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Alfred Russel Wallace

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AN ANSWER
TO THE
ARGUMENTS OF HUME, LECKY, AND OTHERS,
AGAINST MIRACLES.

(A PAPER READ BEFORE THE DIALECTICAL SOCIETY IN 1871.)

It is now generally admitted, that those opinions and beliefs in which men have been educated generation after generation, and which have thus come to form part of their mental nature, are especially liable to be erroneous, because they keep alive and perpetuate the ideas and prejudices of a bygone and less enlightened age. It is therefore in the interest of truth that every doctrine or belief, however well established or sacred they may appear to be, should at certain intervals be challenged to arm themselves with such facts and reasonings as they possess, to meet their opponents in the open field of controversy, and do battle for their right to live. Nor can any exemption be claimed in favour of those beliefs which are the product of modern civilisation, and which have, for several generations, been held unquestioned by the great mass of the educated community; for the prejudice in their favour will be proportionately great, and, as was the case with the doctrines of Aristotle and the dogmas of the schoolmen, they may live on by mere weight of authority and force of habit, long after they have been shown to be opposed alike to fact and to reason. There have been times when popular beliefs were defended by the terrors of the law, and when the sceptic could only attack them

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at the peril of his life. Now, we all admit that truth can take care of itself, and that only error needs protection. But there is another mode of defence which equally implies a claim to certain and absolute truth, and which is therefore equally unworthy and unphilosophical—that of ridicule and misrepresentation of our opponents, or a contemptuous refusal to discuss the question at all. This method is used among us even now; for there is one belief, or rather disbelief, whose advocates claim more than papal infallibility, by refusing to examine the evidence brought against it, and by alleging general arguments which have been in use for two centuries to prove that it cannot be erroneous. The belief to which I allude is, that all alleged miracles are false; that what is commonly understood by the term *supernatural* does not exist, or if it does is incapable of proof by any amount of human testimony; that all the phenomena we can have cognisance of depend on ascertainable physical laws, and that no other intelligent beings than man and the inferior animals can or do act upon our material world. These views have been now held almost unquestioned for many generations; they are inculcated as an essential part of a liberal education; they are popular, and are held to be one of the indications of our intellectual advancement; and they have become so much a part of our mental nature that all facts and arguments brought against them are either ignored as unworthy of serious consideration, or listened to with undisguised contempt. Now this frame of mind is certainly not one favourable to the discovery of truth, and strikingly resembles that by which, in former ages, systems of error have been fostered and maintained. The time has, therefore, come when it must be called upon to justify itself.

This is the more necessary, because the doctrine, whether true or false, actually rests upon a most unsafe and rotten

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foundation; for I propose to show that the best arguments hitherto relied upon to prove it are, one and all, fallacious, and prove nothing of the kind. But a theory or belief may be supported by very bad arguments, and yet be true; while it may be supported by some good arguments, and yet be false. But there never was a true theory which had no good arguments to support it. If, therefore, all the arguments hitherto used against miracles in general can be shown to be bad, it will behove sceptics to discover good ones; and if they cannot do so, the evidence in favour of miracles must be fairly met and judged on its own merits, not ruled out of court as it is now.

It will be perceived, therefore, that my present purpose is to clear the ground for the discussion of the great question of the so-called supernatural. I shall not attempt to bring arguments either for or against the main proposition, but shall confine myself to an examination of the allegations and the reasonings which have been supposed to settle the whole question on general grounds.

One of the most remarkable works of the great Scotch philosopher, David Hume, is *An Inquiry concerning Human Understanding*, and the tenth chapter of this work is *On Miracles*, in which occur the arguments which are so often quoted to show that no evidence can prove a miracle. Hume himself had a very high opinion of this part of his work, for he says at the beginning of the chapter, "I flatter myself that I have discovered an argument which, if just, will with the wise and learned be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently will be useful as long as the world endures; for so long, I presume, will the accounts of miracles and prodigies be found in all history, sacred and profane."

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ANSWER TO HUME, LECKY, AND OTHERS.

DEFINITION OF THE TERM "MIRACLE."

After a few general observations on the nature of evidence and the value of human testimony in different cases, he proceeds to define what he means by a miracle. And here at the very beginning of the subject we find that we have to take objection to Hume's definition of a miracle, which exhibits unfounded assumptions and false premises. He gives two definitions in different parts of his essay. The first is, "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature." The second is, "A miracle is a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent." Now both these definitions are bad or imperfect. The first assumes that we know all the laws of nature; that the particular effect could not be produced by some unknown law of nature overcoming the law we do know; it assumes also, that if an invisible intelligent being held an apple suspended in the air, that act would violate the law of gravity. The second is not precise; it should be "some invisible *intelligent* agent," otherwise the action of galvanism or electricity, when these agents were first discovered, and before they were ascertained to form part of the order of nature, would answer accurately to this definition of a miracle. The words "violation" and "transgression" are both improperly used, and really beg the question by the definition. How does Hume know that any particular miracle is a violation of a law of nature? He assumes this without a shadow of proof, and on these words, as we shall see, rests his whole argument.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary for us to consider what is the true definition of a miracle, or what is commonly meant by that word. A miracle, as distinguished from a new and unheard-of natural phenomenon, supposes an intelligent superhuman agent either visible

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or invisible. It is not necessary that what is done should be beyond the power of man to do. The simplest action, if performed independently of human or visible agency, such as a tea-cup lifted in the air at request as by an invisible hand and without assignable cause, would be universally admitted to be a miracle, as much so as the lifting of a house into the air, the instantaneous healing of a wound, or the instantaneous production of an elaborate drawing. It is true that miracles have been generally held to be, either directly or indirectly, due to the action of the Deity; and some persons will not, perhaps, admit that any event not so caused deserves the name of miracle. But this is to advance an unprovable hypothesis, not to give a definition. It is not possible to prove that any supposed miraculous event is either the direct act of God, or indirectly produced by Him to prove the divine mission of some individual; but it may be possible to prove that it is produced by the action of *some* invisible preterhuman intelligent being. The definition of a miracle, I would propose, is therefore as follows:—"Any act or event necessarily implying the existence and agency of superhuman intelligences," considering the human soul or spirit, if manifested out of the body, as one of these superhuman intelligences. This definition is more complete than that of Hume, and defines more accurately the essence of that which is commonly termed a miracle.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE REALITY OF MIRACLES.

We now have to consider Hume's arguments. The first is as follows:—

"A miracle is a *violation of the laws of nature*; and as a firm and *unalterable experience* has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. Why is it more than probable that all men must die; that lead cannot *of itself remain*

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suspended in the air: that fire consumes wood, and is extinguished by water; unless it be, that these events are found agreeable to the laws of nature, and there is required a *violation of these laws*, or, in other words, a *miracle*, to prevent them? Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happened in the *common* course of nature. 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 been 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*. There must, therefore, be an uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as an *uniform* experience amounts to a *proof*, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior."

This argument is radically fallacious, because if it were sound, no perfectly new fact could ever be proved, since the first and each succeeding witness would be assumed to have universal experience against him. Such a simple fact as the existence of flying fish could never be proved, if Hume's argument is a good one; for the first man who saw and described one, would have the universal experience against him that fish do not fly, or make any approach to flying, and his evidence being rejected, the same argument would apply to the second, and to every subsequent witness; and thus no man at the present day who has not seen a flying fish alive, and actually flying, ought to believe that such things exist.

Again, painless operations in a state produced by mere passes of the hand, were, twenty-five years ago, maintained to be contrary to the laws of nature, contrary to all human experience, and therefore incredible. On Hume's principles they were miracles, and no amount of testimony could ever prove them to be real. Yet these are now admitted to be genuine facts by most physiologists; and they attempt, not

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NO UNIFORM EXPERIENCE AGAINST MIRACLES.

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very successfully, to explain them. But miracles do not, as assumed, stand alone—single facts opposed to uniform experience. Reputed miracles abound in all periods of history; every one has a host of others leading up to it; and every one has strictly analogous facts testified to at the present day. The uniform opposing experience, therefore, on which Hume lays so much stress does not exist. What, for instance, can be a more striking miracle than the levitation or raising of the human body into the air without visible cause, yet this fact has been testified to during a long series of centuries.

A few well-known examples are those of St. Francis d'Assisi, who was often seen by many persons to rise in the air, and the fact is testified to by his secretary, who could only reach his feet. Saint Theresa, a nun in a convent in Spain, was often raised into the air in the sight of all the sisterhood. Lord Orrery and Mr. Valentine Greatrak both informed Dr. Henry More and Mr. Glanvil that at Lord Conway's house at Ragley, in Ireland, a gentleman's butler, in their presence and in broad daylight, rose into the air and floated about the room above their heads. This is related by Glanvil in his *Sadducismus Triumphatus*. A similar fact is related by eye-witnesses of Ignatius de Loyola; and Mr. Madden, in his life of Savonarola, after narrating a similar circumstance of that saint, remarks, that similar phenomena are related in numerous instances, and that the evidence upon which some of the narratives rest, is as reliable as any human testimony can be. Butler, in his *Lives of the Saints*, says that many such facts are related by persons of undoubted veracity, who testify that they themselves were eye-witnesses of them. So we all know that at least fifty persons of high character may be found in London, who will testify that they have seen the same thing happen to Mr. Home. I do not here adduce

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this testimony as proving that the circumstances related really took place; I merely bring it forward now, to show how utterly unfounded is Hume's argument, which rests upon the assumption of universal testimony on the one side, and no testimony on the other.

THE CONTRADICTION NATURE OF HUME'S STATEMENTS.

I now have to show that in Hume's efforts to prove his point, he contradicts himself in a manner so gross and complete, as is, perhaps, not to be found in the works of any other eminent author. The first passage I will quote is as follows:—

“For, first, 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; all which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men.”

A few pages further on, we find this passage:—

“There surely never was a greater number of miracles ascribed to one person than those which were lately said to have been wrought in France upon the tomb of Abbé Paris, the famous Jansenist, with whose sanctity the people were so long deluded. The curing of the sick, giving hearing to the deaf, and sight to the blind, were everywhere talked of as the usual effects of that holy sepulchre. But what is more extraordinary, many of the miracles were *immediately proved upon the spot*, before *judges of unquestioned integrity*, attested by *witnesses of credit and distinction*, in a *learned age*, and on the most *eminent theatre that is now in the world*. Nor is this all. A relation of them was published and dispersed everywhere; nor were the Jesuits, though a learned body, supported by the civil magistrate, and determined enemies to those opinions, in whose favour the

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HUME'S CONTRADICTIONS.

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miracles were said to have been wrought, ever able *distinctly to refute or detect them*. Where shall we find such a number of circumstances, agreeing to the corroboration of one fact? And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute *impossibility*, or *miraculous nature* of the events which they relate? And this, surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation."

In the second passage he affirms the existence of every single fact and quality which in the first passage he declared never existed (as shown by the italicised passages), and he entirely changes his ground of argument by appealing to the inherent impossibility of the fact, and not at all to the insufficiency of the evidence. He even makes this contradiction still more remarkable, by a note which he has himself given to this passage, a portion of which is as follows:—

"This book was writ by Mons. Montgeron, councillor or judge of the parliament of Paris, a man of figure and character, who was also a martyr to the cause, and is now said to be somewhere in a dungeon on account of his book.

"Many of the miracles of Abbé Paris were proved immediately by witnesses before the officiality or bishop's court at Paris, under the eye of Cardinal Noailles; whose character for integrity and capacity was never contested, even by his enemies.

"His successor in the archbishopric was an enemy to the Jansenists, and for that reason promoted to the see by the court. Yet, twenty-two rectors or curés of Paris, with infinite earnestness, press him to examine those miracles, which they assert to be known to the whole world, and indisputably certain; but he wisely forbore. . . .

"All who have been in France about that time have heard of the reputation of Mons. Herault, the lieutenant of police, whose vigilance, penetration, activity, and extensive intelligence, have been much talked of. The magistrate who, by the nature of his office, is almost absolute, was invested with full powers, on purpose to suppress or discredit these miracles; and he frequently seized immediately, and examined the witnesses and subjects to them; *but never could reach anything satisfactory against them.*

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“in the case of Mademoiselle Thibaut he sent the famous De Sylva to examine her; whose evidence is very curious. The physician declares, that it was impossible that she could have been so ill as was proved by witnesses; because it was impossible she could in so short a time have recovered so perfectly as he found her. He reasoned like a man of sense, from natural causes; but the opposite party told him that the whole was a miracle, and that his evidence was the very best proof of it. . . .

“No less a man than the Duc de Chatillon, a duke and peer of France, of the highest rank and family, gives evidence of a miraculous cure performed upon a servant of his, who had lived several years in his house with a visible and palpable infirmity.

“I shall conclude with observing, that no clergy are more celebrated for strictness of life and manners than the regular clergy of France, particularly the rectors or cures of Paris, who bear testimony to these impostures.

“The learning, genius, and probity of the gentlemen, and the austerity of the nuns of Port-Royal, have been much celebrated all over Europe. Yet they all give evidence for a miracle, wrought on the niece of the famous Pascal, whose sanctity of life, as well as extraordinary capacity, is well known. The famous Racine gives an account of this miracle in his famous history of Port-Royal, and fortifies it with all the proofs, which a multitude of nuns, priests, physicians, and men of the world, all of them of undoubted credit, could bestow upon it. Several men of letters, particularly the Bishop of Tournay, thought this miracle so certain, as to employ it in the refutation of Atheists and Freethinkers. The queen-regent of France, who was *extremely prejudiced against the Port-Royal*, sent her own physician to examine the miracle, who returned an absolute convert. In short, the supernatural cure was so incontestable, that it saved for a time that famous monastery from the ruin with which it was threatened by the Jesuits. *Had it been a cheat, it had certainly been detected by such sagacious and powerful antagonists, and must have hastened the ruin of the contrivers.*”

It seems almost incredible that this can have been written by the great sceptic David Hume, and written in the same work in which he has already affirmed that in all history no such evidence is to be found. In order to show how very remarkable is the evidence to which he