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J. Houston

Excerpt

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Introduction

An impressive cloud of modern witnesses can be called to support the case that the making, and reading, of this book is vanity.

The first to be cited is Bernard Williams, now a philosophy professor in Oxford; in 1983 when he was (at least) one of Cambridge's leading philosophers he reviewed J. L. Mackie's lucid book *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford) in which, and prominently among the sequence of confident attacks on standard types of apologetic, Hume's dispatch of apologists' appeals to miracle reports is succinctly re-presented, endorsed and sharpened. Williams writes, 'For a detailed and perspicuous account of how it now stands [that is, with the traditional reasonings in support of theism] I know of no book that does it better than this'.¹ Williams goes on, however, to qualify his praise of the book: 'It concedes too much to these arguments in pretending that it is an open question whether they could deliver their conclusion . . . Hume and Kant . . . broke up most of this furniture a long time ago'. A book attacking Hume's views about the actual or possible significance of miracle-stories, such as this book is, is presumably no less otiose than a book advocating those views, if the matter was long ago settled.

The second witness is Maurice Wiles, Regius Professor of Theology, now Emeritus, at Oxford, who has recently written dismissively about the view that 'The absolute reliability of Scripture can be convincingly proved by the testimony of

¹ B. Williams, review of J. L. Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford, 1982, in *The Times Literary Supplement* (11 March 1983), p. 231.

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miracle and fulfilled prophecy.’² He says, ‘Claims of the latter kind [that is the kind just characterised in the previous quotation] have proved quite unable to stand up to the challenges that philosophical critics [he is not now thinking of biblical critics] have levelled against them. I shall not waste time by going over the arguments once again.’ Both the passages quoted and their wider context make plain that Wiles regards it as time ill spent to defend or try to reinstate any such claims against the standard objections. Yet this book aims to show that reports or miracles may contribute to the apologists’ case for theism.

John Hick is a notable and respected philosopher – theologian who, like very many others (such as Mackie, or T. Penelhum) has argued for the following,³ as setting out the available acceptable alternatives in relation to alleged miracles: either you are a religious sceptic in which case you discount miracle-stories because of your premisses, or else, because you have faith in the supernatural, you have different premisses, and so you may accept at least some miracle-stories. However, miracle-stories cannot on this account of the matter, lead you, in reason, from scepticism to belief, nor can belief rest on attestations by miracles. In the following pages it will be argued *inter alia* that the wide consensus on this issue is quite mistaken.

These three witnesses are in no way eccentric in their estimates; and in the body of this book there appear other luminaries who concur with the expert testimony already called, in holding in effect that this book’s task is hopeless. Yet expert witnesses in philosophy and theology cannot claim a court’s firm confidence in quite the way that an expert metallurgist or pathologist might. Indeed it is surprising to see any professional philosopher appealing, as Williams does, to assured results, those of Hume and Kant, in philosophy; it is the more surprising when much of their Enlightenment anti-theology has come to be challenged in recent years.

² M. Wiles, in an essay entitled ‘The Reasonableness of Christianity’, in *The Rationality of Religious Belief*, edited by W. J. Abraham and S. W. Holtzer, Oxford, 1987, pp. 40–1.

³ See J. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1963, pp. 39f.; also T. Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality*, New York, 1971, pp. 276f.

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Although he will have specialist expertise in one or two areas, a systematic theologian cannot engage in detailed careful scrutiny of all the current views of all the specialists whom he must consult: biblical scholars, historians of doctrine and of philosophy, experts in other religions than his own, and philosophers. So Wiles has a better excuse than Williams for receiving rather than assessing the consensual philosophical wisdom. In fact he recognises the contemporary existence of sophisticated challenges to Enlightened philosophical orthodoxy, but his rejection is summary⁴ because he thinks he can rely on merely indicating rather than rehearsing or developing a standard, widely accepted line of criticism.

Some contemporary challengers have accepted that Enlightenment anti-theology is sound enough as far as it sees but have claimed that it failed to notice other perspectives, or features of life in the world, which have been more recently recognised, such as those towards which existentialist or personalist philosophers direct us. However, other challengers have attacked specific Enlightenment arguments which were directed against specific theological claims, and these challenges have been much more by way of the sorts of argument whose point or force Enlightenment philosophers would immediately recognise or reckon with. (These challengers include Robert Adams, William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, William Rowe, Richard Swinburne and others from highly reputable centres of learning. It was presumably the work of these writers which led J. L. Mackie to think that his book was called for.) The present book aspires to contribute to this kind of rebuttal of Enlightenment anti-theology.

The Enlightenment arguments specifically against the apologists' use of miracle reports are due mainly to Hume. Schleiermacher, it is true, does offer a distinctive, theological and non-Humean argument against believing miracle stories; but although it seems to have been hugely influential, it is a weak argument, whose weakness will be clearly brought out in the context of debate about Hume's line of reasoning. Hume's

⁴ Wiles, in Abraham and Holtzer, *The Rationality of Religious Belief*, p. 48

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arguments have of course been employed by philosophical critics of religious apologetics. Essentially these same arguments have also been appropriated, sometimes transposed, in the kind of idealist standpoint which has been greatly influential on theology. This book aims to reveal specifically the error and weakness of this Humean constellation of arguments. If they are, as will shortly be claimed, erroneous, and fail to justify the significant conclusions which they pretend to support, it is important that they should be assessed and their false pretensions exposed. The fact that large numbers of generally informed people see Hume on miracles as substantially unassailable, and so regard a book like this as a pointless waste of effort, actually makes it the more desirable to examine Hume's reasoning, and if necessary to reveal to those who rely on it the error of their way.

Of course the view which you take about the proper evaluation of miracle-stories will have implications for science, historiography and theological studies, as well as philosophy. The relevances of miracle reports to natural science are to be seen by engaging in some epistemology. Much that is written about miracle-stories in relation to science or history is Humean⁵ and can be dealt with by exploring the epistemological implications of adopting or rejecting a Humean attitude. Other recent writers have more extensively discussed changes in modern science itself as these may be thought to impinge on the assessment of miracle reports. However, it is clear that neither the 'new physics' nor chaos theory, for instance, eliminates the usable distinction between what accords with nature's usual course and what runs counter to it, what is law-conforming and what is law-violating. So while some questions of interest are raised by these developments in science, the Humean problematic remains, to be reckoned with. Exploring the epistemological themes begins to open up a world view, alternative to that of the so-called Enlightenment, in which science and history are neither at odds with theistic belief nor unrelated to it.

⁵ For example, the crudely Humean James Hansen, 'Can Science Allow Miracles?', *New Scientist*, vol. 94, no. 1300, (8 April 1982), pp. 73–6 (main cover story), and the much subtler F. H. Bradley's *Collected Essays*, Oxford 1935, pp. 1–70, discussed at length in Chapter 5, below.

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Moreover, scripture scholars may hope for some valuable guidance from this enquiry, in view of the prevalence of miracle narratives in the scriptures. There are ways, certainly, of being a scripture scholar and avoiding the issue. You can simply dismiss or ignore the Humean constraints of historical critical method, as it is commonly understood, and defiantly present all or most miracle-stories as true. A bold but baseless approach. Or you can treat the stories which, just as stories, have many interesting things to be said about them without questions of the stories' truth ever being addressed. For scholars who find these approaches inadequate, but who also, by reason of their specialist study, find unsatisfactorily implausible the Humean claim that all these stories which describe what really would count as miracles (as distinct from events which have a natural explanation, like psychosomatic healings) must be regarded as erroneous, a discussion of the credentials of miracle-stories will be helpful.

In the last part of the book, therefore, significant relationships will be traced and discussed, between what has been said about the Humean case and the assumptions and methods of scientists, historians and, finally, theologians.

The study begins however, with the exposition of the ideas about reported miracles, of Augustine, Aquinas, Locke, Hume, Bradley and Troeltsch. These five chapters (Bradley and Troeltsch being taken together) are offered partly because accurate accounts, which give adequate detail to enable the thinkers' viewpoints about miracles to be properly grasped, are non-existent for all but Hume; not because they serve as a case study which counts (insofar as any case study can) against these maintaining radical cultural and conceptual discontinuity over the centuries, though, incidentally, they do serve that end; but mainly because these prominent figures between them made points, brought out conceptual connections and engaged in argumentative manoeuvres in relation to reported miracles, knowledge of which is invaluable, perhaps obligatory, for anyone who wishes to reflect responsibly about the topic now. The scholarly description is offered, then, as having a value in its own right, but principally as providing an important resource for the evaluative enterprise which is this book's main point.

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The line between description and evaluation cannot admittedly be drawn precisely, and undue concern to avoid the evaluative, for example by refusing to consider how an author could or would deal with a problem, may prevent the emergence of the author's meaning. So although the treatments do go beyond mere reportage, the aim in these first five chapters is fair and full exposition. The six authors chosen are arguably the six most influential writers on the subject. Yet even if that claim can be defeated, the more important point is that the historically occurring, pre-First World War ways of thinking about the miraculous, which are likely to be of interest or value to anyone now seeking the truth, are to be found in the authors who have been selected.

The survey of the older authors reveals more than one conception of miracle, and the twentieth century has generated more. Theologians have particularly wished to reject Hume's conception and have proposed alternatives. The next two chapters explore their contentions and attempt a sufficiently full understanding of the implications, largely desirable, of employing Hume's conception.

Hume's own theories are then criticised, largely adversely. In the course of that critique, accusations of question-begging abound, and some important ones are well justified. Higher critics may infer from the fact that 'begging a question' is never, in this book, employed to mean raising a question, or leaving unanswered some question that has arisen, that these chapters were drafted some time ago, or by a decently educated person. Certainly, here, begging the question is the fallacy *petitio principii*.

One principal outcome is in effect a defence of Locke and of Pannenberg. However, the book is not otiose because it endorses the conclusions of these two distinguished thinkers. Their conclusions, as they appear before us in their own writings and those of their commentators are undermined by the Humean attack. So long as it remains unanswered, the standpoints of Locke and Pannenberg conspicuously lack visible means of support. This book aspires to make good the large deficiency, so as to set the views of Locke and Pannenberg up, well-founded.

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The concern here is not historical assessment for its own sake; whatever Locke or Pannenberg or anyone else may have said, the points of greatest import are that miracle stories are not as such incredible, and that they may, properly interpreted as truth-claiming, make a contribution to the advocacy of religious belief.

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CHAPTER I

Augustine on the miraculous

St Augustine thought that, to the discerning, anything in the world of time and space could (for example, by its goodness) tell of God. As for Plato, an inevitably imperfect, geometrical figure such as a triangle could prompt an intellectual awareness of the ideal perfect triangle, and an imperfect human being or a somewhat beautiful scene could lead us up to contemplation of perfect humanity or beauty, so, for many Christians who were influenced by him, everything which is in the spatio-temporal world and accessible to our senses can draw the minds of the wise up to knowledge and love of God, whose thoughts the created world (albeit imperfectly) represents. Accordingly, for those such as Augustine who think in this way, no class of things, or events in which things participate, is marked off from others simply as opening up knowledge of, and love for, God. However, not everybody is wise or discerning.

Augustine distinguishes between the 'proper' or 'usual' order whereby events occur 'naturally', and occurrences which are otherwise and 'miraculously' done. While the wise would recognise the call to seek and know and love God by the ordinary usual course of events, the foolish, who ignore or fail to notice the significance of such events as 'constantly meet our senses', 'may be lifted up to God' by the authority which he openly exerts in miracles. Hence by such unusual events, especially those which meet our needs, people whose souls are clouded in folly by misplaced love are moved by God to

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recognise and love him.¹ None of this would be necessary for the wise man.² Augustine says ‘Whatever appears that is difficult or unusual, that I call a miracle.’³ Further, ‘When . . . things happen in a continuous kind of river of ever-flowing succession, passing by a regular and beaten track, then they are called natural; when, for the admonition of men they are thrust in by an unusual changeableness, then they are called miracles.’⁴ Being didactic, drawing the mind of the onlooker to the mind of God is not a sufficient condition for being miraculous. So Augustine refers, as an example of something which is not a miracle, to the action of the prophet Ahijah who tore his new garment into twelve pieces and gave ten of them to Jeroboam as a sign that God would take the nation from the offending Solomon and give ten of its twelve tribes to Jeroboam (1 Kings, Chapter 11, verses 30 and 31). Such actions ‘cannot cause wonder as being miracles’. To do that they must be ‘more difficult and more unknown’.⁵

Many more pages of Augustine’s writings⁶ describe, and argue for the occurrence of, particular miracles, than are devoted to the theory of the miraculous. It is a matter of importance to him, in particular in his later writing, that specified miracles actually took place. There is no question of its being enough for us to come to see the truth and goodness of what God would be setting before us were he to work such and such miracles, which the perceptive reception of an edifying miracle-story simply as a story might be thought to accomplish. Apparently he thought that, following our false loves,⁷ our heart may well not rise to know God by the hearing of a pointful miracle-story, which (like one of Aesop’s fables) might have

¹ For example, Augustine, *De Cura pro Mortuis Gerenda*, xvi, 20; All references in this chapter are to the text of Augustine in *Patrologiae Latinae*, ed. J. P. Migne, Paris, 1861–1900; the reference system is that used by Migne whereby the Book number is given first as a Roman capital (where there is more than one Book in the work), the chapter number is given as a lower-case Roman numeral, and the paragraph number as an Arabic numeral. ² Augustine, *De Utilitate Credendi*, xvi, 34.

³ *Ibid.* ⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, III, vi, 11. ⁵ *Ibid.* III, x, 20.

⁶ Notably Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, xxii, viii–ix.

⁷ Augustine, *Epistle* cxvii, iii, 10.

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point rather than be a true report. Instead, God must compel us towards himself by the actual working of miracles of which we can come to hear. So Augustine gives many examples of actual miracles of which he claims knowledge.

If we ask further whether awareness of the miraculous is essential for salvation, in Augustine's view, the answer must be in the affirmative in that the Incarnation, by which alone we are saved, is, with Creation, a primary miracle. If we ask whether our personally witnessing a miracle is necessary for our salvation, however, the answer is 'no'; and warnings are issued against our coveting the sensational for ourselves,⁸ and exhortations given to find and know God rather by the sacraments.

A third question suggests itself: do miracles, or reports of miracles, provide unbelievers with a reason for them to come to faith? Although the answer here is 'yes', it can hardly be thought that all the miracles of which Augustine speaks can have this kind of apologetic or compulsive force. When Augustine is talking about the wonders done by Christ and in his name it is often upon the conversion of rebellious wills, forgiveness, the birth of true belief, the overthrow of false devotion that he dwells.⁹ All this belongs rather to the content of faith, to what the newly convinced Christian believer has come to believe, than to his reasons for the new belief. If the enquirer has been lacking reasons for Christian commitment, at least some of *these* miracles are more likely to be part of what it is he needs to be persuaded about than they are to be persuasive reasons in themselves.

Some of these miracles, such as changes of heart, may seem of doubtful argumentative force, because, if they are free choices, it will not be clear either that there can be a usual order of nature for them to differ from, or what the usual order of nature can be. Since, however, Augustine maintains that there is a usual order of nature in which human wills do not of themselves or within that order turn away from lower, corrupting loves, to love of God and good, and that it is not natural for us to repent, repentance and conversion do count as miraculous on Augustine's account. The fact remains that this belief, that such

⁸ Augustine, *De Peccatorum Meritis*, II, xxxii, 52.

⁹ For example, Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, X, xxxii.