

Not a Miracle: Our Knowledge of God's Signs and Wonders

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PERHAPS MORE THAN in other religions, miracles play an essential role in the Christian faith, most particularly the Resurrection. But miracles have attracted not only the attention of believers and theologians, but also of philosophers. This is the case especially since David Hume's objections against our ability to recognize miracles even if they occur. In this article, I wish to show that it is possible to know that miracles have taken place if we include further philosophical considerations and scientific methods. Science and historiography can recognize the occurrence of miracles on their own principles, if only they are sufficiently and properly articulated.

Miracles as Intersection of Faith and Reason

The phenomenon of miracles constitutes one of the most obvious intersections of faith and reason: since miracles are to provide evidence for the authenticity of revelation and therefore faith, they cannot yet rely on an appeal to faith. In fact, faith itself sends us back to reason, for it is the defined faith of the Church that we can know miracles by reason. The First Vatican Council teaches:

In order that the obedience of our faith might be in harmony with reason, God willed that to the interior help of the Holy Spirit there should be joined exterior proofs of his revelation; to wit, divine facts, and especially miracles and prophecies, which, as they manifestly display the omnipotence and infinite knowl-

edge of God, are most certain proofs of his divine revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all men.¹

To put it paradoxically: by faith we are not fideists. The Church herself sends us out to investigate reasons to believe. This is risky, but necessary. These reasons to believe include evidence for miracles that authenticate faith. We cannot base our belief in miracles on the authority of the Church because that authority is itself authenticated by miracles. In fact, the whole of Christianity is based on the miracles and signs that Jesus worked in his life, but most fundamentally on the miracles of the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Even while faith is a gift of grace, belief in these events must be reasonable.

This is denied not only by modern fideists, but also by David Hume, who hopes “to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian Religion, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason.” He continues:

Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason . . . So that, upon the whole, we may conclude, that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.²

In spite of some pious rhetoric, Hume is quite conscious that he is attacking the very heart of Christianity, which is both a religion of reason and, at the same time, a religion of miracles.³ No other religion

¹ First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* (1870), ch. 3, “De Fide,” which continues: “Wherefore, both Moses and the Prophets, most especially, Christ our Lord himself, showed forth many and most evident miracles and prophecies; and of the Apostles we read: ‘But they going forth preached everywhere, the Lord working withal, and confirming the word with signs that followed’ (Mark 16:20).”

² David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. X, “Of Miracles,” part II, nos. 100 f., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1975), 129–131.

³ Hume himself reports that he had realized this in a conversation with a Jesuit at La Flèche; see John Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

claims more miracles than Christianity, which is itself based on the fact of God's unique intervention in history.

No doubt, faith will make the believer more susceptible to the acceptance of miracles. But if that faith is in turn reasonable, then this would only imply that the believer has a background knowledge that makes it easier for him to *recognize* a miracle. Just as a physician will be trained to recognize the symptoms of beginning diabetes and therefore recognize it more quickly than a lay person, so a believer might have a better training in recognizing miracles.⁴ Still, a miracle must be recognizable to unbelievers as well, and the believer can and must make available criteria for non-believers to recognize the miracle, provided they in turn are open to the evidence.⁵ The Church herself is extremely cautious with regard to miracle claims and requires scientific evidence provided by scientists who are not necessarily themselves believers. This is part of the regular procedures of canonization processes, as well as of the investigations of apparitions, healings and other occurrences. Hence the medical committees of places like Lourdes include atheist doctors who, by virtue of the evidence, can state that no natural explanation of a particular healing is possible.⁶

Hume's Challenge

Hume, on the other hand, questions the very possibility of making precisely these kinds of investigations. Hume is often taken to claim that miracles are impossible because they would constitute a violation of the laws of nature. The implied premise of such a claim would be that it is metaphysically or physically impossible that such a violation

⁴ Swinburne gives the example of our recognition of the existence of the greatest prime number. Without contact with Western mathematics, we would not know that there are prime numbers, yet it is true and rational nevertheless. Likewise, the Christian faith *helps* with the recognition of miracles, but this help does not exclude a purely rational basis of that recognition. See Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2004), 291.

⁵ That is, it is not required that we are able to convince unbelievers against their will. Nor does it imply that the unbeliever grants better vision to the believer. But it does in turn imply an epistemological obligation on the side of the non-believer to withhold belief only where it is reasonable, and in extreme cases to revise his background assumptions or question his own motivations for disbelief. See Winfried Corduan, "Recognizing a Miracle," in *In Defense of Miracles*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 99–111, at 107.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 2:677.

can occur. This, however, is not the claim of David Hume, but that of Baruch Spinoza.⁷ And it is not this argument that I wish to engage. I will take it for granted that the universe needs a first cause and that this first cause is a person who cares enough to intervene for the sake of certain of his creatures that share with him reason and free will. Neither does Hume dispute this claim in his essay on miracles. His objection is made on purely epistemological grounds and has since then generated the most protracted debates and arguments.

Hume's argument is not that the laws of nature cannot be violated—he would not be able to make this argument, since he himself is famously skeptical about any evidence for the very fact of causality in nature. According to Hume, we only observe regularities, not causality. And we call these observed regularities “laws of nature.” These regularities, however, are enough for Hume to make it impossible for us ever to have enough evidence for a miracle. In other words, Hume does not necessarily question the *possibility* of miracles. What he questions is our ability to know that they have occurred, even if it were the case that they happened.⁸ Establishing the *actuality* of a miracle is, for him, just a matter of weighing the evidence, and he claims that the evidence for the factuality of a miracle will never add up to certainty or even probability. The reason is that miracles are by definition improbable. The laws of nature that they violate have been established by the repeated testimony of our senses and have the common observations of past humanity in their favor. A miracle contradicts this previous testimony. It might be attested by only one or few sightings. As an interruption of the laws and as an exception, the miracle is rare. *By definition*, therefore, the factuality of a miracle is always less probable than the law of nature; thus its occurrence cannot be established or be made probable.⁹

⁷ See also Peter Millican, “Twenty Questions about Hume’s ‘Of Miracles,’” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 68 (2011): 151–192, at no. 10f. By contrast, Newton and Boyle appeal to miracles as an apologetic argument.

⁸ There might be stronger implications, however: since God does not perform miracles for himself, but for us, miracles that cannot be recognized would be non-sense. As R. F. Holland notes, religious significance, *admiratio*, and a form of revelation are essential to miracles; see Holland “The Miraculous,” in *Miracles*, ed. Richard Swinburne (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 53–69, at 58. It would then be analytically part of being a miracle that it can be noticed. Hume, therefore, by implication, questions the very possibility of miracles as well.

⁹ J. Earman, himself not a Christian and skeptical about miracle claims, argues that Hume’s contemporaries had already made better arguments than Hume

To make matters worse, many miracle claims involve *historical* cases of which we know only the documents that have been handed down to us. Again, even if these documentary witnesses are trustworthy (which Hume denies), they always provide less evidence in favor of the miracles than the laws that they break. Anthony Flew reinforces Hume's argument by pointing to the fact that scientific laws can still be tested and confirmed here and now. The miraculous event, on the other hand, cannot so be tested, and this for two reasons: a) the alleged event is in the *past*, and b) it is a *particular*, unique event that is, by definition, *not repeatable*. And Flew adds that the historical record itself can be a conduit of information only if we assume that the laws of nature are reliably operating, for only then can we rationally interpret the detritus of the past as evidence for such an event and construct from it our account of what actually happened.¹⁰ In other words, "our sole ground for characterizing a reported occurrence as miraculous is at the same time a sufficient reason for calling it physically impossible."¹¹

This is a formidable argument, but I do not think it insurmountable. In what follows, I will make a principal objection to Hume and will then attempt to turn Flew against himself.

for and against miracles. Hume is looking for a quick "knock out" argument and ends up making a bad argument, neglecting to look at the evidence in appropriate ways; see Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*, vi, 2 and 14–19. Robert Fogelin, on the other hand, thinks that Hume evaluates evidence appropriately in the second part of his essay; see Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2003), and the review of Richard Otte in *Hume Studies* 31 (2005): 165–168. See also Millican, "Twenty Questions," no. 12. But if the argument is that miracles as exceptions are *by definition* rare and therefore always less probable, then this would seem to be an a priori argument (from a definition). The upshot is the same in any case: the standards can never be met, whether for a priori or a posteriori reasons. And this is the claim that one has to argue against in either case.

¹⁰ Anthony Flew, "Scientific versus Historical Evidence," in Swinburne, *Miracles*, 97–102, at 101; and Flew, "Neo-Humean Arguments About the Miraculous," in Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 45–57, at 49–52.

¹¹ Anthony Flew, "Miracles," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, quoted in William Lane Craig, "The Problem of Miracles: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective," in *Gospel Perspectives VI*, ed. David Wenham and Craig Blomberg (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1986), 9–40, at 39.

Evidence and Paradigms

It has been argued¹² that Hume overstates his case when he claims that laws of nature constitute “a uniform experience against every miraculous event.” With this claim, he begs the question, because this claim presupposes what needs to be proved, namely the non-existence of miracles. In fact, the amount of experiences of miracles in all cultures might be much larger than the experience of the small group of secular Western academics of recent years that question them. And indeed, some might have come to acknowledge the assumption of the non-occurrence of miracles as an imposition of contemporary culture.¹³ But this is not the argument I wish to make.¹⁴ After all, it *is* true that, in everyone’s experience, miracles, if they are experienced at all, are experienced more rarely than the laws of nature on which we rely every day.

The point, rather, is that individual experiences as such do count—*especially* if there is nothing in Hume’s metaphysics to rule out exceptions a priori. Precisely as an empiricist, he cannot claim more than an incomplete induction for laws of nature.¹⁵ And this is true not just for Hume, but in general.¹⁶ Now, if this is so, then there is nothing in miracles that constitutes a logical contradiction with our evidence for

¹² See, e.g., Craig, “The Problem of Miracles,” 37 f.; William Paley, “Evidences of Christianity—Preparatory Considerations” (1794), reprinted in Swinburne, *Miracles*, 41–47, at 43 ff.; and Richard L. Purtill, “Miracles: What If They Happen?” in Swinburne, *Miracles*, 189–205, at 191.

¹³ Keener, *Miracles*, 1:78, 100–105, and 185.

¹⁴ Recently, a greater openness on the part of historians to take accounts of miracles at face value does not mean that these historians now believe in miracles (or else they would become Christians or whatever the case might be). Making this point about contemporary practice would not answer the question we are trying to address.

¹⁵ John H. Newman makes the point that concrete experience is indeed never uniform, and that the uniformity of laws is an abstract notion to which nothing corresponds in concrete experience; see *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 73 f. Paley made the further point that the invariability of these laws has never been demonstrated (“Evidences of Christianity,” 4).

¹⁶ Earman even claims that theoretical physics is a kind of theology: “I would turn it around and maintain that, in so far as the hypotheses of theoretical physics are subject to strong empirical underdetermination, theoretical physics is a kind of theology whose high priests should be accorded no more respect, qua scientists, than the high priests of Christianity or Buddhism”; see his “Bayes, Hume, Price, and Miracles,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 113 (2002): 91–109, at 107.

the laws of nature. Therefore, miracle claims should not be a priori and dogmatically discarded, but investigated. Nor are they discredited by the fact that they do not occur regularly. Improbable things do happen, after all. Winning in the lottery is improbable, but people do win, and there is evidence for it.¹⁷

In fact, if Hume were right, then there would be no progress in science. After all, we *can* falsify our current theories of what the laws of nature are. We can come across evidence that does not obey what we had so far believed to be inviolable laws of nature, which means that they are not inviolable. This is what has been called a “recalcitrant case.” To Hume, however, such evidence is to be a priori dismissed. As he indicates at one point, the Indian prince who hears for the first time of the phenomenon of frost, unknown in his own climate, should rightly dismiss such evidence. And so, perhaps we should have dismissed the first reports of black swans in Australia as superstition or as an attempt at deception. But if so, then we should never be able to falsify a current paradigm.¹⁸ Hume might answer that, if the evidence *adds up*, he would be willing to surrender the paradigm. Although that could, of course, never happen, if every individual case is to be dismissed. If each is dismissed, all are dismissed; zeroes do not add up to anything.

Still, let us grant that it can add up. Even so, do we have to wait for evidence to add up? Hume would require us to wait for so much evidence that it would trump the cumulative evidence for our previous paradigm. But this is not in fact correct. Consider the possibility of coming across a recalcitrant case, some one piece of evidence that, all by itself, suggests to us a paradigm shift. It might not by itself be enough evidence to *confirm* that paradigm, indeed. But I do not think that confirmation is required. According to Popper,¹⁹ paradigms and hypotheses do not need to be confirmed in order to be acceptable scientific theories. They only need to be *falsifiable*—that is, it must be

¹⁷ This is the point of Robert Hambourger, “Belief in Miracles and Hume’s Essay,” *Nous* 14 (1980): 587–604. The first one to introduce the example of the lottery was Price (Earman, “Bayes, Hume, Price, and Miracles,” 99 f.).

¹⁸ The very distinction between a hypothesis and the facts might collapse; in fact, the hypothesis would be a hypothesis about nothing (see Holland, “The Miraculous,” 61 and 58). A bit more skeptical about facts is Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1970), 49 f.

¹⁹ See, for example, Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1963), 33–39.

possible to prove them wrong empirically. If a recalcitrant case leads us to propose a new theory, and even one that includes the supernatural, then it is not irrational to accept it. Rather, it is possible to state the conditions under which the new paradigm would be falsified, and then it is rational to proceed and investigate it empirically.

In addition, it is very important to realize that, against Hume's assumption, the recalcitrant new evidence for the new paradigm does *not* have to outweigh the old. The reason is that there is *no contradiction* between the new paradigm and the evidence for the old paradigm. It is the aim of the new paradigm to explain not only the *new* evidence, but also the *old*. The new paradigm will indeed explain the old evidence better and more comprehensively. And if it does so, then all the old evidence that Hume claims speaks against the new paradigm now speaks in fact *for* it.

This is true for scientific theories. But is it true also for miracles? Miracles are, after all, unique and peculiar. They do not amount to evidence for a new law of nature. They are still defined by *contrast* with such laws. Nevertheless, there is a way in which they, too, can establish a new paradigm.²⁰ Consider someone who is converted by witnessing a miracle. And so as to go to the heart of the matter, consider the apostles being confronted with the risen Jesus. The Gospel narratives illustrate what such a paradigm shift might look like and that it may take a bit of time to sink in—even an initial dismissal of the evidence—but then indeed constitute a new outlook. In this new outlook, all the old evidence looks different. The old evidence will not contradict the new paradigm. Rather, it is suddenly evident what the evidence had meant all along. This is true particularly for all the previous religious experience and all the evidence that could be adduced for the faith of ancient Israel. But the new paradigm will also include the evidence for the regular and ordinary behavior of nature and its laws. Having come to know God as someone who reveals himself in extraordinary events in history would not have led the apostles to disbelieve in a God who orders the ordinary course of nature according to predictable laws. In fact, it is the same care that leads God to reveal himself and to provide for us laws of nature that make our environment sufficiently predict-

²⁰ Leibniz would claim that they reveal an even deeper *law* of the universe—see his *Discours de métaphysique* (1686), nos. 6 and 16—by contrast with Malebranche, for whom miracles are contrasting particular volitions in God (Leibniz, *Theodicy*, nos. 207f). This deeper law, we suggest, might be understood as the new heavens and the new earth, where, as a rule and law, *all* bodies are resurrected and *all* illnesses are healed.

able and intelligible. Evidence for laws of nature are just *more* evidence for the same God who also works miracles.²¹ Contrary to Hume, nothing in this faith is irrational, and nothing in miracles requires us to dismiss any evidence. Rather, it is Hume who, to make his case, needs to dismiss the given evidence dogmatically and a priori.

Miracles Second Hand: Historiography and the Testimony of Witnesses

What about the historical argument of Anthony Flew? After all, we are not the apostles; we are not eye witnesses to the Resurrection. We live 2000 years later and have to rely on documents that others might call into doubt. I will not engage the specific case of the Resurrection here, although a surprisingly good case has been made for the historical evidence of this event.²² Rather, I would like to look at the case of historical miracle claims in general and in principle.

First, we need to clarify a common misunderstanding arising from Ernst Troeltsch's so-called "principle of analogy," which states that the past is not dissimilar to our present experience.²³ On this basis, the common claim is made that miracles do not happen today and that, by analogy, historians should therefore dismiss miracle claims about past events as well. The historical method would inherently be restricted to non-miraculous events. Yet what this "principle of analogy" can reasonably mean is only that we should evaluate testimony from the past in the same way as we evaluate testimony from the present. Put in this way, the analogy is not an analogy between present and past *events*, but an analogy of the *methods* to be employed in the investigation of events. After all, not just miracles are by definition unique and unrepeatable, but also history as such (as Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out).²⁴ If the principle of analogy in Troeltsch's sense were

²¹ Thus, divine explanation and teleology may provide explanatory resources for the theist that are unavailable to the atheist (see Millican, "Twenty Questions," no. 18).

²² For example, see William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), or for a good, succinct statement of apologetics, Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 185–210.

²³ Ernst Troeltsch, "Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1913), 2 and 729–53.

²⁴ Proofs in history might therefore be different from proofs in science (see Purtill, "Miracles: What If They Happen?" 198), but we still need natural science to check the evidence.

applied to the events themselves, we could not have historiography. The only plausible application is an analogy of method, not of content.²⁵ And that still allows for all the critical analysis a modern historian will be interested in: if certain conditions in the present are known to produce illusions—such as taking drugs—then we should assume that, analogously, witnesses on drugs in the past might have been deluded as well. But this analogy does not exclude the possibility that things happened in the past that do not happen today. In fact, the same methods might lead us to believe that reports about unusual things are *truthful* under certain circumstances. The same methods that should make us disbelieve certain accounts should also make us believe others. Dismissing dissimilar events *as such* risks uncritically projecting our peculiar Western contemporary prejudices and agendas onto the past.²⁶ In the context of miracles, this dismissal might even ignore the fact that miracles are also reported today—that is, not just among “barbarous and ignorant nations” as Hume claims.²⁷ Thus, the dismissal of miracle claims for the past might even be violating the principle of analogy in its usual form.²⁸ Nothing in the historical method precludes the possibility of miracles in the past.²⁹

This possibility, however, does not yet constitute actuality or probability. What are those analogous methods that allow us to establish the factuality of a miracle in history? Flew maintains that, as a unique and past event, it cannot be scientifically tested. This, however, is not true, and for the very reasons to which Flew appeals: he correctly insists that our interpretation of the detritus of the past requires us to assume that

²⁵ A similar point is made in Francis J. Beckwith, “History and Miracles,” in Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 86–98, at 97.

²⁶ Some might consider this projection an acceptable form of historical relativism, but it is in fact a self-contradictory position, given that this position would then itself be historically relative. On this question, see Beckwith, “History and Miracles,” 89f.

²⁷ Hume does not name criteria for a (not-trustworthy) “barbarous and ignorant nation” or its opposite. Even the Middle Ages had very high standards (see Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, 17).

²⁸ Keener, *Miracles*, 1:185. Keener, not a Catholic, has collected an impressive amount of contemporary evidence for miracles. Still, even ubiquitous contemporary accounts do not imply that I need to have witnessed a miracle personally: “My lack of experiencing a miracle first-hand does not serve to make the universal statement probable [i.e. ‘There are no miracles in the world’] because there is no probability that I should experience a miracle myself” (Craig, “The Problem of Miracles,” 47).

²⁹ Craig, “The Problem of Miracles,” 41 f. (following Pannenberg).

the laws of nature are operative in order for us to be to extrapolate to past events. But is it true that we can therefore never access an event that is not itself an expression of these laws?

Consider the Big Bang:³⁰ the Big Bang is a unique historical event of the past that we cannot today replicate or test in the laboratory. This event certainly is far more distant in the past than any miracle ever reported. At the Big Bang, presumably neither time, nor space, nor the laws of nature existed; it is a unique event that has all the marks of a miracle,³¹ of a supernatural initiative by a non-physical agent.³² And yet we know about the event only by virtue of tracing things back from contemporary evidence according to the laws of nature we know. This means that we use a scientific method involving a principle of analogy, and the method leads us back precisely to a non-analogous, unique historical event.

Can we apply such methods to miracles? What might help us here is something Hume did not know about: the modern methods of criminology and scientific forensic investigation. As Richard Swinburne points out, Hume did not take into account physical traces such as can be left on a crime scene (for example, cigarette ashes, bomb craters, fingerprints, or pollen).³³ In addition, we have methods of Carbon-14 dating, genetic testing, dendrochronology, archaeological methods, and other tests that allow us to gather scientific evidence about historical events. The interesting point is that this evidence about the past is *present* evidence. The evidence is observable under the microscope and other testing devices. And as such it can be subjected to *repeated* testing. And indeed, the Catholic Church had such tests applied to the Shroud of Turin and the Tilma of St. Juan Diego.³⁴ Contrary to Flew,

³⁰ Suggested also by Norman L. Geisler, "Miracles and the Modern Mind," in Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 73–85, at 82.

³¹ See also Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 10.12: "For we cannot listen to those who maintain that the invisible God works no visible miracles; for even they believe that He made the world, which surely they will not deny to be visible. Whatever marvel happens in this world, it is certainly less marvelous than this whole world itself"; in Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: Modern Library; Random House, 2000), 317–318.

³² This would have to be an agent with personal spontaneity. Mere abstract principles are causally inert and have no reason to act at one point rather than another.

³³ On this point see Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, 33–51. While physical traces might be obliterated over time, our ability to trace things is also growing over time, with the advance of science (*ibid.*, 36).

³⁴ Genetic and other tests have also been applied to Eucharistic miracles.

there are repeatable experiments that we can make about the past, and we can repeat these experiments indefinitely. In this manner, sufficient evidence can easily accumulate.

However, contrary to Swinburne, I do not think that proving a miracle is a mere matter of cumulative probabilities. This would already concede too much to Hume. Rather, as has been seen above with the paradigm shifts, such a proof is not a mere matter of quantities. The testing scenario suggests something rather different than weighing or adding up of evidence. Hume says: “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.”³⁵ But what if these testing devices do indeed show us evidence for a miracle? Then we can dismiss the evidence only on the supposition that a miracle has occurred *in the testing device!* Not only the observed scenario presumably operates on the laws of nature, but the use of testing devices presupposes that these tools operate according to such laws as well. Perhaps Hume would suggest that we should, in the case of evidence for a miracle, weigh the evidence for the laws of nature being broken either in the testing device or in the observed event, and at best we get a draw between the two. But again, it is not a matter of weighing. The very fact that we have to weigh anything at all is everything we need as proof for a miracle.³⁶ Regardless of whether the laws of nature are broken in the observed event or in the testing device, it is a miracle. Even and precisely if it is a draw, it is a miracle.

This is important because this insight is applicable beyond the methods of forensic criminology. It does, for example, apply to the classic case of eye-witnesses. For what is the eye, if not a testing device? The eye, too, operates according to the laws of nature, such as the laws of

³⁵ Hume, “Of Miracles,” part I, no. 91.

³⁶ Discussions of Hume’s argument have made much use of Bayesian mathematics of probability. If I am correct, then this might not be necessary, and it is, in any case, not the argument I wish to make here. Questions like the problem of the *base rate fallacy* (e.g., Millican, “Twenty Questions,” no. 19f) also would not apply in this particular scenario because it is not a matter of probabilities. Generally, the real questions are philosophical in nature and precede their mathematical formulation. See Michael P. Levine, Review of *Hume’s Abject Failure* by John Earman, *Hume Studies* 28 (2002): 161–167, at 165: “One only gets out of the Bayesian equation what one puts in, and what one puts in is a function of interpretation.” Nevertheless, a Bayesian analysis has the advantage of articulating background assumptions and prior probabilities that are easily overlooked.

optics. And even if someone is deceived under certain, ideal conditions, then we would still have to conclude that a miracle has occurred in the eye itself. And this, too, can be and has been tested, for example in cases of apparitions. We can test repeatedly the evidence, as well as the eye. Either way, it would be a miracle. If we were to dismiss this kind of evidence, we would have to dismiss our evidence for laws of nature as well. For we test and establish the laws of nature with the same kind of devices. The ultimate devices available to us are our five senses, conveying sense experiences to us by organs like the eye. Any evidence against the witness of our own eyes can only consist in additional sense experiences and therefore rely on the same kinds of methods about which we pretend to be skeptical.

This includes also eye witnesses of the historical past, of which Hume and many others tend to be dismissive. Witnesses as they are treated in court are just another sort of testing device. They might be broken devices indeed, but they nevertheless follow laws of their own that allow us to evaluate the evidence.³⁷ Accordingly, no court dismisses eye witnesses just because they are eye witnesses. They do not *dismiss* them, but they *evaluate* their testimony. The methods of this evaluation are not unlike those that are used to establish the proper functioning of other kinds of tests and devices. For, the behavior of witnesses has its own laws and regularities that enable us to assess the claims that are made. These regularities are not in principle different from those of the laws of nature, since they are established in the same way: in both cases, such regularities provide the most simple and coherent account of a large number of observed data. To treat regularities about witnesses differently than regularities of nature would be an unwarranted *ad hoc* procedure for assessing evidence.³⁸

One of the established regularities about witnesses is that it is difficult for a liar to keep his story straight.³⁹ At a certain point, it would require an almost miraculous power of presence of mind and memory to do so. Still, it might be possible. But suppose we add the fact that

³⁷ Hume acknowledges, yet dismisses, similar examinations in the case of miracles at the tomb of Jansenist Abbé in Paris ("Of Miracles," part II, no. 96, with footnote). He never acknowledged his misrepresentation of this case; cf. Timothy and Lydia McGrew, "The Argument from Miracles," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 593–662, at 656–658.

³⁸ Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, 43.

³⁹ John Leslie Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and Against the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 25 f.

multiple independent witnesses are consistent in telling a miracle story, then the assumption of a lie would constitute a coincidence more miraculous than assuming that they are speaking the truth.⁴⁰ Had the miracle not occurred as reported or observed, then their agreement would itself be a miracle, just as it would be in a testing device in the previous cases. Further information to be evaluated would include whether the witnesses are of doubtful character, whether their statements are compatible, whether their agreement could have a special motivation, whether they speak with hesitation or too assertively or have vested interests, and whether they happened to uphold their testimony even under torture and threat of death. Some of the evidence thus generated might only produce probabilities, but in many cases, assuming the opposite would lead to real impossibilities. Scientists who would want to question the rigor of these criteria might do well to consider the procedures of their own disciplines and how much of their evidence relies on the testimony of other members of the scientific community.⁴¹

Consider prophecy: insofar as it includes contingencies in the remote future, it is something that principally escapes the grasp of the human mind, since it implies a knowledge of the future that only God can have. Yet, prophecies are eminently testable,⁴² since we can observe whether the prophecy is fulfilled or not. A prophecy, especially an unlikely one, if it comes true, is certainly good evidence for a miracle. And if many independent prophecies come true, the cumulative effect would of course be even better evidence, since their fulfillment would be unlikely to be a chance coincidence. A good example might be the miracle of the sun in Fatima: this is an event that occurred according to the prediction received by three children. It was attested by multiple witnesses, in fact, many thousands of them. And while the miracle, if not a cosmic catastrophe, must indeed have occurred in the eyes of the witnesses (and in the camera lenses of the journalists), this is itself miraculous. These witnesses were often located geographically independent from each other, precluding mass-hypnosis or hallucination. In addition, there were physical traits subject to empirical verification,

⁴⁰ It is important to note that this does *not* depend on the moral character of the witnesses; they can be rather fallible, morally and epistemically (“ignorant and barbarous,” in Hume’s vocabulary). This has been made clear by Laplace and Babbage (see Earman, “Bayes, Hume, Price, and Miracles,” 99 f.).

⁴¹ Scientists tend to be forgetful about the ultimate rootedness of science in what Husserl would call “*Lebenswelt*.”

⁴² Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 22 f.

such as that the place was dry afterwards, in spite of heavy rain—surely something that does not come about by hypnosis or hallucination.

In Conclusion

Whatever the merits of specific cases, all of them are open to rational and scientific investigation, such that one can arrive at conclusions that prove the existence of miracles. The points that we have made against David Hume and Anthony Flew address only some specific, albeit important, points. For a true consideration of miracles, further questions need to be taken into account that can decisively shift the evidence in favor of miracles. If, for example, we have independent *philosophical* reasons to believe that God exists and is omnipotent and benevolent, certain miracles would not be unlikely at all. And if it can be shown that the laws to which Hume and others appeal as evidence against miracles are indeed dependent on the existence of such a God,⁴³ then these laws themselves cease to be evidence against miracles and instead come to support them. All of this can be known on philosophical grounds and it either allows for the use of scientific methods or is presupposed by these methods.

Thus, divine revelation, as well as the faith that responds to it, is based on evidence that does not presuppose the faith that it is meant to authenticate. Because of this evidence, we can have reasonable faith. N&V

⁴³ See Anselm Ramelow, “When Understanding Seeks Faith: Does Religion Offer Resources for the Renewal of Contemporary Rationality?” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 8 (2010): 647–664, at 648–655, and Ramelow, “The God of Miracles,” in *God, Reason and Reality*, ed. A. Ramelow (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2014), 303–364. Even the reliability of our faculties for *science* cannot be guaranteed by science itself. Based on evolution theory, we should rather doubt science as well. Many thinkers from Darwin and Nietzsche to Patricia Churchland confirm this quandary; see Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 311–316.