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The Miraculous

The sceptical attitude to miracles expressed by David Hume, and followed by many others, is examined from several different standpoints. Hume's argument against attempts to prove the truth of Christianity from miracles reported in the Bible seems largely valid. However, his other criticisms of miracles are weakened by a misconception of the Christian view of the place of miracles in the faith. In common with others, Hume's view of miracles as a violation of a law of nature reveals a misunderstanding. Finally his views on testimony and experience are examined.

Key Words: Evidence for Christianity, Evidence for miracles, David Hume, Scientific laws, Testimony, Proof.

The issue of miracles raises many important and fascinating problems in the area of Christian faith and natural science. It also gives rise to frequent misunderstandings. The aim of this article is to air several of these areas of interest and to argue that while the apologetic value of miracles has frequently been overestimated miracles present no incompatibility between science and faith. The article ends with some observations about the evidence for miracles.

One of the seminal treatments of the topic is David Hume's discussion 'Of Miracles', Section X of his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. While not considering Hume's arguments directly each section of this article takes up one of Hume's themes.

1. Miracles as proof of the truth of Christianity

There is a strong, if not a dominant tradition, which argues that the appeal to the miracles as recorded in Scripture has a probative force for the Christian faith as a whole. Indeed so strong is this tradition that it has come to condition the entire way in which the concept of the miraculous is discussed in British philosophical literature. Hume's celebrated attack on miracles focused on demolishing the claim that a miracle can be the foundation of a religion, and subsequent discussion of miracles is largely footnotes to Hume.

We may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such a force as to prove a miracle, and to make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.¹

Hume was no doubt taking his cue here from the apologetic claims made by

1 *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (3rd. Edition, Oxford, 1975) p.127.

some of his contemporaries such as Samuel Clarke, who in his 1705 Boyle Lecture said, concerning miracles,

The Christian Revelation is positively and directly proved, to be actually and immediately sent to us from God, by the many infallible Signs and Miracles, which the Author of it worked publicly as the Evidence of his Divine Commission.²

Clarke was following in the footsteps of Stillingfleet and, no doubt, Stillingfleet echoed a much older tradition.

Attempting to use the evidence of miracles in this way presents two serious problems. One problem is the need to avoid circularity in argument. By the 'Christian Revelation' Clarke presumably means the Bible or at least central parts of the Bible. But the evidence for the authenticity of the Christian Revelation cannot be drawn from the pages of that revelation itself without circularity. For one would be appealing to the authenticity of the revelation, the accurate account it provides of miracles, to authenticate it as a revelation, actually and immediately sent to us from God.

But perhaps a distinction could be made between the revelation as immediately sent from God, and the revelation as historically trustworthy. If the Bible could be established as historically trustworthy, and if its historical trustworthiness could be initially granted then, it might be argued, its account of miracles can be taken as giving additional authentication of itself as a divine revelation.

It is here that the other prong of Hume's attack on miracles is relevant. For what Hume attempts to do is to undermine the historical trustworthiness of any testimony, including of course written testimony, which includes an account of the happening of miracles. If Hume's arguments are sound here, it becomes impossible first to treat the Bible or any other document as historically reliable and then to consider the further evidence from miracles as giving authenticity to the documents as a divine revelation. The very fact that they contain miracle stories, and present these not as myths but as historical occurrences, debars the documents from serious consideration as historically trustworthy, and hence prevents the argument from their trustworthiness, via the miracle stories, to their position as a divine revelation.

But there is also an important theological reason why the Stillingfleet-Clarke strategy is defective. The Christian faith as it is derived from Scripture is inherently or essentially miraculous. For at the heart of the biblical account of human redemption are miracles; the miracle of the Incarnation and of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. These miracles are not a prelude to anything else, they are the warp and woof of the Christian faith.

² Cited by J.C.A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (London, 1978) p.106. This book provides useful background information to the eighteenth-century debate.

The picture of that faith presented by the Stillingfleet–Clarke strategy is markedly different from this. It is of a faith which is essentially moral and didactic in character rather than gracious and miraculous. The question they address is thus: is the teaching of Jesus and of the prophets and apostles authentic? The miracle stories are invoked to provide the necessary authenticity. But if the Christian faith, while of course including important teaching, is inherently miraculous, then it is impossible to invoke miracles to authenticate that religion. It may be coherent to invoke miracles to authenticate something else; but it is clearly misguided to invoke miracles to authenticate miracles.

But is not the strategy of Stillingfleet, Clarke and others in appealing to miracles as authenticating the divine revelation supported by the teaching of the gospels themselves? When Nicodemus said to Christ 'We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him' (John 3.2) was he not arguing along similar lines. And are we not invited by the gospels to endorse this argument?

There is a world of difference, however, as even Hume would allow, between a person who witnesses a miracle, and someone else who believes a miracle because of the testimony of someone else. The position of Nicodemus and of ourselves is therefore crucially different. Furthermore, there is no problem of circularity with Nicodemus' claim.

Jesus' miracles

In order to obtain a balanced view of the New Testament's estimate of the importance of miracles as the authenticators of teaching it is necessary to add the frequent occasions as recorded in the gospels when Jesus refused to work miracles or signs to authenticate his own person and mission.

Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas (Matthew 12.38–9)

And he said unto them, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead (Luke 16.31)

So the earlier conclusion still stands, that there are difficulties over supporting the claims of a book to be a divine revelation by appealing to the miracle stories that it contains. But in drawing this conclusion it must not be thought that testimony has no importance at all.

There is a further issue, that of whether anyone is warranted in seeking miraculous authentication today of the completed Christian revelation. We shall return to this issue later, and also to the question of the relation between direct experience and testimony, when it will be suggested that Hume, among others, severely underestimates the place and importance of testimony in all human knowledge.

2. What is a miracle?

So it is argued that the strategy which Hume attacks, and which has been a dominant strategy in popular apologetics and in presentations of the Christian faith since the time of Hume, and despite his critique, is mistaken in character.

How then ought we to regard the miraculous? Let us try to answer this question by taking up some of the points already made.

Despite the title of this article 'the Miraculous' is not a separate category of event in the Christian gospel which merits separate treatment. Anyone who reads the New Testament, for example, will be struck by how integral (and integrated) the miracles recorded there are to the rest of what is recorded. They do not function as a preliminary warm-up, as stories designed to make the readers' jaws drop. Miracles are not presented as magical happenings, designed to show how clever a god the Lord is, much less to entertain the reader or to invite his applause. As we have seen, Jesus did not pursue a policy of maximising miracles, and there is clear evidence of restraint. Invoking miracles is clearly subordinated to a deeper purpose. Not only that, stories of miraculous happenings are not distributed uniformly through the pages of Scripture but miracles accompany the giving of new revelation from God. This is one reason why there is no warrant to seek miraculous endorsement of the Christian faith today.

In keeping with this general approach the Bible does not clearly distinguish what we confidently call miracles, events which cannot be accounted for in terms of known science, from other happenings. There is a wide spectrum of cases. Some signs or miracles appear to be unusual or unlikely events, a sign of God's providential care or control, and nothing more. In this category might fall the diet of the exiles as recorded in the book of Daniel and the feeding of Elijah by the ravens. Some events are, in a parallel fashion, signs of God's judgment; the plagues of Egypt, for example. Other events, such as Christ finding the coin in the fish's mouth, are wildly improbable from a statistical point of view. Other unusual events which play a crucial role in the gospel narratives, such as the occasions when Christ was 'hidden' from the perception of his followers, and then revealed, such as those disciples whom he accompanied on the road to Emmaus, may be capable of a straightforward psychological explanation.

At the other end of the continuum are those events which are clearly at odds with scientific explanations; the changing of water to wine, the raising of the dead, the immediate healing of the sick and the blind and, supremely and centrally, the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ.

What this spectrum or continuum of cases suggests is that as far as Scripture is concerned it is unimportant to draw a hard and fast line between 'the miraculous' and other events which are more readily explainable in terms of natural features.

But it is easy to draw the wrong conclusion from these data. One such

conclusion would be that all that the Bible is interested in recounting these strange happenings is the production of a certain psychological state in the witnesses, a state of wonder and awe. On this view what matters is the effect and not how the effect is produced. But this understanding of the miraculous in Scripture would be a distortion.

Etymologically a 'miracle' is an event that causes wonderment; but it does not follow from this that anything that causes wonderment is a miracle and that we are free to reinterpret the miracle stories of the gospels in a reductionist fashion, as tales of whatever provenance which are designed to produce wonderment, or as attempts to express the wonderment of the early disciples, and nothing more.

So there is need to steer a middle path between on the one hand isolating a certain class of events, the miraculous, for special attention and promoting it to a special place in the presentation of the Christian faith by treating it like magic and, on the other, reducing or devaluing the miracle stories until they are nothing more than devices to elicit wonder.

Coherence

The way to approach the miraculous in the Bible is to understand the contribution that it makes to the coherence and integration of the whole biblical 'story'. The problem with the Stillingfleet-Clarke approach which we considered at the beginning, and also with more modern defences of the idea of the miraculous, such as that of Professor Swinburne,³ at least if they are regarded as contributions to an understanding of the place of miracles in the Christian religion, is that they abstract the concept of the miraculous from its place in the gospels.

One important method by which claims are made plausible or credible is by the way in which they can be shown to cohere together. Of course such coherence is not sufficient for truth, since fables and fairy stories, and even engaging nonsense like *Alice in Wonderland* may have a certain coherence. Nevertheless, while coherence is not sufficient, it is certainly necessary. And the miraculous is treated properly not when it is promoted for special attention but when it keeps its rank as part of the overall coherence of the Christian faith.

Certain parts of the teaching of the Bible set up certain expectations. For example, much of the teaching of Christ anticipates and foretells the cross and the resurrection. The cross is a 'natural' event, a killing by crucifixion; the resurrection is a 'supernatural' event. But in a sense this is immaterial to the coherence of the whole. For had there been no account of the cross and resurrection then Christ's claims would have been anomalous. But given that we possess such an account then the coherence of his teaching is strengthened. This is the spirit in which, I believe, Christ understood his

3 *The Concept of Miracle* (London, 1971); *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 1979) Ch. 12.

own death and resurrection (Luke 24.26) and in which Peter presented it (Acts 2.24).

Alternatively we could conceivably have had an account of the death of Christ and of his resurrection but no teaching about these events from Christ. They would then have appeared to be context-less wonders and prodigies, and nothing more.

But we have both. We have the teaching, and we have the events which dovetail with the teaching, which fulfil it and fill it out. They do not, in abstract fashion, prove that Christ's teaching is better or more convincing than any other teaching. Christ's teaching is not supported in this way, and it is hard to see what such support could amount to. How could anyone set about proving the superiority of the teaching of Christ to any other teaching? What would the criteria be? And how would such criteria be fulfilled?

So the approach to the miraculous must be to show that they form an intelligible part in the development of the one coherent account of that which presents itself as the divine revelation.

There is a further aspect to this coherence. Not only does the miraculous in Scripture cohere with its other elements of prophecy and teaching, it is also congruent with the main thrust and message of that revelation. This is that there is a gracious, undeserved, unanticipated redemption from God. The miracles of Scripture, in which God acts directly and immediately in human affairs, strongly support this thrust. They speak, as the gospel does, of unprecedented power and goodness entering human affairs. The scriptural teaching is not of man striving for God, of human aspiration towards the divine. It is of God coming to mankind. The basic direction is not from man to God, but the reverse; from God to man. Miraculous happenings, in which God works immediately and apart from the use of normal natural events, is an acting out in history of the gracious, undeserved character of the redemption from sin that God provides.

There is another aspect to this coherence. When one reads the contributions of Clarke or Stillingfleet or Hume to the controversy over the miraculous one cannot but be struck by the almost complete absence of any reference to the character of God in what they say. If there is any reference at all to God then he is assumed to exhibit those calculating, proportioned, reasonable features of character which these apologists and sceptics regarded as the supreme intellectual virtues.

But the God of Scripture is not quite like that. He is, of course, presented to us as one who is supremely wise and good, and as one who is incapable of acting capriciously or without a reason. But he is also represented as one who time and again overturns human expectations both about human life and about what God will do. For time and again in Scripture God acts as if to say 'You did not expect this, did you?' The all-too-human temptation is to live as if God is utterly predictable, even to lay down conditions as to what it is reasonable or unreasonable for God to do. And time and again in

the history of Israel, and in the New Testament, God in effect overthrows such conditions.

The philosopher Leibniz provides an interesting case of such a priorism. He held that God created the universe according to a pre-established harmony such that any miraculous occurrence was unthinkable. Such an occurrence would betoken a lack of power or foresight on God's part. Thus he writes

I maintain it (the material world) to be a watch, that goes without wanting to be mended by him; otherwise we must say, that God bethinks himself again. No; God has foreseen every thing; he has provided a remedy for every thing beforehand; there is in his works a harmony, a beauty, already pre-established.⁴

In a similar, a priori vein it might be held to be 'reasonable' for the disciples of Christ to expect an earthly Messiah, a political Saviour who would break the yoke of their oppressor. What shocks them, and what they find for a time to be quite unacceptable, is the idea of a lowly Messiah who would save them and conquer their enemies through suffering as if he were a criminal.

So the miraculous in Scripture is congruent not only with the other elements in the Scriptural revelation but also with the character of God revealed there; of the God who surprises men and women by acting against the odds, against all their expectations. Who chooses the weak and insignificant, who delivers in the darkest hour.

3. Miracles and Science

So far we have tried to counter the strategy which isolates the miraculous in Scripture and treats it in a fashion which abstracts it from the other important elements of the 'story' of which miracles form an integral part. In arguing for this we have also stressed that 'the miraculous' in Scripture is a very varied category, varying from the unusual and unexpected to the scientifically inexplicable. The Bible does not have a clear and distinct category of miracles as this is often used in discussion today, but rather speaks of 'signs and wonders and mighty works'.

But it is, of course, the miraculous as what is scientifically inexplicable that attracts the greatest attention, and it is to this aspect of our subject that we must now turn.

Scientific explicability is a relative notion, for what science could not explain a hundred years ago it may well be able to explain today, and more will be explained in scientific terms in another hundred years' time. Some have found our relative ignorance an important apologetic ploy when considering miracles. They believe it to increase the acceptability of miracles to remember that we may, one day, have a perfectly good scientific

4 *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence* ed. H.G. Alexander (Manchester, 1956) p.18.

explanation of why, on occasions, water turns into wine, and, suitably equipped, we may even be able to perform this feat for ourselves.

But it will be clear from what has already been argued that this approach to miracles holds few attractions. The importance of the story of the turning of water into wine does not rest on Jesus' technical brilliance in performing it. It is wrong to think of Jesus as an early scientist or technologist, or, more bizarrely, as a parapsychologist. Rather, the importance of any miracle originally lay, and continues to lie, in its place in the ministry of Christ and in its significance for that ministry. Even if turning water into wine were to become a hum-drum occurrence this fact would not detract from the place that that first miracle of Jesus occupies.

For there are things that Jesus did and taught that do have a perfectly satisfactory explanation at the scientific level. It is no surprise that Jesus ate, slept, taught, sailed, climbed hills and so on. But the fact that scientific explanations exist for why boats keep afloat does not detract from the significance of Jesus taking a trip on a boat. We ought not to approach the question of miracles in a 'god of gaps' fashion and suspend their significance upon our ignorance. Their significance lies in the way in which they integrate with the total biblical message, and vividly illustrate it, indicating that physical nature and salvation from sin have a common source in the power of the Creator who is also the Saviour.

The significance and importance of most scientific explanations, though not of all, is that they permit us to repeat certain experiments at will. They extend human control over the physical environment. But the significance of Jesus' miracles lies not in the fact that they cannot, or could not at the time, be repeated, but in the significance, as singular events, in the matrix of other events that formed Jesus ministry.

We may, with difficulty, be able to reconstruct the Battle of Waterloo. We may form armies, equip them, and launch the men against each other at exactly the place and at the same time of the year as the original battle. In a sense we are repeating the Battle of Waterloo. Perhaps we could repeat it many times. But this ability does not detract in the least from the significance of the original Battle, the military consequences of that Battle and its wider consequences for English and European history.

This illustrates one of the most significant differences between natural science and human history. The significance of a historical event lies precisely in its unique place in a wider matrix of events making up the history of a nation or group of nations. By contrast, the significance of a scientific event lies in its being repeatable at will under controlled conditions.

There is no reason to think that if we could show that in certain circumstances putting mud on the eyes of the blind effected a cure, and give an account of why this was, this would detract from the incident in the Gospels when Christ cured a blind person in this way (John 9.6). We ought

not to think that the significance of the miracles lay in the credulity of the people.

But to many people the stumbling-block posed by miracles, and, given their central place in the Christian faith, the problem that that faith presents, does not lie in possible ignorance of how these events are to be explained. It is the very fact that, in their eyes, the miracles cannot be explained, that is the difficulty.

Miracles 'could not happen'?

What is meant by saying that a miracle is an event that cannot be scientifically explained? On one influential and plausible account of scientific explanation, this means that there is no known law of which this event is an instance. And, it is objected, if a particular event, an alleged miracle, could not be scientifically explained then it could not have happened. And so, if miracle-stories lie at the heart of the Christian Faith that Faith must be intellectually unacceptable.

To say of a particular alleged event that it could not have happened is a very strong thing to say. Not even sceptics about miracles such as David Hume have gone as far as to claim this. The reason for this is that to say of an event that it could not have happened is to say that the very description of that event contains a logical inconsistency or incoherence. There are, of course, descriptions of events which do contain logical inconsistencies. For example, the events described as 'squaring the circle' and 'painting a wall blue but not coloured' are events which could not occur. And the reason that they could not occur is that if something is squared it is necessarily not circular, and if something is blue it is necessarily coloured. To suppose that a particular event could not have happened is to treat laws of nature as if they are rules of arithmetic or laws of logic.

Is 'changing water into wine' similarly inconsistent? There is nothing to prevent anyone making it inconsistent by so defining 'water' or 'wine' that nothing that is water in the defined sense could become wine, and nothing that is wine in the defined sense could have been water. But as generally understood the terms 'water' and 'wine' do not carry these implications, and there is no compelling reason to redefine them in the way proposed.⁵

Laws of nature

But are scientific laws laws in the sense in which the laws of logic or arithmetic are laws. Rather, the laws of science typically express not what is logically necessary but what is contingently true at a very basic level of generality. It is not only that there is no necessity about the laws of nature, but also that what science uncovers is often surprising. Who would have thought, prior to the investigations being conducted, that silicon has the properties it is now seen to have, or that certain substances are radioactive?

⁵ Compare R.F. Holland, 'The Miraculous' (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1965) who argues that miracles are empirically certain and conceptually impossible.

Moreover, such laws are always surrounded by a set of *ceteris paribus* conditions. *Other things being equal* copper expands when heated, but perhaps there are conditions under which copper would not behave in this way when heated.

So we might say that a miracle may be defined, in part, as an exception to a law of nature. Defined in this way miracles are possible. David Hume went further than this and defined a miracle as 'a violation of the laws of nature', but this definition may reveal a further misunderstanding, or at least an exaggeration.

A miracle is an exception to a law of nature. But what is a law of nature? Hume's use of the word 'violation' suggests that he understood a law of nature to be like a law of Parliament. If Parliament decrees that one ought not to exceed thirty miles an hour on a particular section of road then anyone who exceeds the limit violates the law.

At first glance the idea that a miracle is a violation in this sense might appear to be attractive, particularly to the Christian. For it might seem that as Parliament is to the speed limit so God is to the laws of nature. Parliament, and God, both prescribe laws. But in fact to suppose that a law of science is like a law of the land leads to confusion.

To see this let us consider a law of science firstly from the perspective of the scientist or human observer, and then from the perspective of God.

For a scientist a law of nature is a regularity of a statistical or of an even more uniform kind. In logical character it lies somewhere between a mere regularity, such as the observation that all the trees in my garden are over twenty feet tall, and a law of logic or arithmetic. A law of nature is stronger than a mere regularity and (as we noted earlier), weaker than a law of logic. The strength of a law of nature by comparison with a mere regularity of experience can be brought out by the fact that from it one can deduce what logicians and philosophers of science call *counterfactual* propositions.

Thus from the proposition

Copper expands when heated

one can deduce the counterfactual propositions

If this sample of copper had been heated it would have expanded
and

If this sample of copper were to be heated it would expand

But from the fact that I have noticed that all the trees in my garden are over twenty feet tall I cannot argue that if this tree were in my garden it would be over twenty feet tall.

The important points are that a scientific law is descriptive, not prescriptive, and that scientists arrive at such laws by theory-devising and testing of a rigorous kind. Because they are descriptive it is not logically

incoherent to suppose that under certain circumstances there may be exceptions to these laws.⁶

God's laws

Let us now look at scientific laws from God's point of view. According to Scripture God has created the physical universe by his own will and, having created it, he sustains it by his own power. Despite the influence and attractiveness of the view, the Bible does not represent God as sustaining the universe by endowing what he has created with inherent powers of duration. Rather the sustaining of the universe is dependent upon the will of God and that it continues as it does is testimony to the wisdom and faithfulness of God.

Perhaps a universe is conceivable in which, given the initial conditions of the creation, and the laws of nature, the universe once created would continue indefinitely, behaving in accordance with those laws. But according to the Bible this is not the character of our physical universe which God, in his freedom, continuously sustains.

Thus God is not tied or bound by the laws of his own creating but is free to vary those regularities as he sees fit. It was the thought that God was bound, together with the idea that the initial laws are the product of divine wisdom, that led Leibniz, in the quotation given earlier, to suppose that miracles were unworthy of the divine wisdom and so never occurred.

Thus neither from the standpoint of the human scientist or observer, nor from the standpoint of God the creator, are miracles violations of anything. From the human observer's point of view they are deviations from what is regular, changes that are without precedent, and changes that certainly cannot be repeated in the same fashion by any human agency. From the standpoint of God they are changes to the regular ordering of natural events which he decrees, not capriciously but for good reason.

4. Evidence for Miracles

The last point to be taken up concerns the nature of the evidence for miracles. One of Hume's central arguments in the *Enquiry* was about evidence. In particular Hume makes a strong contrast between two kinds of evidence, the evidence of the senses, and testimony. Experience, that is, sensory evidence is, Hume says 'our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact'. Where the experience of some regularity is exceptionless ('infallible' is Hume's word) then our expectation of the connection of the regularity may be of the highest kind. Where there are exceptions, then caution commensurate with the nature and frequency of the exceptions is

⁶ This point applies even if the regularities in question are explained in terms of the natures or essential properties of the substances in question. While the expansion of copper under heat may be due to its nature there may be other conditions in which, because of its nature, it would behave differently.

appropriate; for, as Hume says, 'A wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence'.

In the case of human testimony, we trust it in proportion to its veracity. The way in which we test this veracity is by experience

the ultimate standard, by which we determine all disputes, that may arise concerning them (i.e. judgements arising from testimony), is always derived from experience and testimony.⁷

So that if the testimony is to some marvellous happening of the sort that we have never experienced ourselves then our uniform experience discredits the testimony. And so, in the case of miracles, which are by definition exceptions to laws of nature, and laws of nature are founded upon human experience, the rational thing to do is always to reject the testimony to the miracle in favour of our everyday, uniform experience. Thus

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 endeavours to establish.⁸

Hume then attempts to show that, as a matter of fact, 'there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence' as to amount to an entire proof.

The pattern of Hume's argument is clear; experience has priority, and human testimony is to be accepted only if it accords with our experience.

The question is, is Hume correct in giving these respective weightings to experience and testimony? More sharply, may it not be that the weightings are entirely opposite to those Hume proposes, namely that our direct experience is set within a framework provided by testimony, and interpreted and judged in the light of that framework, and that this is a justifiable procedure? Indeed, given our limitations, perhaps it is the only rational procedure.

How much do we learn for ourselves? The answer must be, 'Not very much'. We obtain a huge amount of our knowledge from the testimony of others, from parents, teachers, books, films and the like. One only needs to think of the vast amounts of history, archaeology, science, geography that we accept on trust from other sources. To read Hume one would think that knowledge derived from such testimony was small and marginal, and that we can easily judge its worthwhileness on the basis of our direct experience.

Long ago St Augustine put the point as follows:

I began to realize that I believed countless things which I had never seen or which had taken place when I was not there to see—so many events in the history of the world, so many facts about places and towns which I had never seen, and so much that I believed on the word of friends or

⁷ Hume *ibid.* p.112.

⁸ Hume *ibid.* pp.115–6.

doctors or various other people. Unless we took these things on trust, we should accomplish absolutely nothing in this life.⁹

Not only is testimony of more importance than Hume acknowledges, it also conditions our experience. There is not testimony and experience, two separate sources of knowledge, and Hume has misjudged the relative importance of each, but what we take to be reliable experience itself depends upon taking so much else from testimony. What enables us to extend our belief beyond personal experience is not the idea of cause and effect (as Hume thought) but acceptance of the testimony of others.¹⁰

What does this show about Hume's argument about miracles? It shows that 'experience' cannot judge as sharply or as decisively as he thinks. For example, the miracle stories of Scripture have been received by many people as a result of them being taught by their parents. They have, in the first instance, believed their parents about the miracle stories as they have believed them about so much else. And the fact that they do not experience any miracles directly today does not bother them because it has been no part of their parents' teaching to expect miracles today. In the acquisition of knowledge of all kinds, and not only theological knowledge, we depend upon a tradition of information.

And many people have rejected the miracle stories of Scripture because they have received testimony from their parents. The question then becomes not testimony versus direct experience, as Hume thought, but of one tradition of testimony against another.

The evidence for miracles is thus not to be confined to what experience in Hume's narrow sense can judge. For in fact experience encompasses not only what is directly witnessed, but also what one is told, and what makes sense at the practical, regulative level in one's life. And so miracles do not stand apart from all the other evidence as phenomena, to be handled separately and before all the other data, but they are to be seen as integral to those data, as supporting and reinforcing the coherence of the whole 'story'. And for that coherence the character and purposes of God are central.

9 *Confessions* VI.5, trans. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, 1961) p.117.

10 For this point and more on the place of testimony in knowledge, see G.E.M. Anscombe, 'What Is It to Believe Someone?' in *Rationality and Religious Belief* ed. C.F. Delaney (Notre Dame, 1979).

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