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An Answer to the Arguments of Hume, Lecky, and Others, Against Miracles (S174: 1870)

Editor Charles H. Smith's Note: This essay was first read at a meeting of the London Dialectical Society; it was subsequently presented at one of the "Winter Soirées" on 14 November 1870, and printed the following day in Number 15 of Volume 1 of the London magazine The Spiritualist. The version reproduced here was taken from a reprint that appeared in the March 1872 number of The Spiritual Magazine under the title "No Antecedent Impossibility in Miracles. A Reply to Modern Objectors." Original pagination (from The Spiritual Magazine) indicated within double brackets. To link directly to this page, connect with: <http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/wallace/S174.htm>

[[p. 112]] *The Supernatural and Modern Thought*. 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 [[p. 113]] 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 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 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, misrepresentation, 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 cognizance 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 [[p. 114]] foundation. I propose to show you 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 was never 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.

David Hume, and His False Definition of a Miracle. 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."

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 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 [[p. 115]] 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.

The True Definition of a Miracle. Before proceeding any further, it is necessary for us to consider what is the true definition of a miracle, or what is most commonly meant by that word. A miracle, as distinguished from a new and unheard-of natural phenomenon, supposes an intelligent superhuman agent either visible 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. My definition of a miracle therefore is as follows:--"Any act or event 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.

Hume's First Argument a Radical Fallacy. 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 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 [[p. 116]] 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 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. But miracles do not 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. St. 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 Greatorex 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 narrated by eye-witnesses of Ignatius de Loyola, and Mr. Madden, in his *Life of Savonarola*, [[p. 117]] 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.¹ I do not adduce 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 universal testimony on the one side, and no testimony on the other.

Hume Self-Contradictory. 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 magistrates, and determined enemies to those opinions, in whose favour the 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, and he entirely changes his ground of argument by appealing to the inherent impossibility of the fact, and not at [[p. 118]] 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 wrote 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 Kneels; 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 22 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 forebore . . .

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. This 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*.

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 for 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 curés 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 Free-thinkers. 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 incontestible, 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 the evidence is to which he alludes, I think it well to give you one [\[p. 119\]](#) of the cases in greater detail, as recorded in the original work of Montgeron, and quoted in Mr. William Howitt's *History of the Supernatural*:--

Mademoiselle Coirin was afflicted, amongst other ailments, with a cancer in the left breast, for 12 years. The breast was destroyed by it, and came away in a mass; the effluvia from the cancer was horrible, and the whole blood of the system was pronounced infected by it. Every physician pronounced the case utterly incurable, yet, by a visit to the tomb, she was perfectly cured; and what was more astonishing, the breast and nipple were wholly restored, with the skin pure and fresh, and free from any trace or scar. This case was known to the highest people in the realm. When the miracle was denied, Mademoiselle Coirin went to Paris, was examined by the royal physician, and made a formal deposition of her cure before a public notary. Mademoiselle Coirin was daughter of an officer of the royal household, and had two brothers in attendance on the person of the king. The testimonies of the doctors are of the most decisive kind. M. Gaulard, physician to the king, deposed officially, that, "to restore a nipple absolutely destroyed, and separated from the breast, was an actual *creation*, because a nipple is not merely a continuity of the vessels of the breast, but a particular body, which is of a distinct and peculiar organisation." M. Souchay, surgeon to the Prince of Conti, not only *pronounced the cancer incurable, but, having examined the breast after the cure*, went of himself to the public notary, and made a formal deposition, "that the cure was perfect: that each breast had its nipple in its natural form and condition, with the colours and attributes proper to those parts." Such also are the testimonies of Seguier, the surgeon of the hospital at Nanterre; of M. Deshieres, surgeon to the Duchess of Berry; of M. Hequet, one of the most celebrated surgeons in France; and numbers of others, as well as of public officers and parties of the greatest reputation, universally known, all of whose depositions are officially and fully given by Montgeron.

This is only one out of a great number of cases equally marvellous, and equally well attested, and we therefore cannot be surprised at Hume's being obliged to give up the argument of the insufficiency of the evidence for miracles and of the uniform experience against them; the wonder being that he ever put forth an argument which he was himself able to refute so completely.

Another Argument of Hume's a Palpable Fallacy. We now have another argument which Hume brings forward, but which is, if possible, still weaker than the last. He says:--

I may add, as a fourth reason, which diminishes the authority of prodigies, that there is no testimony for any, even those which have not been expressly detected, that is not opposed

by any infinite number of witnesses; so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of the testimony, but the testimony destroys itself. To make this the better understood, let us consider that, in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary: and that it is impossible the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, and Siam, and of China, should, all of them, be established on any solid foundation. Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as is its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. In destroying a rival system it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles on which that system was established; so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts; and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite to each other. According to this method of reasoning, when we believe any miracle of Mahomet or his successors, we have for our warrant the testimony of a few barbarous Arabians. And, on the other hand, we are to regard the authority of Titus, Livius, Plutarch, Tacitus, and in short of all the authors and witnesses, Grecian, Chinese, and Roman Catholic, who have [[p. 120]] related any miracle in their particular region; I say, we are to regard their testimony in the same light as if they had mentioned that Mahometan miracle, and had in express terms contradicted it, with the same certainty as they have for the miracle they relate.

Now this argument, if argument it can be called, rests upon the extraordinary assumption that a miracle, if real, can only come from God, and must therefore support only a true religion. It assumes also that religions cannot be true unless given by God. Mr. Hume assumes, therefore, to know that nothing which we term a miracle can possibly be performed by any of the probably infinite number of intelligent beings who may exist in the universe between ourselves and the Deity. He confounds the evidence for the fact with the theories to account for the fact, and most illogically and unphilosophically argues, that if the theories lead to contradictions, the facts themselves do not exist.

I think, therefore, that I have now shown that-- 1. Hume gives a false definition of miracles, which begs the question of their possibility. 2. He states the fallacy that miracles are isolated facts, to which the entire course of human testimony is opposed. 3. He deliberately and absolutely contradicts himself as to the amount and quality of the testimony in favour of miracles. 4. He propounds the palpable fallacy as to miracles connected with opposing religions destroying each other.

Recent Objections to Miracles. We will now proceed to some of the more modern arguments against miracles. One of the most popular modern objections consists of making a supposition and drawing an inference, which looks like a dilemma, but which is really none at all.

This argument has been put in several forms. One is, "If a man tells me he came from York by the telegraph-wire, I do not believe him. If fifty men tell me they came from York by telegraph wires, I do not believe them. If any number of men tell me the same, I do not believe them. Therefore, Mr. Home did not float in the air, notwithstanding any amount of testimony you may bring to prove it."

Another is, "If a man tells me that he saw the lion on Northumberland House descend into Trafalgar Square and drink water from the fountains, I should not believe him. If fifty men, or any number of men, informed me of the same thing, I should still not believe them."

Hence it is inferred that there are certain things so absurd and so incredible, that no amount of testimony could possibly make a sane man believe them.

Now, these illustrations look like arguments, and at first [\[p. 121\]](#) sight it is not easy to see the proper way to answer them; but the fact is that they are utter fallacies, because their whole force depends upon an assumed proposition which has never been proved, and which I challenge any one to prove. The proposition is, that a large number of independent, honest, sane, and sensible witnesses, *can* testify to a plain matter of fact which never happened at all.

Now, no evidence has ever been adduced to show that this ever has happened or ever could happen. But the assumption is rendered still more monstrous when we consider the circumstances attending such cases as those of the curés at the tomb of the Abbé Paris, and the cases of modern scientific men being converted to a belief in the reality of the phenomena of modern Spiritualism; for we must assume that, being fully warned that the alleged facts are impossible and are therefore delusions, and having the source of the supposed delusion pointed out, and all the prejudices of the age and the whole tone of educated thought being against the reality of such facts, yet numbers of educated men, including physicians and men of science, are convinced of the reality of the facts after the most searching investigation. Yet the assumption that such an amount and quality of independent converging evidence *can* be all false, must be proved to be a fact if the argument is to have the slightest value, otherwise it is merely begging the question. It must be remembered that we have to consider, not absurd beliefs or false inferences, but plain matters of fact; and it cannot be proved, and never has been proved, that any large amount of cumulative evidence of disinterested and sensible men, was ever obtained for an absolute and entire delusion. To put the matter in a simple form, the asserted fact is either possible or not possible. If possible, such evidence as we have been considering would prove it; if not possible, such evidence could not exist. The argument is, therefore, an absolute fallacy, since its fundamental assumption cannot be proved. If it is intended merely to enunciate the proposition, that the more strange and unusual a thing is the more and the better evidence we require for it, that we all admit; but I maintain that human testimony increases in value in such an enormous ratio with each additional independent and honest witness, that no fact ought to be rejected when attested by such a body of evidence as exists for many of the events termed miraculous or supernatural, and which occur now daily among us. The burden of proof lies on those who maintain that such evidence can possibly be fallacious. Let them point out one case in which such cumulative evidence existed, and which yet proved to be false; let them give not supposition, but proof.

[\[p. 122\]](#) Another modern argument is used more especially against the reality of the so-called spiritual phenomena. It is said, "These phenomena are so uncertain, you have no control over them, they follow no law; prove to us that they follow definite laws like all other groups of natural phenomena, and we will believe them." This argument appears to have weight with some persons, and yet it is really an absurdity. The essence of the alleged phenomena (whether they be true or not, is of no importance) is, that they seem to be the result of the action of independent intelligences, and are therefore deemed to be spiritual or superhuman. If they had been found to follow strict law and not independent will, no one would have ever supposed them to be spiritual. The argument therefore, is merely the statement of a foregone conclusion, namely, "As long as your facts go to prove the existence of distinct intelligences, we will not

believe them; demonstrate that they follow fixed law, and not intelligence, and then we will believe them." This argument appears to me to be childish, and yet it is used by some persons who claim to be philosophical.

Scientific Men in Error When They Deny the Facts of Investigators. Another objection which I have heard stated in public, and received with applause, is that it requires immense scientific knowledge to decide on the reality of any uncommon or incredible facts, and that till scientific men investigate and prove them, they are not worthy of credit. Now I venture to say that a greater fallacy than this was never put forth. The subject is a very important one, and the error is a very common one, but the fact is the exact opposite of what is stated; for I assert that whenever the scientific men of any age have denied the facts of investigators on *à priori* grounds, they have *always been wrong*.

It is not necessary to do more than refer to the world-known names of Galileo, Harvey, and Jenner; the great discoveries they made were, as we know, violently opposed by all their scientific contemporaries, to whom they appeared absurd and incredible; but we have equally striking examples much nearer to our own day. When Benjamin Franklin brought the subject of lightning conductors before the Royal Society, he was laughed at as a dreamer, and his paper was not admitted to the *Philosophical Transactions*. When Young put forth his wonderful proofs of the undulatory theory of light, he was equally hooted at as absurd by the popular scientific writers of the day. The *Edinburgh Review* called upon the public to [[p. 123]] put Thomas Gray into a straight jacket for maintaining the practicability of railroads. Sir Humphry Davy laughed at the idea of London ever being lighted with gas. When Stephenson proposed to use locomotives on the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, learned men gave evidence that it was impossible that they could go even twelve miles an hour. Another great scientific authority declared it to be equally impossible for ocean steamers ever to cross the Atlantic. The French Academy of Sciences ridiculed the great astronomer Arago, when he wanted even to discuss the subject of the electric telegraph. Medical men ridiculed the stethoscope when it was first discovered. Painless operations during the mesmeric coma were pronounced impossible, and therefore impostures.

But one of the most striking, because one of the most recent cases of this opposition to, or rather disbelief in facts opposed to the current belief of the day, among men who are generally charged with going too far in the other direction, is that of the doctrine of the "Antiquity of Man." Boué, an experienced French geologist, in 1823, discovered a human skeleton eighty feet deep in the lees or hardened mud of the Rhine. It was sent to the great anatomist Cuvier, who so utterly discredited the fact, that he threw aside this invaluable fossil as worthless, and it was lost. Sir. C. Lyell, from personal investigation on the spot, now believes that the statements of the original observer were quite accurate. So early as 1715, flint weapons were found with the skeleton of an elephant in an excavation in Gray's Inn Lane, in the presence of Mr. Conyers, who placed them in the British Museum, where they remained utterly unnoticed till quite recently. In 1800, Mr. Frere found flint weapons along with the remains of extinct animals at Hoxne, in Suffolk. From 1841 to 1846, the celebrated French geologist, Boucher de Perthes, discovered great quantities of flint weapons in the drift gravels of the North of France, but for many years he could convince none of his fellow scientific men that they were works of art, or worthy of the slightest attention. At length, however, in 1853, he began to

make converts. In 1859-60, some of our own most eminent geologists visited the spot, and fully affirmed the truth of his observations and deductions.

Another branch of the subject was, if possible, still worse treated. In 1825, Mr. McEnery, of Torquay, discovered worked flints along with the remains of extinct animals in the celebrated Kent's Hole Cavern, but his account of his discoveries was simply laughed at. In 1840, one of our first geologists, Mr. Godwin Austin, brought this matter before the Geological Society, and Mr. Vivian, of Torquay, sent in a paper fully [\[\[p. 124\]\]](#) confirming Mr. McEnery's discoveries, but it was thought too improbable to be published. Fourteen years later, the Torquay Natural History Society made further observations, entirely confirming the previous ones, and sent an account of them to the Geological Society of London, but the paper was rejected as too improbable for publication. Now, however, for five years past, the cave has been systematically explored under the superintendence of a Committee of the British Association, and all the previous reports for forty years have been confirmed, and have been shown to be even less wonderful than reality. It may be said that "this was proper scientific caution." Perhaps it was; but at all events, it proves this important fact, that in this, as in every other case, the discoverers have been right, those who rejected their observations have been wrong.

Now, are the modern discoverers of some phenomena usually termed supernatural and incredible, less worthy of attention than these already quoted? Let us take, first, the reality of what is called clairvoyance. The men who have observed this phenomenon, and have carefully tested it through long years or through their whole lives, will rank in scientific knowledge, and in intellectual ability, as quite equal to any observers in any other branch of discovery. We have no less than seven eminent medical men, Drs. Elliotson, Gregory, Ashburner, Lee, Herbert, Mayo, Esdaile, and Haddock, besides persons of such high ability as Miss Martineau, Mr. H. G. Atkinson, Mr. Charles Bray, and Baron Reichenbach. With the history of previous discoverers before us, is it more likely that these eleven educated persons, knowing all the arguments against the facts, and investigating them carefully, should be all wrong, and those who say *à priori* that the thing is impossible should be all right, or the contrary? If we are to learn anything by history and experience, then we may safely prognosticate that, in this case as in so many others, the disbelievers in other men's observations will be found to be in the wrong.

*Fallacies of Mr. Lecky.*² We now come to the modern philosophical objectors, most eminent among whom is Mr. Lecky, author of the *History of Rationalism* and the *History of Morals*. In the latter work he has devoted some space to this question, and his clear and well expressed views may be taken to represent the general opinions and feelings of the educated portion of modern society.

He says:--

The attitude of ordinary educated people towards miracles is not that of doubt, of hesitation, of discontent with the existing evidence, but rather of absolute, derisive, and even unexamining incredulity.

[\[\[p. 125\]\]](#) He then goes on to explain why this is so:--

In certain stages of society, and under the action of certain influences, an accretion of miracles is *invariably formed* around every *prominent person* or *institution*. We can analyse the general causes that *have impelled men towards the miraculous*; we can show that these causes have never failed to produce the effect; and we can trace the gradual alteration of mental conditions *invariably accompanying* the decline of the belief.

When men are *destitute of the critical spirit*, when the notion of *uniform law* is yet *unborn*, and when their imaginations are still incapable of rising to abstract ideas, histories of miracles are always formed and always believed; and they continue to flourish and to multiply until these conditions are altered. Miracles cease when men cease to believe and expect them.

Again:--

We do not say they are impossible, or even that they are not authenticated by as much evidence as many facts we believe. We only say that, *in certain states of society, illusions* of this kind inevitably appear.

Sometimes we can discover the precise natural fact which the superstition has misread, but more frequently we can give only a general explanation, enabling us to assign these legends to their place, as the *normal expression* of a *certain stage* of knowledge or intellectual power; and this explanation is their refutation.

Now, in these statements and arguments of Mr. Lecky, we find some fallacies hardly less striking than those of Hume. His assertion that in certain stages of society an accretion of miracles is invariably formed round every prominent person or institution, appears to me to be absolutely contradicted by certain well-known historical facts.

The Church of Rome has ever been the great theatre of miracles, whether ancient or modern. The most prominent person in the Church of Rome is the Pope; the most prominent institution is the Papacy. We should expect, therefore, if Mr. Lecky's statement be correct, that the Popes would be pre-eminently miracle-workers. But the fact is, that with the exception of one or two very early ones, no miracles whatever are recorded of the great majority of Popes. On the contrary, it has been generally among the very humblest members of the Romish Church, whether clergy or laity, that the power of working miracles has appeared, and which has led to their being canonized as saints.

Again, to take another instance, the most prominent person connected with the Reformed Churches is Luther. He himself believed in miracles. The whole world in his day believed in miracles--and miracles, though generally of a demoniac character, continued rife in all Protestant churches for many generations after his death; yet there has been no accretion of miracles round this remarkable man.

Nearer to our own day we have Irving, at the head of a church of miracle-workers; and Joe Smith, the founder of the miracle-working Mormons; yet there is not the slightest sign of [[p. 126]] any tendency to impute any miracles to either of these men, other than those which the latter individual claimed for himself before his sect was established. These very striking facts seem to me to prove that there must be some basis of truth in nearly every alleged miracle, and that the theory of any growth or accretion round prominent individuals is utterly without evidence to support it. It is one of those convenient general statements which sound very

plausible and very philosophical, but for which no proof whatever is offered.

The Decline of Belief in Miracles. Another of Mr. Lecky's statements is, that there is an alteration of mental conditions invariably accompanying the decline of belief. But this "invariable accompaniment" certainly cannot be proved, because the decline of the belief has only occurred once in the history of the world; and, what is still more remarkable, while the mental conditions which accompanied that one decline have continued in force or have even increased in energy and are much more widely diffused, belief has now for twenty years been growing up again. In the highest states of ancient civilisation, both among the Greeks and Romans, the belief existed in full force, and has been testified to by the highest and most intellectual men of every age. The decline which in the present century has certainly taken place, cannot, therefore, be imputed to any general law, since it is but an exceptional instance.

Again, Mr. Lecky says that the belief in the supernatural only exists "when men are destitute of the critical spirit, and when the notion of uniform law is yet unborn." Mr. Lecky in this matter contradicts himself almost as much as Hume did. One of the greatest advocates for the belief in the supernatural was Glanvil,³ and this is what Mr. Lecky says of Glanvil.

He says that Glanvil "has been surpassed in genius by few of his successors."

The predominating characteristic of Glanvil's mind was an intense scepticism. He has even been termed by a modern critic the first English writer who has thrown scepticism into a definite form; and if we regard this expression as simply implying a profound distrust of human faculties, the judgment can hardly be denied. And certainly it would be difficult to find a work displaying less of credulity and superstition than the treatise on *The Vanity of Dogmatising*, afterwards published as *Scepsis Scientifica*, in which Glanvil expounded his philosophical views . . . The *Sadducismus Triumphatus* is probably the ablest book ever published in defence of the reality of witchcraft. Dr. Henry More, the illustrious Boyle, and the scarcely less eminent Cudworth, warmly supported Glanvil; and no writer comparable to these in ability or influence appeared on the other side; yet the scepticism steadily increased.

Again Mr. Lecky thus speaks of Glanvil:--

It was between the writings of Bacon and Locke that that latitudinarian [[p. 127]] school was formed which was irradiated by the genius of Taylor, *Glanvil*, and Hales, and which became the very centre and seedplot of religious liberty.

These are *the men* and these the *mental conditions* which are favourable to *superstition and delusion!*

The critical spirit and the notion of uniform law are certainly powerful enough in the present day, yet in every country in the civilised world there are now hundreds and thousands of intelligent men who believe, on the testimony of their own senses, in phenomena which Mr. Lecky and others would term miraculous, and therefore incredible. Instead of being, as Mr. Lecky says, an indication of "certain states of society"--"the normal expression of a certain stage of knowledge or intellectual power"--this belief has existed in all states of society, and has accompanied every stage of intellectual power. Socrates, Plutarch, and St. Augustine alike, give personal testimony to supernatural facts; this testimony never ceased through the middle ages; the Early Reformers, Luther and Calvin, throng the ranks of witnesses; all the

philosophers, and all the judges of England, down to Sir Matthew Hale, admitted that the evidence for such facts was irrefutable. Many cases have been rigidly investigated by the police authorities of various countries, and, as we have already seen, the miracles at the tomb of the Abbé Paris, which occurred in the most sceptical period of French history, in the age of Voltaire and the Encyclopædists, were proved by such an array of evidence, and were so open to investigation, that one of the noblemen of that court, convinced of their reality after the closest scrutiny, suffered the martyrdom of imprisonment in the Bastille for insisting upon making them public. And in our own day we have, at the lowest estimate, many millions of believers in modern Spiritualism in all classes of society; so that the belief which Mr. Lecky imputes to a certain stage of intellectual culture only, appears on the contrary to have all the attributes of universality.

Mr. Tylor's Objection That Belief in Miracles is an Example of the Survival of Savage Thought. The philosophical argument has been put in another form by Mr. E. B. Tylor,⁴ in a lecture at the Royal Institution, and in several passages in his other works. He maintains that all Spiritualistic and other beliefs in the supernatural, are examples of the survival of savage thought among civilised people; but he ignores the facts which compel the beliefs. The thoughts of those educated men who know, from the evidence of their own senses, that things called supernatural are true and real facts, [[p. 128]] are as totally distinct from those of savages, as are their thoughts respecting the sun, or thunder, or disease, or any other natural phenomenon. As well might he maintain that the modern belief that the sun is a fiery mass is a survival of savage thought, because some savages believe so too; or that our belief that certain diseases are contagious is a similar survival of the savage idea that a man can convey a disease to his enemy. The question is a question of facts, not of theories or thoughts, and I entirely deny the value or relevance of any general arguments, theories, or analogies, when we have to decide on matters of fact.

Thousands of intelligent men now living know from personal observation that some of the strange phenomena which have been pronounced absurd and impossible by scientific men, are nevertheless true. It is no answer to these, and no explanation of the facts, to tell them that such beliefs only occur when men are destitute of the critical spirit, and when the notion of uniform law is yet unborn; that in certain states of society illusions of this kind inevitably appear, that they are only the normal expression of certain stages of knowledge and of intellectual power, and that they clearly prove the survival of savage modes of thought in the midst of modern civilisation.

Concluding Observations. I believe that I have now shown-- 1. That Hume's arguments against miracles are full of unwarranted assumptions, fallacies, and contradictions; 2. That the modern argument of the telegraph-wire conveyance and drinking stone lion are positively no arguments at all, since they rest on false or assumed premises; 3. That the argument that dependence is to be placed upon men of science and upon them only, is opposed to universal experience and the whole history of science; 4. That the philosophical argument so well put by Mr. Lecky and Mr. Tylor, rests on false or unproved assumption, and is therefore valueless.

In conclusion, I must again emphatically declare that the question I have been discussing is-- in no way whether miracles are true or false, or whether modern Spiritualism rests upon a basis

of fact or of delusion,--but solely, whether the arguments that have hitherto been supposed conclusive against them have any weight or value. If I have shown, as I flatter myself I have done, that the arguments which have been supposed to settle the general question so completely as to render it quite unnecessary to go into particular cases, are all utterly fallacious, then I shall have cleared the ground for the production of [[p. 129]] evidence, and no honest man desirous of arriving at truth will be able to evade an enquiry into the nature and amount of that evidence, by moving the previous question--that miracles are unprovable by any amount of human testimony. It is time that the "derisive and unexamining incredulity" which has hitherto existed should give way to a less dogmatic and more philosophical spirit, or history will again have to record the melancholy spectacle of men, who should have known better, assuming to limit the discovery of new powers and agencies in the universe, and deciding, without investigation, whether other men's observations are true or false.

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Editor's Notes

¹*Daniel Home (1833-1886), Scottish spiritualist medium*

²*William Lecky (1838-1903), Irish historian*

³*Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680), English clergyman and philosopher*

⁴*Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), English anthropologist*

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