly, these arguments have received numerous responses and attempted rebuttals. But among these rebuttals very little attention has been given to the epistemological assumptions that underlie these types of arguments.

This is no minor oversight. For as we shall see, these arguments (whether they are expressed in writing or in a public forum) actually assume that belief in the veracity of any miracle report is unreasonable, irrational, or intellectually irresponsible simply because it is always possible to account for such reports in terms of natural or psychological phenomena. In conjunction with this, they also assume that some kind of *evidentialist* epistemology must *always* apply in situations where a miracle is being reported. Thus, although they may weigh the evidence differently, they all assume the same premise: *it is wrong to hold a belief without sufficient evidence,* and whatever evidence exists (for a miracle report) can be explained without recourse to the miraculous. Against this view I will argue that this approach leads to absurdities, and that (contrary to Hume, Flew, Mackie, and Blackburn) it is very possible to envision scenarios where it would indeed be warranted for someone to believe a miracle report.

At the outset we should define the term 'miracle' as it is used in this paper. For our purposes miracles are, quite simply, *naturally impossible events.* They are 'events which cannot be produced by

the natural causes operative at a certain time and place' (Craig 2008:262). This means, as a matter of course, that whether or not something is a miracle is relative to the natural causes that are operative at any given time and place. For example, under certain conditions 'rain may be naturally inevitable or necessary, but on another occasion, rain may be naturally impossible' (Ibid.). If rain were to occur under conditions in which it was naturally impossible it would be appropriate to label it as miraculous.[1]

Miracles and Evidentialism

Let us now draw out the evidentialist nature of these arguments starting with David Hume. He argued on a probabilistic basis that the evidence for a miracle could, under the best conditions, only warrant a very weak belief in the veracity of any miracle report. Such an extraordinarily weak belief is almost identical to agnosticism, a mere suspension in judgment about the truth of the report.

> A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he 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: 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 judgment, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call probability. (Hume 1997:30)

Accordingly, even in a case where there is extremely good evidence for a miracle 'there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior' (*ibid*., p. 33).

What I would like to call special attention to is the opening sentence of the quoted paragraph: 'A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence'. Hume takes a strongly evidentialist approach to all testimonies of miracles. He weighs the evidence in terms of probabilities,[2] and he believes that the uniform experience of mankind makes it extremely improbable that any claim that the laws of nature have been violated is actually true. In his own words,

> A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and *as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws*, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. . . .
>
> The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish' (Ibid., p. 33; emphasis added).

Antony Flew, writing almost two hundred years later, has maintained the basic contours of Hume's argument. But he has made a few modifications that have (in his opinion) 'substantially

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[1] Miracles are often distinguished from that which is merely scientifically inexplicable by the fact that they are also beneficial to human beings. But this requirement of being beneficial is severely disputed by some because it is extremely difficult to establish just what is and is not beneficial. See, for example, T.J. Mawson, 'Miracles and Laws of Nature', *Religious Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Mar., 2001), p. 39. For the sake of avoiding this dispute this paper simply defines miracles as naturally impossible events.

[2] 'All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments and observations, where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence, proportioned to the superiority' (*ibid.*, p. 30).

strengthened' it. For him, the main issue is not probability but verifiability. But he still takes an evidentialist approach.

> It is a matter of what evidence there is or can be, a matter of verifiability and of verification. The two crucial and conflicting propositions are of very different and quite disproportionate orders of logical strength, of confirmability and confirmation. For the proposition or propositions asserted by the putative witnesses [of a purported event] were singular and in the past tense 'once upon a time, on one particular occasion, this or that actually happened'. The days are, therefore, long past when these claims could be directly confirmed or disconfirmed. But the proposition or propositions that rule out the alleged miraculous occurrences as physically impossible must be open and general. They are either of the form 'It is physically necessary for every so-and-so to be such-and-such', or of the form 'It is physically impossible for any so-and-so to be such-and-such'. Nomological propositions, as these are called, propositions asserting the subsistence of laws of nature and/or of causal connections, can in principle therefore, if not necessarily and always in practice, be tested and retested anywhere and at any time. (Flew 1997:50)

Again, notice the fundamental epistemological approach: 'It is a matter of what evidence there is or can be'. Flew is unapologetically an evidentialist when it comes to dealing with miracle reports.

Hume and Flew are not alone in this line of attack. Among epistemological arguments[3] against miracles (again, these are arguments made against the rationality of *believing* a miracle report)[4] this evidentialism is exceedingly common. To be sure, the arguments might weigh the evidence differently. Some might weigh it in terms of probabilities, as Hume has done. Some might weigh it in terms of verifiability, as Flew has done. But it will be an evidentialist approach nonetheless. Simon Blackburn, for example, is much closer to Hume's original essay than Flew is. He, like Hume, believes the evidence comes in the form of probabilities, asserting that, for any given miracle testimony, we can perform a Bayesian calculation which '*always* comes down against the truth of the testimony, and in favour of the uniformity of nature' (Blackburn 1999:184; emphasis added). Note the comprehensive quality of this claim. The Bayesian calculation, Blackburn says, *always* comes down against the truthfulness of a miracle report. This means that there is no way that anyone can be credible enough to justify believing him or her if he or she claims to have witnessed a miracle. In a similar vein J.L. Mackie claimed that a miracle is 'maximally improbable' and concluded, 'It is this maximal improbability that the weight of the testimony would have to overcome'. Unfortunately for miracle-believers, 'it is most unlikely that *any testimony* will be able to outweigh' this maximal improbability (Mackie 1986:25-26; emphasis added).[5]

This last point must not be overlooked. According to these arguments no witness can possibly be credible enough to warrant belief in a miracle report. All discussions of credibility are thus precluded because no witness is sufficiently reliable to justify believing him or her (no matter who he or she may be) if that witness is reporting a miracle. Hume himself made similar statements:

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[3] For the sake of style, I will occasionally interchange the terms "epistemological argument" and "Humean argument" but I am using them synonymously.

[4] In Flew's own words: 'The argument to be presented now is epistemological rather than ontological. It is directed not at the question of whether miracles occur but at *the question of whether—and, if so, how—we could know that they do*, and when and where they have' (Flew 1997:49; emphasis added).

[5] Elsewhere Mackie explains how human beings are inclined to believe a witness after his or her credibility has been established. But, he explains, reliability and honesty are not enough when dealing with unusual events: 'If we're satisfied on all these scores, we are inclined to believe what the witness says, without weighing very seriously the question "How intrinsically improbable is what he has told us?" But . . . this further question is highly relevant' (Mackie 1986:19). He goes on to explain that miracles are so improbable that no testimony is sufficient to justify believing in them.

> Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that, *even supposing it amounted to a proof*, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact, which it would endeavor to establish. It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other, and embrace an opinion, either on one side or the other, with that assurance which arises from the remainder. But according to the principle here explained, this subtraction, with regard to all popular religions, amounts to an entire annihilation; and therefore we may establish it as a maxim, that *no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.* (Hume 1997:41-42; emphasis added)

Notice his explicit claim: It is simply not possible for any testimony of a miracle to be so credible that one is justified in believing it. In another place, Hume tells us, '*I should not believe such a story were it told me by Cato,* was a proverbial saying in Rome, even during the lifetime of that philosophical patriot. The incredibility of a fact, it was allowed, might invalidate so great an authority' (Hume 1997:32). He then proceeds to explain why he is so sympathetic to this scepticism, saying, in effect, that there are certain events so improbable that no authority is great enough to justify belief in them.

Evidence and Epistemological Argument

In all of these arguments one can see in broad outline the position taken by William K. Clifford, author of the popular essay 'The Ethics of Belief'. In that essay Clifford explains his own rejection of all miracle reports—at least those involving Mohammed and Buddha. But just before that explanation he clearly announces his overarching approach to *all* knowledge. For any particular belief, he insists,

> if the belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure is a stolen one. Not only does it deceive ourselves by giving us a sense of power which we do not really possess, but it is sinful, stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our body and spread to the rest of the town. (Clifford 1996:84)

In short, 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' (*ibid.,* p. 85). Naturally, indeed, almost out of necessity, Clifford rejects all miracle reports. Why? Because there can *never* be enough evidence to support any such report: 'If an event really happened which was not a part of the uniformity of nature, it would have two properties: *no evidence could give the right to believe it to any except those whose actual experience it was*; and no inference worthy of belief could be founded upon it at all' (*ibid.,* p. 95; emphasis added).

It is not an overstatement to say that this epistemology was quite common in the middle part of the twentieth century. For example, Bertrand Russell, in one place, strongly rejects all reports of miracles, as he does in *Religion and Science* (1961:82-109), and in another place strongly commends evidentialism, as he does in his critique of William James:

> The precept of veracity, it seems to me, is not such as James thinks. It is, I should say: 'Give to any hypothesis which is worth your while to consider *just that degree of credence which the evidence warrants*'. And if the hypothesis is sufficiently important there is the additional duty

> of seeking further evidence. This is plain common sense, and in harmony with the procedure in the law courts. (Russell 2004:727; emphasis added)

Hence, though it may be measured in different ways, for each of the aforementioned thinkers evidence is a necessary condition of warranted belief in the veracity of any miracle report. All in all, if we filter out the minor differences between these arguments we can find some important common principles among them. The most obvious principle could properly be called a *theorem* (since it is argued for with the use of examples by multiple authors like Hume and Clifford), and it could be stated thus:

> T1. *It is not rational to believe any miracle report because the strongest evidence always stands against its veracity,* [6] *and it is always possible to explain the evidence in terms of natural and/or psychological phenomena.*[7]

However, it needs to be pointed out that this theorem is not merely a commonality; it is the lynchpin of the epistemological argument against miracles. It *must* be true in order for the argument to succeed. *It always stands as a foundational premise in the argument.* Hence, if it is disproved the argument collapses. Since it is the lynchpin of the argument I therefore propose to dispute T1. But in doing so I need to clarify exactly what part of it I am challenging. To this end, consider the following propositions:

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[6] In Hume, Flew, Mackie, and Blackburn we find this view of the evidence in the following places:

Hume: 'In all cases, we must balance the opposite experiments, where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater, in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence. . . . as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle' (Hume 1997:31-33).

Flew: 'The days are, therefore, long past when [a miracle report] could be directly confirmed or disconfirmed. But the proposition or propositions that rule out the alleged miraculous occurrences . . . can in principle therefore, if not necessarily and always in practice, be tested and retested anywhere and at any time' (Flew 1997:50).

Mackie: '. . . the antecedent improbability of this event is as high as it could be, hence . . . we have the strongest possible grounds for believing that the alleged event did not occur'. (Mackie 1986:25).

Blackburn: 'The hypothesis [that a miracle happened] is immensely improbable' (Blackburn 2001:184).

[7] That is, it is claimed that there is always some way to explain the existence of the miracle report without believing that it is actually true. In Hume, Flew, Mackie, and Blackburn we find this recourse to 'other possible explanations' in the following places:

Hume: 'Where such reports, therefore, fly about, the solution of the phenomenon is obvious; and we judge in conformity to regular experience and observation, when we account for it by the known and natural principles of credulity and delusion' (Hume 1997:41).

Flew: 'Suppose that in some particular case the evidence for a miracle appears extremely strong. Then perhaps [the investigator] may ask himself whether the nomological proposition that precludes this event is after all true. It could, in principle at any rate, be further tested. If, as is possible, it were shown to be false after all, then perhaps the event so strongly evidenced did indeed occur. But by the same token, that event could now no longer be described as truly miraculous. *This, surely, is what has happened in the case of so many of the reports of astonishing psychosomatic cures*' (Flew 2006:272; emphasis added).

Mackie: 'Perhaps there were unknown circumstances that made it possible; or, perhaps what were thought to be the relevant laws of nature are not strictly laws; there may be as yet unknown kinds of natural causation through which this event might have come about' (Mackie 1986:26).

Blackburn: 'The antecedent probability of such evidence coming into being is never so very small, because there are lots of other, natural, hypotheses that explain it. These are the common human frailties: deception, delusion, inflamed passions, mistakes, and so on' (Blackburn 2001:184).

A. The strongest evidence always stands against the veracity of any miracle report

and

B. It may always be possible to explain the evidence in terms of natural and/or psychological phenomena

therefore

C. It is not rational to believe any miracle report.

I am arguing that C does not follow from the conjunction of A and B. That is, T1 assumes that if A and B are both true, then C follows. T1, in other words, assumes a *non sequitur*. I firmly do not believe C is the case even if both A and B are true.

To state it in grammatical terms: I will not dispute the dependent clause of T1 (which says, 'because the strongest evidence is always against its veracity . . .'). Rather, I will dispute the *assumption* that if the dependent clause is true then it *necessarily follows* that the independent clause is true (which says, 'It is not rational to believe any miracle report'). If I am successful, this would be a refutation of the epistemological argument against miracles.

Sensory Experience and Justified Belief

To begin we must first consider the definition of 'report' as it is used in T1. Typically a report is a deliverance of information that is obtained from another person, either through verbal or written communication. But why must this word (or 'testimony' which is Hume's preferred label) refer only to information obtained from other persons? After all, we also obtain information about the world through our senses. Regarding the sense of vision, for instance, what I am currently seeing is being 'reported' to me by my eyes via my nervous system. Likewise, what I am hearing is being 'reported' to me by my ears, and what I am smelling is being reported to me by my nose. It is hard to casually dismiss the claim that sensory experience is indeed a kind of reporting. This is especially the case since our perceptual faculties can seriously lead us into error. We can be deceived by optical illusions, mirages, hallucinations, phantom limb pain, etc. *If this is so, then it is quite difficult to see why this Humean (epistemological) argument against miracles does not also apply to miracles that a person sees with his or her own eyes since the possibility of perceptual error is very real*. Of course, it seems absurd to sincerely insist that a person is irrational in believing in a genuinely miraculous event[8] that they personally witness. But it appears that such a denial is what this argument leads to.

For example, suppose Jones personally witnesses a miracle firsthand while he is alone at a forest park. He sees, we will say, a heavy wooden table lift up five feet into the air, and remain suspended for a number of minutes. And this happens immediately after he asks God for a sign of His existence. Furthermore, suppose that he examines the situation very carefully to make sure that he is not being tricked. He checks for wires, strings, mirrors, any devices that might produce a magnetic field, any large fans that could lift the table into the air with wind power, etc. He meticulously eliminates all of these possibilities. He also rubs his eyes, and pinches himself to ensure that he is not hallucinating or seeing an optical illusion. He finally concludes that the table is indeed remaining suspended five feet in the air and that it initially got that way after he asked God for a sign of His existence. Eventually the table descends back to earth, and Jones goes home. That night he believes:

[8] Some might think that my speaking hypothetically of a genuinely miraculous event is actually begging the question because I am assuming that miracles are actually possible. Thus, it might be worthwhile at this point to remind ourselves that *the epistemological argument against miracles does not assume miracles are impossible.* It remains agnostic about their possibility. It merely states that whether they are possible or not, it is not rational to believe any reports of them.

D. The table levitated after my prayer for a sign.

The next day, he reflects on the strange event he witnessed. To his chagrin, he suddenly realizes that if the Humean argument is correct, he should not believe that he really witnessed this event since it is not impossible for him to have actually been in error**.** He therefore thinks that he should weigh the evidence carefully, and (taking a cue from Flew) immediately decides to think of D as a hypothesis, a hypothesis that explains his experience of the strange event. But no matter how hard he tries he cannot think of any experiment that would verify D. It is not at all amenable to confirmation.[9] If Jones asks God to make the table levitate again, it does not happen, no matter how many times he asks. But he continues to follow Flew's criterion and, against D, he formulates another hypothesis:

E. It is physically necessary for a heavy object resting on the earth to remain at rest unless a physical force is applied to it.[10]

He finds that he can repeat numerous experiments that confirm E. He finds there is an almost endless supply of reports from other people whose experience agrees with E. And it is morally certain that he cannot disconfirm it. Moreover, E appears to be in conflict with D, since E speaks of physical *necessity*. Hence, he has better evidence to believe E than to believe D. Therefore, according to Flew, he should disbelieve D even though he personally witnessed the table levitating.

Second, he decides to weigh the evidence in terms of probabilities. He knows that a miracle, according to Hume, is 'a violation of the laws of nature' and that 'firm and unalterable experience has established these laws' (Hume 1997:33). He believes that the levitation of the table would definitely qualify as such a violation (of the law of gravity), and he also realizes that he has never heard anyone explain that they have witnessed such an event. Therefore, relative to human experience the probability of the event's having actually happened seems to be vanishingly small. 'And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact' against the reality of the table levitating. '[N]or can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior' (*ibid.*, p. 33). Jones, unfortunately, as we shall see, has no such opposite proof. So, whether he weighs the evidence in probabilistic terms, or in terms of confirmability, it looks like D has very thin evidential support.

Worse yet, Jones knows that there are other explanations for this strange event, and that he cannot conclusively rule any of these out. Perhaps he fell asleep in the woods and had an extraordinarily vivid dream. Perhaps he really was hallucinating. Perhaps he was on *Candid Camera*, and was fooled by fancy technology, and he will soon be laughing with his buddies as watches himself on prime time television. Perhaps his eyes really were deceiving him, even though he rubbed them to ensure that they were not. Or perhaps he did not look carefully enough for wires, strings, fans, or magnetic devices, and one of these was being used to deceive him. Perhaps he has psychological problems and his malfunctioning brain has created a false experience. There are many possible explanations, none of which can be ruled out with absolute certainty. And when he weighs the probabilities (based on the aforementioned uniformity of nature) in the way that Hume, Blackburn and others say that he should, he finds that D 'is immensely improbable, and the evidence can easily arise for other reasons' (Blackburn 2001:184). Therefore, it looks like he should explain the event in terms

[9] One might object, 'Yes, but this is indeed what we would expect with a one-time event'. And that exactly proves my point. Flew's criterion of confirmability leads to absurdities.

[10] In this example D exemplifies Flew's proposition that 'once upon a time, on one particular occasion, this or that actually happened'. And E exemplifies his proposition that 'It is physically necessary for every so-and-so to be such-and-such', or of the form 'It is physically impossible for any so-and-so to be such-and-such'.

of one of these other explanations, and cease believing D.

The long and short of this example is quite simple. The Humean argument implies that even when a miraculous event really has happened, anyone who witnesses it should not believe that it happened. So the question for us to ask is this: Is Jones irrational if he continues believing D? I believe it is intuitively clear that he is *not* being irrational.

First-hand and Second-hand Experience

So I am arguing that the scepticism enjoined (by the epistemological argument) toward second-hand reports of miracles should also, if its advocates are consistent, be applied to first-hand experiences of miracles as well. But is it reasonable for me to make this jump from second-hand reports to first-hand experience? Yes, because the premise of the epistemological argument applies in both cases. Whether the evidence is weighed in terms of probabilities or in terms of verifiability, the ultimate basis for rejecting all miracle reports is the observable consistency of the laws of nature along with the bare possibility of an error (or deception) on the part of our source of information regarding the miracle.

Again, consider how we have all experienced occasions when our faculties were clearly in error due to optical illusions, mirages, hallucinations, phantom limb pain, etc. On these grounds William Ellery Channing rejected the epistemological argument:

> This argument . . . proves too much; for if I am to reject the strongest testimony to miracles, because testimony has often deceived me, whilst nature's order has never been found to fail, then I ought to reject a miracle, even if I should see it with my own eyes, and if all my senses should attest it; for all my senses have sometimes given false reports, whilst nature has never gone astray; and, therefore, be the circumstances ever so decisive or inconsistent with deception, still I must not believe what I see, and hear, and touch, what my senses, exercised according to the most deliberate judgment, declare to be true. All this the argument requires; and it proves too much; for disbelief, in the case supposed, is out of our power, and is instinctively pronounced absurd; and what is more, it would subvert that very order of nature on which the argument rests; for this order of nature is learned only by the exercise of my senses and judgment, and if these fail me, in the most unexceptionable circumstances [that is, circumstances of an obvious miracle], then their testimony to nature is of little worth. (Channing 1901:225)

At this point it might be objected that I am employing an argument from analogy—since I am (with Channing) making a comparison between an event that is reported by another human being and an event that is reported by one's own faculties. Such arguments, it is well known, are notoriously problematic. However, this is actually not an argument from analogy, it is an argument *reductio ad absurdum*. I am simply asking that the proponents of this Humean argument be consistent. Consider again the conjunction of A and B:

A. The strongest evidence always stands against the veracity of any miracle report *and*
B. It may always be possible to explain the evidence in terms of natural and/or psychological phenomena

Consistency demands that B also be applied to miracles reported by one's own faculties. After all, even if someone personally experiences a miracle, no matter how certain they may feel about it, it is still *possible* to explain away the evidence (their sensory experience) as an error in their perceptual faculties. Therefore B is still applicable to such firsthand experience. Also, please notice that A is entirely independent of the first-hand or second-hand nature of the miracle report (that is, if A really is true *it is true regardless of how the report is transmitted,* whether through another person's testimony or through one's own faculties). This means that C ("It is not rational to believe any miracle report") naturally follows even in this situation. But this portends a very hard epistemological pill to swallow. And this puts Humeans and Neo-Humeans in a very difficult position. For, as far as I can tell, they

must admit that, if they are consistent, they would not believe in a miraculous event even if they witnessed it themselves.

All of the foregoing can be summarized very concisely for use in dialogue with sceptics. If someone uses this argument to justify their disbelief in the resurrection of Jesus, it is appropriate to ask them, 'If you saw a dead man come back to life, with your very own eyes, and you confirmed that he really was alive, and you knew that he really had been dead, would you believe it? Or, would you simply say, "I know, based on induction, that this cannot happen, therefore I will not believe it"?' If they say they could not believe it, even if they personally experienced it, it should be pointed out that they hold to an unlivable epistemology, or that their real problem is rooted in metaphysical commitments and not a theory of knowledge.

Basic Beliefs and Warrant

Jones' situation is similar to a hypothetical scenario offered by Alvin Plantinga in which he (Plantinga) is accused of stealing a letter from his chairman's office. There is extremely strong evidence (eyewitness testimony, a clear motive, and a record of similar behavior in the past) indicating that he is guilty. However, he knows that he did not steal the letter, since he clearly remembers that at the time it happened he was alone in the woods where he had spent the entire afternoon. Because of this, he believes in a properly basic way

F. I was alone in the woods all that afternoon, and I did not steal the letter.[11]

Yet, like Jones, he really does have powerful evidence for the denial of (his belief in) his innocence, since he has the same evidence as everyone else, evidence that strongly indicates his culpability, 'and this evidence is sufficient to convince my colleagues (who are eminently fair-minded and initially well disposed towards me) of my guilt. They are convinced on the basis of what they know that I took the letter; and I know everything they know' (Plantinga 1986:310).

So he believes F even though he has strong evidence for a defeater of F. Is he being irrational? Is he intellectually obligated to determine his belief solely on the evidence? To say it another way, should he believe that he is guilty simply because of what the evidence says? Not at all, says Plantinga: 'In this situation it is obvious, I take it, that I am perfectly rational in continuing to believe F in this basic way'. He then explains why:

> The reason is that in this situation the positive epistemic status or warrant that F has for me (by virtue of memory) is greater than that conferred upon its potential defeater by the evidence I share with my colleagues. We might say that F *itself* defeats the potential defeater; no further reason for the denial of this defeater is needed for me to be rational. Suppose we say that in this sort of situation a proposition like F is an *intrinsic* defeater of its potential defeater. When a basic belief *p* has more by way of warrant than a potential defeater *q* of *p*, then *p* is an intrinsic defeater of *q*—an intrinsic defeater-defeater, we might say. (*Ibid.*, p. 311)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into a discussion of the nature of warrant.[12] Suffice it to say, different epistemological systems define it differently. Descartes, for instance, believed that a

[11] For the sake of simplicity I have taken the liberty to change this statement's original enumeration of '13' to my own (as 'F').

[12] By 'warrant' Plantinga means that property which, when a belief possesses enough of it, converts said belief into knowledge. Warrant is Plantinga's solution to the Gettier problems that have vexed epistemologists in their quest to understand the nature of knowledge; and these problems are especially vexing if they hold to the standard definition of knowledge as merely *justified, true belief*. 'I may believe that I will win a Nobel Prize next year; by some mad chance my

proposition is warranted only if it cannot be doubted, or if it is derived from such a proposition. Very few epistemologists of the present day agree with his lofty standard. A more common view comes from philosophers like Chisholm and Plantinga for whom warrant comes in degrees; it is not binary, or (to say it another way) it is not all-or-nothing. To be sure, different thinkers place greater or lesser emphasis on intuition, logic, sense experience, and other factors. But no matter how we define it, unless we subscribe to a Cartesian epistemology, it appears that both Jones and Plantinga (in his hypothetical story) are behaving rationally in believing something—even though it contradicts good evidence.

Interestingly, Mackie himself comes quite close to this perspective, admitting that Jones would be thinking rationally, but he still falls short: 'Nevertheless, anyone who is fortunate enough to have fully observed and carefully recorded, for himself, an apparently miraculous occurrence is no doubt rationally justified in taking it very seriously' (Mackie 1986:28). But, from what we have seen, Mackie cannot consistently allow this exception since B also applies to firsthand experience.

Reliable Information-Flow and Justified Belief

In light of the foregoing, against T1 I would like to propose T2:

> T2. *If a person witnesses some kind of miraculous event, and they have good reasons to think that they were in a good epistemic position to know whether or not the event really happened, they are perfectly rational to believe it.*

T2 applies to first-hand experience. We accept it because we believe that epistemic situations of reliable information flow (via our perceptual faculties) are situations in which justified beliefs are formed. As Christopher Green explains it, 'any successful case of ordinary perception will depend on the existence of a channel of information all the way from the truthmaking object to the believing subject' (Green 2006:89). Where the subject perceives a miraculous event, and the subject is also justified in believing that the flow of perceptual information is reliable and not deceptive, the subject is justified in believing that a miraculous event actually happened.

But if the reliability of the channel of information is that which confers justification, then this same principle can be extended to apply to situations in which one obtains information through an informant and that informant is reliable. To illustrate, consider the following thought experiment. Imagine that Smith is a friend of Jones, and Jones tells him about his strange experience in the woods. He tells him about checking for wires, strings, mirrors, any devices that might produce a magnetic field, any large fans that could lift the table into the air with wind power, etc. Moreover, Smith believes (with good reasons,

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belief may be true; it hardly follows that I know the truth in question' (1991, p.v) If some high ranking member of the Nobel awards committee was playing a prank on Plantinga, telling him that he knew ahead of time he was going to receive one of the Nobel Prizes, and he told him this with a great deal of seriousness and persuasion, then Plantinga would be justified in believing it. But if this were merely a prank, and by some 'mad chance' he actually did receive a Nobel Prize it would seem very odd to say that Plantinga, for a period of months, actually had *knowledge* of his future reception of that prize. Thus, it appears that the combination of a belief's being justified and its being true is not sufficient for it to qualify as knowledge. Therefore, in his first book on warrant he asks,

> What more is required? What is this elusive further quality or quantity which, or enough of which, stands between knowledge and mere true belief? What is it that, added to true belief, yields knowledge; what is it that *epistemizes* true belief? (We cannot properly assume that it is a *simple* property or quantity; perhaps it is more like a vector resultant of other properties or quantities.) This quality or quantity, however, whatever exactly it may turn out to be, is the subject of this book. (1993, p.vi)

And that quality or quantity is what he is referring to with the term 'warrant'.

based on personal experience) that Jones is a credible and reliable source of information. He is not prone to exaggeration or lying, and he is usually quite sceptical about extraordinary claims made by other people. Also, he can see that Jones is not joking, he is completely serious about the story of the table rising into the air, and he obviously believes it himself. Now, it must be clearly stated: the fact that Jones is credible and that he believes the story himself is probably not enough to warrant Smith's belief that the table did indeed rise into the air. But when we add one additional factor it does appear to be enough, namely, that *Smith has good reason to believe that Jones was in a good epistemic position to know if the event really happened*. This means that Smith has good reasons to believe that the entire channel of information-flow, starting with Jones' own sense experience and continuing through Jones' himself (as an informant) is reliable.

To summarize this we can formulate T3.

> T3. *If a person sincerely reports that they have experienced some kind of miraculous event, and there are good reasons to think that they were in a good epistemic position to know whether or not the event really happened, and they are a reliable source of information, then it is perfectly rational to believe him or her.*

Few would dispute that a person is justified in believing what their senses report if they also have good reasons to believe they are in a good epistemic situation (that is, their faculties were functioning properly and were not being deceived). If this confers justification in cases of information obtained by the senses why does it not confer justification in cases of information obtained through testimony? If someone objects to T3 they need to demonstrate why reliability confers justification in the one case but not the other.

Indeed, T3 naturally comports with principles that enjoy widespread agreement regarding the epistemology of testimony. To be sure, there is a great deal of dispute among philosophers about the epistemic status of beliefs that are derived from testimony when the 'attester' (the person delivering the testimony) is not known to be reliable and sincere. Some, such as Christopher Green (2006) and C.J. Coady (1995) argue that a person may indeed be warranted for believing the claims of an attester whose reliability and sincerity is unknown. Others, such as Lackey and Faulkner, insist that such beliefs (from a witness whose credentials are unknown) are not warranted. But there is virtually no one claiming that a belief is unwarranted if it is derived from the testimony of a person who appears to be both sincere and reliable (Graham 2006:93). Indeed, it appears that T3's requirement (that there are good reasons to think that a person was in a good epistemic position to know whether or not an event really happened) is really just an incipient element of the more general requirement that a witness should be a reliable source of information.

For the sake of clarity I should point out that I am not claiming that a person in the same situation as Smith is *obligated* to believe Jones. That would be claiming too much. My contention is much more modest. By formulating T3 I am merely claiming that Smith (or a person similarly situated) is *well within his epistemic rights* if he does believe Jones. He is not being irrational. Others may not believe Jones. But they cannot say Smith is acting irrationally for believing Jones. Moreover, it is easy to see that if an objector to T3 were to fault Smith for this belief then this objector is implicitly saying that it is not epistemically permissible to believe a *reliable* and *sincere* witness (not an unknown witness) when they testify to a remarkable event.

Another way to frame our discussion is to adopt Alvin Plantinga's terminology (Plantinga 2000:ix). One might say that I am making a distinction between a *de facto* objection to belief in miracles and a *de jure* objection to belief in miracles. '*De facto'* refers to what actually exists, what is 'in fact'. A *de facto* objection is one aimed at the logical or ontological possibility of miracles, arguing that they can never, in fact, happen. It attempts to show that miracles are not possible. '*De jure'* refers to what is legitimate, lawful, or within one's rights. A *de jure* objection (against belief in miracles)

argues that one is not within one's intellectual rights to believe in miracles regardless of whether or not they are possible. It attempts to undermine belief in miracles even if they really can and do happen. The epistemological argument against miracles is undoubtedly a *de jure* objection. It states that, *in principle*, one is *never* entitled to belief in a miracle report. But, as our discussion has shown, as long as it really is possible for miracles to happen the *de jure* objection cannot succeed. To defeat a universal claim (like the epistemological argument makes) it is only necessary to present a valid counterexample to the contrary. Our thought experiments reveal that there are specific circumstances in which it is possible for someone to be warranted in their belief in a miracle report. Thus, there is no legitimate *de jure* objection to belief in the miraculous independent of a *de facto* objection. It cannot be said that, *in principle*, one can *never* rationally believe a miracle report unless it can also be shown that miracles are not logically or ontologically possible.

Objection: The Uniformity of Nature is Epistemologically Necessary

There is one particular objection to my argument that calls for special attention. It might be objected that the problem with the foregoing discussion is that it ignores Hume's observation that 'a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature', or, at the very least, it ignores the implications of this observation. For if we believe that the laws of nature really can be violated we are immediately confronted with insuperable difficulties in the historical sciences (such as archaeology or paleontology). This is because (by believing this) we are inadvertently undermining the methodology that is used for collecting historical data. Historical research depends on the assumption that the laws of nature, especially the processes of physics and chemistry, have remained uniform for the entire history of planet earth (indeed, for the entire history of the universe, except, perhaps, for the period immediately following the big bang).

As Antony Flew has said,

> The heart of the matter is that the criteria by which we must assess historical testimony, and the general presumptions that alone make it possible for us to construe the detritus of the past as historical evidence, must inevitably rule out any possibility of establishing, on purely historical grounds, that some genuinely miraculous event has indeed occurred. . . . The basic propositions are, first, that the present relics of the past cannot be interpreted as historical evidence at all unless we presume that the same fundamental regularities obtained then as still obtain today. Second, that in trying as best they may to determine what actually happened, historians must employ as criteria all their present knowledge, presumed knowledge, of what is probable or improbable, possible or impossible. (Flew 1997:49)

According to this objection, if the laws of nature do not remain uniform, those engaged in historical sciences will have to give up the criteria by which they 'assess historical testimony', including the testimony of nature. For instance, archaeologists will not be able to assume that each ring in an ancient tree really represents one year. Astronomers will not be able to presuppose the accepted date for a supernova (millions of years ago) since that date assumes the constancy of the speed of light. A geologist will not be able to believe that varves (annual sedimentary depositions) can enable him to pinpoint the timing of any events in our planet's history since they may not have been laid down in a uniform manner. And there are countless other assumptions that scientists would have to dispose of. In short, if we are going to believe the testimony of Jones about the miraculous incident (which is now in the past), we undermine the methodologies we use to detect the past in numerous other ways.

On the surface, this does appear to be a grave problem. But in response to this objection there is one simple question that must be asked: Why should we think that a miracle must be defined as a violation of the laws of nature? This is the foundational premise of the objection, but this premise is not necessarily certain.

Flew tells us why we must define *miracle* in this way: in order for a miracle to seem miraculous it must be something that cannot occur naturally. He says the word *miracle* 'must involve an overriding of a law of nature, a doing of what is known to be naturally impossible by a Power which is, by this very overriding, shown to be supernatural. Only if this is given can the occurrence of a miracle under the auspices of some particular system of belief constitute an inexpungible divine endorsement of that system' (*ibid.*, p.46). To clarify his contention, he speaks of Christian apologists who may be tempted 'to suggest that further advances in our scientific knowledge may verify several of the miracle stories in the Bible in the same sort of way'. That is, scientific advancement may one day demonstrate that the Bible's miracles are actually just byproducts of natural processes. But such an apologetic comes

> only at the price of showing that, although what was said to have happened did indeed happen, it's happening was not after all miraculous. Suppose that all the miracle stories in the New Testament were true, but that none of the events that occurred were genuinely miraculous. Then we would be left with no evidencing reason for believing the fundamental, essential, defining Christian dogma, that Jesus bar Joseph was God incarnate. (*ibid.*, p.51)

But Flew has almost certainly overstated his case by ignoring the fact that natural laws have a *ceteris paribus* clause inherent within them. As William Lane Craig explains,

> . . . natural laws are assumed to have implicit in them the assumption 'all things being equal'. That is to say, the law states what is the case under the assumption that no other natural factors are interfering. When a scientific anomaly occurs, it is usually assumed that some unknown natural factors are interfering, so that the law is neither violated nor revised. But suppose the law fails to describe or predict accurately because some *supernatural* factors are interfering? Clearly the implicit assumption of such laws is that no supernatural factors as well as no natural factors are interfering. Thus, if the law proves inaccurate in a particular case because God is acting, the law is neither violated nor revised. If God brings about some event which a law of nature fails to predict or describe, such an event cannot be characterized as a violation of a law of nature, since the law is valid only under the tacit assumption that no supernatural factors come into play in addition to the natural factors. (Craig 2008:262)

As Craig later describes it, the proposition 'Salt has a disposition to dissolve in water' states a natural law. 'If, due to God's action, some salt failed to dissolve in water, the natural law is not violated, because it is still true that salt has such a disposition' (Ibid., p. 263).

As Mackie also clarifies:

> Equally, there is no obscurity in the notion of intervention. Even in the natural world we have a clear understanding of how there can be for a time a closed system, in which everything that happens results from factors within that system in accordance with its laws of working, but how then something may intrude from outside it, bringing about changes that the system would not have produced of its own accord, so that things go on after this intrusion differently from how they would have gone on if the system had remained closed. All we need do, then, is to regard the whole natural world as being, for most of the time, such a closed system; we can then think a supernatural intervention as something that intrudes into that system from outside the natural world as a whole. (Mackie 1986:21)

If God has miraculously intervened throughout the course of history this does not mean that we must discard our belief in the uniformity of nature. The fact that God might exist and might have occasionally disrupted natural processes does not undermine the methodologies of the historical disciplines any more than the fact that other forms of intelligent life, extraterrestrials, might exist and also might have interfered with nature and thus disrupted natural processes.

To summarize: we have seen that the epistemological argument against miracles claims that it is never rational to believe a miracle report, no matter how credible the source, because there is never sufficient evidence and that it is always possible to explain away the report in terms of natural and psychological phenomena. I have argued that consistency demands that this scepticism toward second-hand reports must also apply to first-hand experience since the same reasons for doubting apply in both cases. In our thought experiment this led to the unpleasant conclusion that Jones is not rational for believing in a miraculous event even if he personally experiences it.

A better approach is to say that Jones is rational for believing in such an event if he, first of all, personally experiences it and, second, has good reasons for believing that he was in a good epistemic position to judge whether or not the event really happened. I have argued that being in such an epistemic situation, in which one has good reason to think that the flow of information from the external world to one's perceptive faculties is reliable, justifies one's belief in a miraculous event. But this same reasoning that applies to first-hand experience also applies to second-hand reporting. Thus, if Smith is aware of these good reasons for evaluating Jones' epistemic position positively, and he believes Jones is a reliable source of information, Smith is perfectly rational to believe the miracle report given by Jones.

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