

The Possibility of  
Resurrection  
and Other Essays in  
Christian Apologetics

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Westview Press  
A Division of HarperCollins Publishers

*To my stepchildren  
Noël, Eamon, and Claire Lawless*

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Published in 1998 in the United States of America by Westview Press, 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301-2877, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, 12 Hid's Copse Road, Cumnor Hill, Oxford OX2 9JJ

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Van Inwagen, Peter.

The possibility of resurrection and other essays in Christian  
apologetics / Peter Van Inwagen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8133-2731-8 (cloth)

1. Apologetics. 2. Philosophical theology. I. Title.

BT1105.V36 1998

239—dc21

97-17602

CIP

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard  
for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Chapter Six

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# Of “Of Miracles”

In the first and briefer part of this essay, my concerns are ontological. I shall explain what a miracle *is* (or would be if there were any). In the second part, my concerns are epistemological: I shall discuss and attempt to refute Hume’s argument for the conclusion that it is unreasonable to believe any historical report that would count as a report of a miracle.

### The Ontology of Miracles

The account of “miracles” that I shall present here is a summary of the account I presented in “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God.”<sup>1</sup> (It is, I believe, entirely consistent with Hume’s “official” definition of ‘miracle’: “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.” And, I believe, it will not weaken Hume’s argument for the conclusion that it would be unreasonable to accept any report of an alleged “miracle” if, in evaluating his argument, we understand the word in the sense I supply in the present section.)

Let us suppose that the physical world is made up of certain fundamental building blocks or units, certain tiny physical things without proper parts. I shall call them elementary particles. Elementary particles are sorted into kinds by their causal powers (e.g., rest mass and charge). It will simplify my account of miracles if I make the assumption (false, of course, at least in our present state of knowledge) that there is only one type of elementary particle. Each particle is continuously sustained in existence by God: At each instant, he supplies it with existence and the causal powers it then has. The motions over the interval  $t_1$ - $t_2$  of the particles that compose the world are determined (insofar as they are determined) entirely by their distribution at  $t_1$  and the causal powers they have at each instant in  $t_1$ - $t_2$ . (Here we make a second simplifying assumption: that the propagation of causal influence is instantaneous.)

God always, or *almost always*, supplies each particle with the same causal powers. But he may, *very rarely*, supply *just a few* particles—“just a

few" in comparison with the number of all the particles there are—with different causal powers from the powers they normally have. If he momentarily supplies some of the particles in a certain small region of space with powers different from their normal powers, the particles in that region will follow trajectories different from the trajectories they would have followed if he had continued to supply them with their normal powers. Here is a preliminary definition of 'miracle': The early stages of any such "divergence" constitute a miracle. (The later stages of a divergence will be classified as "consequences of a miracle" and not "parts of a miracle.")

Now a qualification and refinement of this definition. A proposition will be called a law of nature in a possible world  $x$  if it is a contingent proposition that is true in every world  $y$  in which particles *always* have the causal powers that they *always or almost always* have in  $x$ . If some particles in the world  $x$  do sometimes have "unusual" powers, some of the propositions that are laws in  $x$  may be false propositions in  $x$ . (If  $x$  is a deterministic world, this must be so.) If a proposition  $p$  is both a law of nature in  $x$  and false in  $x$ , it will be said to be violated in  $x$ ; it will be violated by the behavior of those particles that (owing to their or their neighbors' unusual causal powers) follow trajectories inconsistent with the truth of  $p$ .

If a world is indeterministic, some events that are miracles according to our preliminary definition may not involve violations of laws. If the laws of a world allow  $A$  to be followed either by  $B$  or by  $C$ , and if God temporarily changes the causal powers of certain particles in such a way as to determine that  $A$  be followed by  $B$ , the consequent occurrence of  $B$  will be a miracle by our preliminary definition but will not be a violation of the laws of the world in which it occurs. In "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," my topic was Providence, and it suited my purposes to have a definition of 'miracle' that had this feature. In the present essay, however, I wish to conform my usage (more or less) to Hume's. I shall, therefore, understand 'miracle' to imply 'violation of the laws of nature'. God performs a miracle, then, if he momentarily supplies certain particles with unusual causal powers and the consequent divergence of the trajectories of those (and no doubt some other) particles from the courses they would have followed is a violation of the laws of nature. (Of course, a violation of one law will in most cases be a violation of many, since if two propositions are laws, so is their conjunction.) The miracle is the early stages of the divergence.

### Hume's Argument

In this section, I shall present and attempt to refute the central argument of "Of Miracles."<sup>2</sup> More exactly, the argument I shall present and attempt to refute is my own reconstruction of the central argument of "Of Miracles." I believe that there are, in Hume's presentation of his argument, certain infe-

licities that arise from his imprecise use of terminology, and my reconstruction is designed to remove them. To subject one's reconstruction of a philosopher's argument to criticisms of one's own devising is a somewhat dubious procedure, and it is dubious on two grounds: First, one's "improvements" may be ones that the author of the original argument would reject, and, worse, they may introduce defects into the argument that were not present in the original. I think, however, that the points I shall make against the reconstructed argument would apply to the original even if Hume would have emphatically rejected my modifications of his argument and even if these modifications introduced errors that were not present in the original.

What, exactly, is the conclusion of the central argument of "Of Miracles"? It is a commonplace that Hume's conclusion is not ontological: He does not claim to show that there are no miracles. His conclusion is epistemological. But it is not that one should not believe that there are miracles. It is not so general as that. It has to do with the attitude one should take toward any (supposed, putative) report of a miracle one might encounter. It is something like this: If one hears a report of a miracle, one should not believe it (or one should believe it only in very special circumstances, circumstances so special that no one has in fact ever been in them). But this formulation of Hume's conclusion raises two important questions. First, what counts as a "report of a miracle"? Secondly, does "one should not believe it" mean "one should reject it" or "one should refrain from accepting it"—or perhaps some third thing?

Let us say that a report of a miracle (or a miracle-report) is any narrative, presented as historical or factual, such that (a) it does not follow logically from that narrative that a miracle has occurred, and (b) if the narrative were true, the only reasonable conclusion would be that at least one of the events it recounted was a miracle.<sup>3</sup> The following story

Jill was about to cross Sixth Avenue in New York when, all in an instant, she was miraculously translated to Sydney,

does not satisfy the terms of this definition, since it follows logically from the story that a miracle has occurred.<sup>4</sup> Here, by way of contrast, are two stories that—whatever other features they may have—do not logically entail that a miracle has occurred:

Jill was about to cross Sixth Avenue in New York when, without any sensation of motion, she suddenly found herself in Sydney.<sup>5</sup>

And when he got into the boat his disciples followed him. And behold there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke

him, saying, "Save us, Lord, for we are perishing." And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" Then he rose and he rebuked the wind and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What manner of man is this that even the wind and the wave obey him?" (Matt. 8:23-27).<sup>6</sup>

Whether either of these two stories satisfies condition (b) in our definition of 'miracle-report'—and thereby qualifies as a miracle-report—is an epistemological question: Given that the story was true, would the only reasonable conclusion be that one of the events recounted in the story was a miracle?<sup>7</sup> It would be possible to argue, some no doubt have argued, that one should never believe of any story (unless it logically entails the occurrence of a miracle) that if that story is true, some of the events it recounts were miracles. One should rather believe (the argument might continue) that if the story is true, there is *some* explanation of the events it relates that is consistent with the laws of nature and this explanation is the correct explanation. (It is not hard to provide gestures at such explanations. Take the story of the stilling of the storm. This story could be embedded in a logically consistent science fiction novel according to which Christianity was "founded" by extraterrestrial beings as an adjunct to a project involving the manipulation of human history; it might be that, in the novel, all the "miracles" related in the New Testament actually happened—at least as far as appearances went—but were the products of an advanced technology rather than true miracles.)

I shall not attempt to answer the (intrinsically very interesting) question whether there in fact are any stories that satisfy the terms of the above definition of 'miracle-report', for the cogency of Hume's argument does not depend on what the right answer to this question is. His conclusion is that one should react in a certain way to any miracle-report one encounters, and his reasoning can be evaluated independently of the question whether anyone ever does encounter any miracle-reports.

But what *does* Hume say about how one should react to a miracle-report? Is his position simply that one should *not* believe the report, or is it that one should *disbelieve* (not believe *and* believe the denial of) the report—or is it some third thing? I do not think that Hume is clear or entirely consistent about the matter, but I believe that the best way to state his conclusion is this: One should *dismiss* any miracle-report one encounters. The concept of dismissal may be spelled out as follows: One dismisses a report—an allegedly historical narrative—if one either disbelieves it or (does not believe it and) assigns it a very low probability.<sup>8</sup> (How low? Well, let's say very low—a probability of the sort that we describe in ordinary speech by phrases like 'of insignificant probability' and 'no real possibility'.)

We shall need one more definition before we turn to Hume's argument for this conclusion. Let us say that a proposition is a *contravention of one's*

*experience* (for short, a contravention) if the truth of that proposition is contrary to one's experience.<sup>9</sup> ("Contravention"—this may be true of "miracle-report" as well—is obviously a person-and-time-relative concept: A proposition may be a contravention of one person's experience and not of another's—or a proposition may be a contravention of a person's experience at one time and not at another. I shall, however, generally speak of contraventions and miracle-reports *sans phrase* and leave it to the reader to fill in the necessary qualifications about person-and-time relativity. And I shall speak of various propositions as "contrary to experience" without bothering to specify whose experience they are contrary to.) Contraventions, moreover, come in "sizes": *p* is a larger or greater contravention than *q* if, although *q* is contrary to experience, *p* is "even more contrary to experience" than *q*.<sup>10</sup> (At this point it should be evident, if it was not already, that I am presenting a reconstruction of Hume's argument, for Hume speaks of "greater" and "lesser" *miracles*, and he employs no term that corresponds to my "contravention.") If I tell my friends that on a recent trip from Boston to Los Angeles my 1973 Cadillac averaged sixty miles to the gallon, what I tell them will no doubt be a contravention. If Calvin tells his mother that the jammy handprints on the new sofa were put there not by himself but by an evil Calvin doppelgänger constructed by beings from Arcturus, that will also be a contravention, and perhaps there is some intuitive sense in which it is a larger contravention than the one I have asserted. An *historical narrative* will be called a contravention if its propositional content is a contravention.

I will now present Hume's argument, or my reconstruction of it. The argument has three premises, two epistemological premises and one "historical" premise. The first epistemological premise is:

E1. Any miracle-report must necessarily be a contravention and, in fact, a very *large* contravention.<sup>11</sup> (If a story is a miracle-report for some audience, it will also be a contravention for that audience. If a story is not a contravention, it will not qualify as a miracle-report. Suppose, for example, that we hear the story of Jill's sudden translation from New York to Sydney. It may or may not be reasonable for us to classify this as a miracle-report, but if the proposition that people sometimes find themselves suddenly on the other side of the earth is not contrary to experience, a necessary condition for classifying the story as a miracle-report will be absent. There are, moreover, stories that are contraventions but not large enough contraventions to qualify as miracle-reports. If I am told that Sally, who was hitherto entirely ignorant of French, spoke perfect French after spending three months in France, that story would be a contravention but no doubt not one that is large enough to qualify as a miracle-report. And how large a contra-

vention must a miracle report be? One way to answer this question would be to specify some story that is a large enough contravention by just about anyone's reckoning to be a miracle-report and say, "At least as large as that." I think that the following story will do for this purpose: Let us suppose that we have heard a report of a shaman in Peru who has, it is alleged, restored several incontestably long-dead people to life. Suppose we are willing to agree that this story is "more contrary to experience" than the story of Sally's remarkably quick mastery of French. Then, according to the criterion I have proposed, the story of Sally is not a large enough contravention to be a miracle-report.

We should note that it does not follow from the proposed criterion that just any story that is as large a contravention as the "shaman" story is a miracle-report. Indeed, it does not follow from anything we have said that the "shaman" story itself is a miracle-report. And if someone maintained that Calvin's story of the origin of the jammy handprints was as large a contravention as the "shaman" story, despite the fact that Calvin's story was not a miracle-report and the "shaman" story was, that person would have said nothing inconsistent with the proposed criterion. Let us say that any contravention that is at least as large as the "shaman" story is *very large*.)

The second epistemological premise requires a little stage-setting. Let us say that two narratives are (historically) independent if neither is derived from the other. Two narratives will be said to support each other if they are independent and "tell the same story"—(purport to) describe events that are the same or at least very similar. ("Similarity" is to include the elements "cast of characters" and "place and time.") Hume's second epistemological premise is

E2. One should dismiss any very large contravention one encounters unless one knows that one of the following two conditions holds:

(a) if the very large contravention is unhistorical—if it is not a reasonably accurate description of events that actually happened—its existence is itself a contravention and a larger contravention than its truth would be

(b) it is one of two or more mutually supporting narratives such that if they are unhistorical, their (collective) existence is a contravention and a larger contravention than their truth (i.e., the truth of their common propositional content) would be.

(Suppose that X tells me that Jimmy Carter is a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings. And suppose no one else has told me that. X's statement is a very large contravention<sup>12</sup> and should therefore be dismissed—unless X's telling me falsely that Carter is a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings is a

contravention and a larger contravention than his being a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings would be. Or suppose that shortly after X has told me that Carter is a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings, Y tells me the same thing. And suppose I am somehow satisfied that X's statement and Y's statement are historically independent. I should dismiss what they have told me—unless the existence of two independent false allegations that Carter is a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings is a contravention and a larger contravention than his being a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings would be.)

Here, finally, is Hume's "historical" premise:

H. Although it may be possible to imagine a miracle-report that satisfies one or the other of the conditions set out in E2, no miracle-report known to history satisfies either; indeed, all known narratives that anyone might be inclined to classify as miracle-reports (such as the Gospel story of the stilling of the storm) fall far short of satisfying either of them.

I will make a few remarks about E2 and H and then proceed to argue against E1. I shall, in discussing Hume's views, write as if he were familiar with the vocabulary and distinctions of the present essay. I believe that this anachronism could be eliminated from my argument, although only at the cost of a great deal of circumlocution.

Hume wrote in an era when photography and sound recordings had not yet been invented—in an era when almost the only evidence as to what had occurred in the past was human testimony. No doubt if he were writing today, he would want emend E2 to take account of "nontestimonial" evidence about the past. But any such emendation of E2 would affect no point of principle, and the question of its proper formulation need not detain us.

It is evident that Hume believed that clause (a) in E2 could not possibly be satisfied, for (such is human credulity and epistemic frailty) the proposition that a given person has made a false statement about the past could not possibly be a "very large" contravention. Hume's position was, therefore, that the only possibility of a case in which a very large contravention should not be dismissed would be of this sort: It was one of two or more historically independent contraventions with essentially the same propositional content. It is, however, unclear whether Hume thought that even a very large number of mutually supporting false statements about the past could constitute a "very large" contravention. In introducing the important "eight-day darkness" example ("Thus, suppose, all authors, in all languages, agree, that, from the first of January 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days . . ."), he says, "For I own, that otherwise [i.e., if we imagine testimony much more extensive and uniform than the testimony to the supposed miracles foundational to Christianity and its rivals], there may possibly be miracles, or violations of the usual

course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony, though, perhaps, it will be impossible to find any such in all the records of history." Although Hume uses the word 'miracle' here, he goes on to say that although philosophers of his own day, if they had available to them the testimony he imagines, ought to grant the historicity of the eight-day darkness (in fact, they should "receive it as certain"), they should proceed to "search for the causes whence it might be derived"—and hence they should presumably *not* regard the darkness as a miracle as the term is "accurately defined" ("A transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent") but only in the loose and much weaker sense he has supplied: as a violation of the usual course of nature. He then argues that various (unspecified) analogies with known events suggest that a universal eight-day darkness "comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform." And this statement implies that other imaginable events might not come within the reach of any testimony, however extensive and uniform. This argument is immediately followed by an example of such an imaginable event: the death and "resurrection" of Elizabeth I. It seems likely, therefore, that Hume would maintain that no imaginable human testimony could be such that its falsity would be what we are calling a very large contravention. And from this and our two epistemological premises, it follows that any imaginable miracle-report should be dismissed.

Even if I have not interpreted Hume correctly, however, even if, in his view, there are imaginable miracle-reports that should not be *dismissed*, it does not follow from this that any imaginable miracle-report should be *accepted*. (I do not believe that the story of King Alfred and the cakes is false—that is, I do not assent to the proposition that the story of King Alfred and the cakes is false. And I do not think that the probability of this story's being true is so low as to be insignificant. I therefore do not *dismiss* the story of Alfred and the cakes. But I certainly do not assent to the proposition that the story is *true*—and, in fact, I think it's very unlikely to be true.) And I think that it would certainly be Hume's position that none should be: Whether or not every imaginable miracle-report should be dismissed, no imaginable miracle-report should be accepted. No imaginable miracle-report should be accepted because a miracle-report, no matter what testimony might support it, is a very large contravention, and no testimonial evidence in favor of a very large contravention could be so good as to make it worthy of belief—even if it were possible for there to be testimonial evidence good enough to lead the judicious reasoner not to dismiss it. (In the most favorable possible case, there would be, as Hume says, "a mutual destruction of arguments.") And, of course, if we leave the realm of the merely imaginable and turn to the actual and historical, it is clear—this is the import of our "historical" premise—that Hume believes that all actual miracle-reports should be dismissed.<sup>13</sup>

Is Hume's argument, as I have reconstructed it, cogent? I think not. My defense of this judgment begins with an examination of E1, the premise that any miracle-report must be a very large contravention. That is, for any story about the past one might hear, one should refuse to make the following judgment about it:

If that story is true, then some of the events it relates involve violations of the laws of nature,

unless one is also willing to make the following judgment:

That story is contrary to my experience—and *as* contrary to my experience as the "shaman" story.

In order to evaluate this premise, we must turn to a question we have so far glossed over. What is it for a story to be "contrary to one's experience"? Hume generally writes as if the following were true: A story is contrary to one's experience if that story involves something's having the property F and the property G and one has observed many things having the property F and has observed that all of them had the complement of G. For example, on this account, a story about a man's returning from the dead is contrary to my experience owing simply to the fact that I have known of a very large number of people who have died and all of them have the property "not having returned from the dead." But this account of what it is for a story to be contrary to one's experience is useless for Hume's purposes, since it will classify far too many stories as contrary to one's experience. Suppose for example, that I know of many visits that Tom has made to his mother over the past ten years; it is all but inevitable that if I hear a detailed account of his latest visit to her, this account will ascribe to this visit some property that all of the others lacked. And this will be true even if we do not "count" the *date* of the latest visit as a relevant property. It may, for example, be that the story I have been told of his latest visit includes the information that he arrived on her doorstep at 3:21 P.M. and that the comprehensive diary I have for some reason kept of his earlier visits reveals that on all the other occasions on which he has visited her he arrived at some other time. No doubt we could play a lengthy game of "counterexample and revision" with the above account of what it is for a story to be contrary to experience. But I do not know of any way of "improving" this account that will enable it to avoid consequences like the following: The first reports of someone's making a solo flight across the Atlantic or running a four-minute mile or reaching the summit of Mount Everest were contrary to the experience of those who heard them.

But might Hume not reply that these consequences are acceptable? Might he not argue that such reports would indeed be a *bit* contrary to the experience of those who heard them? Might he not go on to say, "But it would be

more contrary to the experience of those who heard them if all the reports of these events were false, and that is why it was proper for those who heard the reports to believe them"? Perhaps so. But how, then, are we to understand the relevant notion of *degree* of contrariety? If I hear on Monday that Lindbergh has flown across the Atlantic without a copilot and on Tuesday that a rival has flown across the Atlantic without an aircraft, on what basis am I to judge that the second story is more contrary to my experience (is a larger contravention) than the first? My experience tells me that all previous transatlantic flights have involved an aircraft of some sort, but it also tells me that all previous transatlantic flights have involved two or more pilots. There simply do not seem to be any materials in the "property-complement" account of a story's being contrary to experience from which to construct an account of the concept of one story's being "more contrary to experience" than another is.

Let us consider an actual example (at least I believe it to be actual, although, unfortunately, I no longer remember where I heard or read it) of someone's applying the "property-complement" account of this concept. Thomas Jefferson was once told that in a museum in Cambridge (Massachusetts) there was exhibited a stone that had fallen from the sky. Jefferson declined to believe this story on the ground that although he had never known a stone to fall from the sky, he had often known a Yankee parson—the staff of Harvard College in those days comprised Congregational ministers—to prevaricate. (He had observed the sky on many occasions, and on each of those occasions, it had the property "not being the source of a falling stone"; he had observed many Yankee parsons making assertions, and on many of these occasions, the assertions had the property "being a lie." He concluded that stones falling from the sky were contrary to his experience and lying Yankee parsons were not.) Now even if Jefferson's statement about his experience of the New England clergy was something of an exaggeration, he was no doubt telling the truth when he said he had never known a stone to fall from the sky. But there were many, many things he had "never known" that he wouldn't have been disinclined to believe reports of, even reports from Yankee parsons. If he thought the story unlikely on the basis of his experience, it cannot have been simply because such a thing had never happened in his experience. If the story was indeed "contrary to his experience," it cannot have been simply because events of the type related in the story were not included in the totality of his experience to date. This observation might lead us to conclude that the "property-complement" account of an event's being contrary to experience must be replaced by some other account.

Was there *any* sense in which the story Jefferson was told was contrary to his experience? Well, suppose that Jefferson had fallen asleep like Rip van Winkle and had slept till the existence and nature of meteors was common knowledge. Suppose that, on awakening, he was given an encyclopedia ar-

ticle on the subject to read and had afterward received the testimony of several eminent (Virginian) astronomers that what the article said was true. Would he have been in a position to complain that his eighteenth-century experience was misleading—that it had somehow "told" him that stones never fell from the sky when stones in fact sometimes *do* fall from the sky? Certainly not. No doubt Descartes was wrong in holding that the testimony of experience was never false, but it does not seem to have testified falsely to Jefferson on this point. Experience may have testified to some persons at some points in history that the earth is at the center of the universe or that maggots are spontaneously generated in dung, but it has never testified to anyone that stones do not fall from the sky (or, for most people, that they do—not "directly," not otherwise than via the testimony of other people; for most people, "direct" experience has had nothing to say about whether stones fall from the sky). Although experience may have testified that if stones ever fall from the sky, their doing so is a very uncommon event, it has not testified that stones never fall from the sky.

It is very hard indeed to find a sense in which experience testifies in any direct or immediate sense that events of some sort never happen—or in which stories of events of some sort are contrary to experience. If direct, immediate experience testifies to anything (truly or falsely) its testimony seems to be essentially "positive": It testifies that events of certain sorts *do* happen. One might of course point out that it is *reasonable to believe* of events of various sorts that events of those sorts never happen, and that the reasonableness of such beliefs must ultimately be based on experience. Having made this observation, one might propose an account of what it is for a story to be "contrary to experience" that is based on what it is reasonable to believe. It would go something like this: A story is contrary to one's experience if that story involves the occurrence of events of sorts such that given one's experience at the time one hears the story, it is reasonable for one to believe that events of those sorts never happen—or perhaps that it is highly improbable that such events ever happen (or, more simply, a story is contrary to one's experience if, given one's experience at the time one hears the story, it is reasonable for one to believe that the story is false or is highly improbable). And one might go on to spell out the concept "more contrary to one's experience" in terms of its being more unreasonable to believe one proposition than another. (One might say that *p* is more contrary to one's experience than *q* just in the case that although what it is reasonable to believe, on the basis of one's experience, is that *p* and *q* are both false, one should also believe that if one or the other of them is, after all, true, it is *q*. Thus, or so I would judge, Calvin's story about the handprints on the sofa is "more contrary to experience" than my story about the mileage my Cadillac got, and the "shaman" story is "more contrary to experience" than the story of Sally's quick mastery of French.)



I think, however, that it is reasonably clear that this is not what Hume means by "contrary to experience" and "more contrary to experience." Whatever he means by these phrases and the related phrases he uses, he means something much more concrete, much more immediate than this. For Hume, if one judges that a story of a man's rising from the dead is "contrary to one's experience," the experience that the story is contrary to is one's experience of the dead's staying dead, not the totality of one's experience of the world to date. But at least in my view, what it is now *reasonable for me to believe* about men's rising from the dead must be based on pretty nearly the whole of my experience to date (e.g., those experiences that are relevant to the truth or falsity of the principles of thermodynamics and the truth or falsity of judgments about the historical reliability of the New Testament and the authority of the Church). In any case, if this is what "contrary to experience" and "more contrary to experience" mean, there seems to me to be no very compelling reason for anyone to accept E1.

It may be reasonable to believe that if the Matthean story of the stilling of the storm is historical, then a miracle, a violation of the laws of nature, occurred. I certainly think that this would be the reasonable conclusion to draw from the truth of the story. But I do not think that this story is, by the terms of the definition we are considering, at least as contrary to experience as the "shaman" story is. In fact, I think that the Matthean story is *true* (and, of course, I think I am being reasonable in thinking that it is true), and I think that anyone who heard and believed the "shaman" story and whose experience of the world was otherwise like mine would be very unreasonable indeed. I am not trying to convince you, the reader, that these epistemological judgments are correct. I am saying only that nowhere in "Of Miracles" do I find any reason to suppose they are not correct. Hume's argument, after all, is of this general form: *Because* certain propositions are contrary to experience—*very* contrary to experience—it is unreasonable to accept them. And it is, to say the least, very hard to see how an argument of this form could be cogent if 'contrary to experience' means 'unreasonable to believe.'

I can think of no other plausible sense that can be given to the phrase 'contrary to experience'. I conclude, provisionally, that Hume's argument is a failure, owing to the fact that there is no sense that can be given to 'contrary to experience' such that E1 is compelling when 'contrary to experience' is interpreted in that sense. It should be noted that I do not claim to have shown that anyone is ever justified in believing a miracle-report. Indeed, I do not even claim to have addressed this question. It is perfectly consistent with everything I have said to suppose that anyone who believed any story that could conceivably count as a miracle-report (such as the Matthean story of the stilling of the storm) would be wholly unreasonable. I claim to have shown only that the argument of "Of Miracles" (as I under-

stand the argument) does not establish either this conclusion or any other negative conclusion about the reasonableness of accepting miracle-reports.

### Notes

1. Included in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 211–235. Reprinted in Peter van Inwagen, *God, Knowledge, and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 42–65.

2. "Of Miracles" is section X of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. There are numerous editions of the *Enquiry*. I have used the Open Court edition (La Salle, Ill.: 1907 and 1966), which, according to the publisher's preface is "an unannotated reprint . . . made from the second volume of the posthumous edition of 1777." No editor is given on the title page, but the preface notes that the editing was done by one Thomas J. McCormack. Because there are numerous editions of the *Enquiry* (and, of course, "Of Miracles" appears in whole or in part in scores of anthologies) and because "Of Miracles" is very short, I have not provided page citations for the very few direct quotations I have made.

3. The idea behind (b) is as follows. If two people consider the narrative, and one of them says, "If that story is true, at least one of the events it recounts was a miracle," and the other says, "Even if that story is true in every detail, there is some purely natural explanation for every event it recounts," the first speaker is being reasonable and the second unreasonable. Note that if the second speaker is indeed unreasonable, he nevertheless does not contradict himself, since by (a) it does not follow logically from the story that a miracle has occurred.

4. The purpose of clause (a) of the definition is to rule out of consideration as "miracle-reports" narratives that would satisfy clause (b) *only* because the narrative logically entailed that a miracle had occurred. Here are two examples of such narratives: "Last week Sally witnessed a miracle" and "A feather rose when the resultant of all the natural forces acting on it fell short by an insensible amount of the force requisite for that purpose."

5. It does not follow from our definition of 'miracle-report' that if a miracle-report is true, the people whose deeds and experiences are related in that report should believe that they have witnessed or been involved in a miracle. Consider the story of Jill's translation to Sydney (the second version, the version in which the translation is not described as miraculous). Suppose that we who hear the story should conclude that if the story is true, it recounts a miracle. (It follows from this supposition that the story is a miracle-report.) And suppose that the story *is* true. It does not follow that Jill should conclude from her experience that a miracle has happened. We know that if the story is true, Jill was translated instantaneously to Sydney. But it is not evident that Jill knows (or that she will presently come to know) that she has been translated instantaneously to Sydney—or even that it would be reasonable for her to believe that she has been. Perhaps she should believe that she is still in New York but dreaming or mad or that she was never in New York in the first place.

6. To continue the theme of the previous note: It may or may not be true that we should believe that if the events related in this story really happened, at least one of them was a miracle. But if this is what we should believe, it does not follow that if these events really happened, those who witnessed them should have regarded at least one of them as a miracle. For one thing, it is extremely doubtful whether anyone in the first century A.D. possessed the concept expressed by the modern word 'miracle'.

7. It will simplify the statement of our argument if in applying this definition we assume that 'miracle' and 'violation of a law of nature' are interchangeable. The equation of 'miracle' and 'violation' would be objectionable if my purpose were to defend the thesis that it was sometimes reasonable to believe that a miracle had occurred. This would be objectionable because it might be reasonable to believe that an event of type X had occurred and reasonable to believe that the occurrence of an event of type X required the violation of a law of nature, but *not* reasonable to believe that the "transgression of a law of nature" required by the occurrence of X was a consequence of a "particular volition of the Deity." My purpose, however, is to show that Hume's argument does not establish its conclusion, and not that this conclusion is false. And Hume's conclusion is (roughly) that it is unreasonable to believe any report of an event that would require a violation of a law—*whatever* the reason for that violation might be.

8. In my view, the two disjuncts of the definiens are independent: One can disbelieve something without assigning it a low probability (if in no other way, by assigning it no probability at all), and one can assign something a low probability without disbelieving it. A lot of people will want to say that these contentions represent a confused picture of the relation between belief and probability (I am thinking primarily of those who think that belief comes in degrees and that probabilities are measures of these degrees, a conception of the nature of belief and its relation to probability that I reject), but since nothing of substance in this essay turns on the thesis that the two disjuncts of the definiens are independent, I shall not defend it.

9. We shall later discuss the possible meanings of the phrase 'contrary to one's experience'. For the moment, let us simply assume that we understand this phrase.

10. As we did with the phrase 'contrary to experience,' let us for the present simply assume that we understand the phrase 'even more contrary to experience'. We shall later try to decide what it might mean.

11. As our examples show, not all contraventions are miracle-reports. Hume calls the stories that we are calling miracle-reports "miraculous." Contraventions that do not qualify as miraculous he calls "extraordinary" or "prodigies" or "marvelous."

12. Or so I shall assume for the sake of the example. Anyone who would deny this—that is, anyone who would regard the shaman story as a greater contravention than Carter's being a tool of malign extraterrestrial beings—may change the example.

13. Even the "memorable story related by Cardinal de Retz" and the accounts of those miracles "which were lately said to have been wrought in France upon the tomb of Abbé Paris . . ." "And what have we [Hume asks after telling these two stories] to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate." It is, incidentally, very hard to reconcile Hume's description of the testimony recorded in these two stories with a statement he had made a few pages before:

For . . . there is not to be found in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time, attesting facts performed in such a public manner and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable. . . .

I suspect that what Hume means is that we cannot imagine evidence that would establish the persons who have reported some event as so reliable that it is logically impossible for that evidence to exist and those persons to have given a false report.