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Reason and Religion: Romanell-Phi Beta Kappa Lectures
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Lecture I: “An Everlasting Check: Hume against Miracles”

1. Hume’s conception of miracles
 - a. Not metaphysical
 - b. Epistemological
2. Hume’s First Lemma
 - a. Locke’s problem
 - b. Hume’s solution
3. Hume’s Second Lemma
 - a. Not *a priori*
 - b. Propensity to the marvelous
4. The Archbishop
 - a. Tillotson against transubstantiation
 - b. Hume and self-stultification

Some quotations:

- (a) “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.” (Hume, “Of Miracles”)
- (b) “It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die on a sudden; because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed, in any age or country.” (Hume, “Of Miracles”)
- (c) HUME’S THEOREM: *It is not rational to believe on the basis of testimony (that is, on the basis of what other humans tell us) that a miracle of a religious nature has occurred.*

FIRST LEMMA: *If the falsehood of testimony on behalf of an alleged miraculous event is not “more miraculous” than the event itself, then it is not rational to believe in the occurrence of that event on the basis of that testimony.*
- (d) “[There are] two foundations of Credibility, *viz.* Common Observation in like cases, and particular Testimonies in that particular instance.” (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*)
- (e) “It is experience only which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature.” (Hume, “Of Miracles”)
- (f) “If we consider the shortness of human life, and our limited knowledge, even of what passes in our time, we must be sensible that we should be for ever children in understanding, were it not for this invention, which extends our experience to all past ages, and to the most distant nations; making them contribute as much to our improvement in wisdom, as if they had

actually lain under our observation. A man acquainted with history may, in some respect, be said to have lived from the beginning of the world, and to have been making continual additions to his stock of knowledge in every century.” (Hume, “Of the Study of History”)

- (g) “What would become of *history* had we not a dependence on the veracity of the historian, according to the experience, which we have had of mankind?” (Hume, “Of Liberty and Necessity”)
- (h) SECOND LEMMA: The falsehood of testimony on behalf of an alleged miraculous event of a religious nature is not “more miraculous” than the event itself.
- (i) “The passion of *surprize* and *wonder*, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events, from which it is derived. And this goes so far, that even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events, of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others.” (Hume, “Of Miracles”)
- (j) “But what greater temptation than to appear a missionary, a prophet, an ambassador from heaven? Who would not encounter many dangers and difficulties, in order to attain so sublime a character? Or if, by the help of vanity and a heated imagination, a man has first made a convert of himself, and entered seriously into the delusion; who ever scruples to make use of pious frauds, in support of so holy and meritorious a cause?” (Hume, “Of Miracles”)
- (k) “[If] the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority.” (Hume, “Of Miracles”)
- (l) “Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof.” (Hume, “Of Miracles”)
- (m) “[By] what clearer evidence or stronger Argument could any man prove to me that such words [supporting Transubstantiation] were in the Bible, than I can prove to him that bread and wine after consecration are bread and wine still? He could but appeal to my eyes to prove such words to be in the Bible, and with the same reason and justice might I appeal to several of his senses to prove to him that the bread and wine after consecration are bread and wine still. ...

Whether it be reasonable to manage that God should make that a part of the Christian Religion which shakes the main external evidence and confirmation of the whole? I mean the Miracles which were wrought by our Saviour and his Apostles, the assurance whereof did at first depend upon the certainty of sense. ... Suppose then *Transubstantiation* to be part of the Christian Doctrine, it must have the same confirmation with the whole, and that is Miracles: But of all Doctrines in the world it is peculiarly incapable of being proved by a Miracle. For if a Miracle were wrought for the proof of it, the very same assurance which any man hath of the truth of the Miracle he hath of the falsehood of the Doctrine, that is the clear evidence of his Senses. ... Transubstantiation is not to be proved by a Miracle, because that would be, *to prove to a Man by something that he sees, that he doth not see what he sees.*

[Transubstantiation] cannot be true unless our Senses, and the Senses of all mankind be deceived about their proper objects; and if this be true and certain, then nothing else can be so; for if we be not certain of what we see, we can be certain of nothing.” (Tillotson, “Sermon XXVI: A Discourse against Transubstantiation”)

- (n) “And what can be more vain than to pretend, that a man may be assured that such a Doctrine is revealed by God, and consequently true, which if it be true, a man can have no assurance at all of any Divine Revelation?” (Tillotson, “The Rule of Faith”)
- (o) “If a blind man were to ask me ‘Have you got two hands?’ I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don’t know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn’t I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands?” (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*)
- (p) “Revelation [...] as absolutely determines our Minds, and as perfectly excludes all wavering as our Knowledge it self; and we may as well doubt of our own Being, as we can, whether any Revelation from GOD be true.” (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*)
- (q) “[Our] assent can be rationally no higher than the Evidence of its being a Revelation, and that this is the meaning of the Expressions it is delivered in.” (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*)
- (r) “Because this would be to subvert the Principles, and Foundations of all Knowledge, Evidence, and Assent whatsoever.” (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*)