

"IN THE BEGINNING..."

by chris gushynski



Consequently, Jesus was banned from further triathlons...

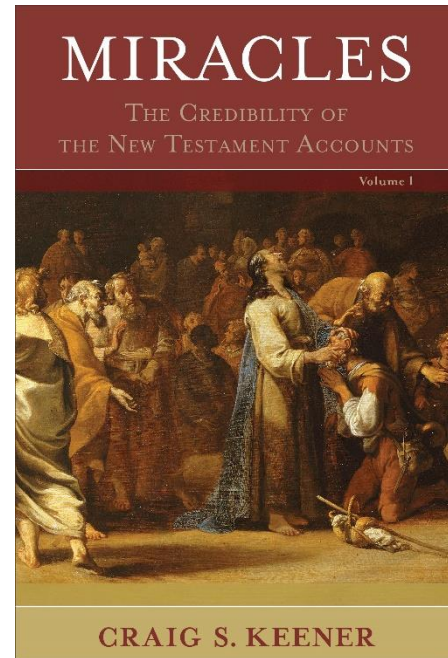
Miracles

Do they happen?

Asset or Liability?

- Are miracles an *asset* for theism, or a *liability*?
- Much Christian evangelism has been supported by miracles (or claims thereof).
- The reliance of Christianity on miracles (especially the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus) brings it into disrepute.
 - Miracles are “superstitious delusion”, and “part of a primitive worldview”.

E.g. New Testament historian Craig Keener has collected accounts of recent miracles in (especially) Asia, Africa and Latin America, that are attested by written eye-witness reports, some of whom he interviewed.



Keener writes, “... it is widely documented that reported miraculous healings have abetted church growth in much of Asia”.

e.g. in Nickerie, Suriname, November 1994

“One hostile visitor, perhaps in his seventies, had been paralyzed on his right side virtually all his life. Because he could not walk, his friends had brought him on a blanket or rug and plopped him down on the ground in front of Norwood. This man was not happy. “Your religion is garbage!” he shouted. “My religion is garbage too! I’ve prayed to Shiva, and to Vishnu, and to my other gods, and nothing happens. Now you want me to pray to Jesus?” As he uttered the name Jesus, his paralyzed arm suddenly shot up into the air. He stared at his own arm, shocked. No one had prayed for him, but when he mentioned Jesus, God healed his paralysis. Norwood reports, “At that instant, he jumped up, grabbed my mike, and began screaming, ‘Look what Jesus did for me!’ as he danced around ...

Account of pastor Douglass Norwood, reported in Craig Keener, *Miracles Today* (2021), p. 32.

Hume's *general* argument against miracles

- “I flatter myself that I have discovered an argument of a like nature 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”
- *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1777), Section 10, “Of Miracles”.

Are miracles a contradiction in terms?

(Like ‘married bachelor’, ‘larger half’, ‘working vacation’)

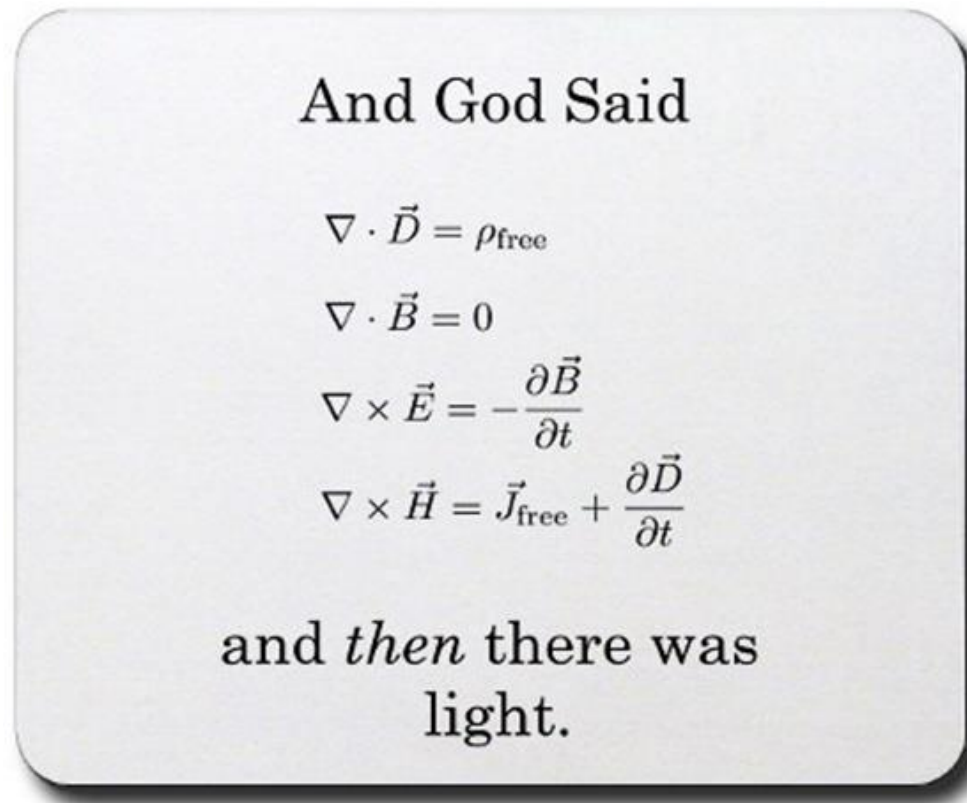
“A miracle is, by definition, a violation of a law of nature, and **a law of nature is, by definition, a regularity**—or the statement of a regularity—about what happens, about the way the world works; consequently, if some event actually occurs, no regularity which its occurrence infringes ... can really be a law of nature; so this event, however unusual or surprising, cannot after all be a miracle.”

(J. L. Mackie, p. 472. N.B. Mackie rejects this ‘regularity’ account of laws.)

Views about natural laws

1. Primitivism (e.g. David Armstrong)
 - Law-like necessity is a basic, or “primitive”, relation that cannot be usefully analysed in terms of anything else.
2. Regularity (e.g. David Hume, David Lewis)
 - “All F are G” is a law if it is a simple regularity. (More precisely, if it is a theorem of all simple-yet-powerful axiomatic theories of physics.)
3. Essentialism (e.g. Brian Ellis)
 - “All F are G” is a law just in case it is a *logical consequence* of some basic and unchanging fact about the world, such as the essence or nature of matter.
 - This one fits best with the possibility of miracles

4. Laws are divine commands?



This view, called *voluntarism*, was proposed in the Middle Ages. But how would it work?

Miracles as supernatural intervention

“ ... we must modify the definition given above of a law of nature. What we want to do is to contrast the order of nature with a possible divine or supernatural intervention. **The laws of nature, we must say, describe the ways in which the world—including, of course, human beings—works when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it.**”

(J. L. Mackie, p. 473)

- This definition appeals to the familiar (Aristotelian) notion of a *forced* or *compulsory* motion, i.e. one that acts from outside the system. (Contrasted with a *natural motion*.)
- The laws of nature describe *natural* motions.
- E.g. Kepler's first law: *Planets move along ellipses, with the sun at one focus.*
 - But not if something hits them!

- So miracles are a coherent concept. But can we also (in principle) have good evidence for them?

Metaphysics vs. epistemology

- This is a 'metaphysical' definition of a miracle, in terms of the actual cause of an event.
- It doesn't say anything about how *we can detect* that a miracle has occurred, or *have evidence* that one has happened.
- How might we *detect* a miracle?

Hume's first argument

- 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.
- (Hume, p. 465)

- Suppose it's a law of nature that people can't walk on (liquid) water.
- Then according to Hume's regularity account of natural laws, out of N attempts to walk on water, people have succeeded 0 times and sunk N times.
 - Therefore the probability that a person walks on water is $0/N = 0$.

- This argument (rather oddly) seems to assume that there haven't been any *reports* of miracles in the past.
- E.g. “... it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life, because that has never been observed in any age or country.”
- On the contrary, there are many such reports. (As e.g. Craig Keener documents.)

IBE?

- We might try to detect miracles by IBE. That is, supernatural forces might provide the *best explanation* of what we have observed. (Since natural explanation is impossible, or almost impossible, in those cases.)
- Possible cases:
 - Healings (e.g. very rapid, or of an incurable disease)
 - Prophecy (accurate prediction of far-future events)
 - Levitation, or other unusual control over nature

Hume's Maxim

- Hume's main argument aims to show that we are *never justified in believing* reports of miracles. This argument relies on the following Maxim:

“that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavors to establish”

Hume's Maxim and IBE

- *Testimony* of a miracle is a fairly rare event, and something that calls for explanation.
- What are the possible explanations of why *this testimony* exists? (And which is *best*?)
 - i. The extraordinary event actually occurred, by supernatural intervention
 - ii. The extraordinary event actually occurred, by natural causes (e.g. spontaneous remission, placebo effect).
 - iii. Deliberate deception, fakery, etc.
 - iv. Psychological bias/disorder of some kind
 - v. Ordinary mistake, etc.

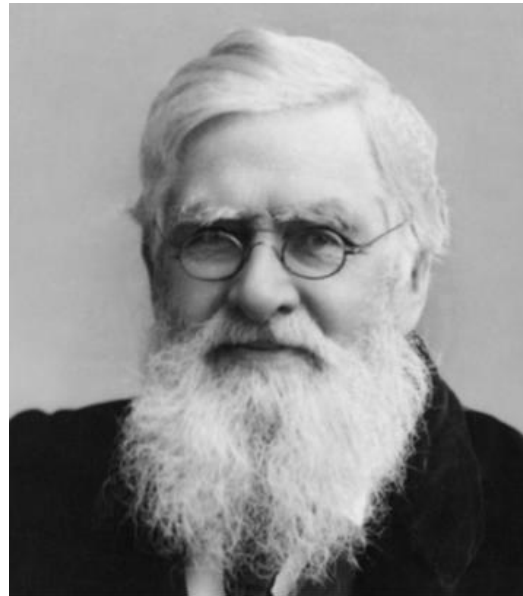
- To evaluate the strength of an explanation, you have to estimate two factors (according to Bayes' theorem):
 - i. The **prior plausibility** of the proposed cause
 - ii. The degree to which that cause **predicts** the evidence
- $\text{Strength} = \text{plausibility} \times \text{degree of prediction}$
- How plausible are miracles, on our background information?
- How plausible are the alternatives?

Hume's Maxim and probability theory

- Attempts have been made to translate the Maxim into probability theory. E.g. (Richard Price, 1772)
- $t(M)$ establishes M iff $P_K(t(M) \mid \neg M) < P_K(M)$
- Price's reading: "Getting testimony of this sort when there is no miracle is even less probable than getting that miracle"
- M – a particular miracle (M) occurred
- $t(M)$ – witnesses *testify* that M occurred
- P_K – the epistemic probability for someone with background knowledge K .

- N.B. Price's statement entails that $P_K(M \mid t(M)) > \frac{1}{2}$
- I.e. the testimony "establishes" the miracle in the weak sense of making it more likely real than fake.
- (Price's proof of this is easily verified. It uses Bayes's theorem, and assumes that $P(t(M) \mid M) \approx 1$, i.e. given than M occurs, observers in the vicinity will very likely testify that M occurs.)

- 19th century biologist A. R. Wallace agrees with something like Hume's maxim:
- "... the more strange and unusual a thing is the more and the better evidence we require for it, that we all admit ..."
- (p. 121)



- In fact, many people said similar things prior to Hume. It's a platitude.
- E.g. A similar principle, often cited by “sceptics” today, is that:

extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence

- This principle is valid in probability theory, to the extent that an improbable hypothesis can only become probable after getting some improbable evidence. (But it can become a fallacy if events you don't want to accept are arbitrarily assigned extremely low probabilities.)

Hume's main argument

1. If a miracle M is reported, it must be something extremely rare, and contrary to our usual experience.
 - (Or it wouldn't be judged a miracle.)
 - I.e., in the absence of supporting evidence, we would be almost certain that M didn't occur. I.e. $P_K(M) \approx 0$.
2. We know that humans are generally unreliable, subject to various biases, deceitful, etc.
3. Hume's Maxim: For a miracle to be established by testimony, getting testimony of this sort when there is no miracle must be even less probable than getting that miracle.

∴ The occurrence of M has not been established

Problem: miracles vs. marvels

It is the business of history to distinguish between the miraculous and the marvelous; to reject the first in all narrations merely profane and human; to doubt the second; and when obliged by unquestionable testimony ... to admit something extraordinary, to receive as little of it as is consistent with the known facts and circumstances. (Hume, *History of England*, p. 128)

Problem: In some cases, even mere “marvels” are in fact things that we have never observed or even heard of.

Wallace on 'marvels'

- “[Hume’s 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.”

A. R. Wallace, p. 116

Miracles vs. 'marvels'

- Is there a relevant difference between claims of miracles (e.g. instantaneous healing) and 'marvels', or novel claims (e.g. flying fish, solid water, etc.)?
- Can Hume rule out miracles, while *not* ruling out scientific progress? (which often requires acceptance of testimony supporting marvels).

Problem: lottery announcements

LOTTO MAX & Extra



Oct 18, 2019

03 21 29 37 40 43 44

Bonus 38



07 11 88 93

Past Results

- What is the *prior probability* that those are the winning numbers?
- 10^{-24} . (Isn't it more likely that there's a mistake?)

Low Prior Probability?

- One possible response to these problems is that the *prior probability* (even apart from experience) is *even lower* for miraculous claims than for marvels and lottery numbers.
 - Miracles, **by their very nature**, are things we can reject *a priori* with a very high degree of certainty.
- (N.B. Hume, being an empiricist, cannot say this. For him, there is no *a priori* knowledge. But let's set that aside for now.)

Hume's supporting claims

1. There's never been a report of a miracle that was attested by a large number of reliable (well educated, unbiased, rational, sane, etc.) witnesses.
2. Believing a miracle story is a source of *pleasure*. This accounts for people accepting such stories.
3. Miracle stories arise chiefly “among ignorant and barbarous nations”.
4. Miracles claimed by contrary religions invalidate each other.
5. ‘Miracles’ used to support religion are *especially* dubious.

1. No well-attested claims of miracle

- 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.
- (Hume, p. 466)

Wallace replies

- “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.”
- (p. 116).

- Hume describes the case of the recovered leg (told by Cardinal de Retz). Despite the many reliable witnesses, the Cardinal himself
- “.. concluded, like a just reasoner, that such an evidence carried falsehood upon the very face of it, and that a miracle, supported by any human testimony, was more properly a subject of derision than of argument”

- The case of the tomb of the (Jansenist) Abbé Paris.

“many of the miracles were immediately proved on the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction ...”

“... what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the **absolute impossibility** or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate?”

Can an empiricist affirm this “absolute impossibility”?
Doesn't it require an *a priori* commitment to naturalism?

E.g.

“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.”

- (Wallace, p. 119)

“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 [levitation] happen to Mr. Home. 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.” (Wallace, p. 117)

“[Hume] 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.” (pp. 117-8)

2. Believing a miracle story is a source of *pleasure*.

... the passion of *surprise* and *wonder*, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events ... (p. 466)

- Does this explain why alleged miracles are *clustered* in certain times and places, such as the tomb of the Abbé Paris? Hysteria?

Religious bias

- “How greedily the miraculous accounts of travellers are received—their descriptions of sea and land monsters, their tales of wonderful adventures, strange men, and crude customs! But when the spirit of religion is joined to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony in these circumstances loses all claims to authority.”
- (Enquiry, Section 10, Part 2)

3. Miracle stories arise chiefly “among ignorant and barbarous nations”.

- It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among **ignorant and barbarous nations**; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors ...
- (p. 467) But aren't there many exceptions to this?

Craig Keener: Half of US doctors claim to have witnessed miracles.

Case Reports

> [Complement Ther Med. 2019 Apr;43:289-294. doi: 10.1016/j.ctim.2019.03.004.](#)

Epub 2019 Mar 9.

Case Report of gastroparesis healing: 16 years of a chronic syndrome resolved after proximal intercessory prayer

Clarissa Romez ¹, David Zaritzky ¹, Joshua W Brown ²

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 30935546 DOI: [10.1016/j.ctim.2019.03.004](#)

[Free article](#)

Abstract

A male infant at two weeks of age was hospitalized vomiting forcefully. He had a pyloromyotomy. He did not improve with medical therapy. The diagnosis of gastroparesis was made after a nuclear

- Keener also accuses Hume of ethnocentrism here.

“In his effort to reduce the pool of witnesses, Hume dismisses all testimony from nonwhite, non-Western witnesses”

4. Miracles claimed by contrary religions invalidate each other.

“... in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary... Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles) ... has ... 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 ...”

(Hume, pp. 469-70)

Keener's responses

1. Non-Christian miracle claims aren't necessarily as well-attested as those made by Christians.
2. "... even if all religions displayed genuine supernatural activity, that would undermine Hume's nonsupernatural approach."
3. "God does not care about or answer the prayers only of Christians. ... My wife's parents grew up in African traditional religions before they became Christians.... When my mother-in-law was a girl, she was crossing a river on a log but slipped and fell into the river. As she was drowning, she felt a hand lift her and set her back on the log. She thought that a mighty spirit had protected her."

Wallace: *naturalism* is an unfounded, dogmatic belief

“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 ... all alleged miracles are false...” (p. 113)

How reliable are witnesses?

“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. ... Yet the assumption ... must be proved to be a fact if the argument is to have the slightest value, otherwise it is merely begging the question.

... 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.”

(Wallace, p. 121)

How reliable is testimony?

- Swinburne:

“Although we do not yet have any exact laws about the reliability of testimony of different kinds, we have considerable empirical information which is not yet precisely formulated. We know that witnesses with axes to grind are less to be relied on than witnesses with no stake in that to which they testify; that primitive people whose upbringing conditions them to expect unusual events are more likely to report the occurrence of unusual events which do not occur than are modern atheists (perhaps too that modern atheists are more likely to deny the occurrence of unusual events which in fact occur in their environment than are primitive people); and so on.” (p. 483)

- N.B. If an unbiased eye witness is wrong in 1% of cases, then 5 independent (and unbiased) witnesses will be wrong in about 1 in 10 billion cases.

“So I conclude that although standards for weighing evidence are not always clear, apparent memory, testimony and traces could sometimes outweigh the evidence of physical impossibility. It is just a question of how much evidence of the former kind we have and how reliable we can show it to have been.”

(Swinburne, p. 483-4)

Perhaps they're *natural* phenomena?

- “Where there is some plausible testimony about the occurrence of what would appear to be a miracle, those who accept this as a miracle have the *double burden* of showing both that the event took place and that it violated the laws of nature. But it will be very hard to sustain this double burden.” (Mackie)
- E.g. perhaps science will one day find that the “power of the mind” over disease is much greater than we presently think?

“Correspondingly, those who deny the occurrence of a miracle have two alternative lines of defense. One is to say that **the event may have occurred, but in accordance with the laws of nature.** Perhaps there were unknown circumstances that made it possible; or perhaps what were thought to be the relevant laws of nature are not strictly laws; there may be as yet unknown kinds of natural causation through which this event might have come about.”

(Mackie)

“...The other is to say that this event would indeed have violated natural law, but that for this very reason there is a very strong presumption against its having happened, which it is most unlikely that any testimony will be able to outweigh.”

Antony Flew – science beats history?

“The justification for giving the “scientific” this ultimate precedence here over the “historical” lies in the nature of the propositions concerned and in the evidence which can be displayed to sustain them the candidate historical proposition will be particular, often singular, and in the past tense.... But just by reason of this very pastness and particularity **it is no longer possible for anyone to examine the subject directly for himself..**, the law of nature will, unlike the candidate historical proposition, be a general nomological. **It can thus** in theory, though obviously not always in practice, **be tested at any time** by any person.”

- (Quoted in Swinburne, p. 481)

Objection

- Evidence for a general law only tells us what *naturally* happens, in the absence of external forces.
- It cannot give evidence that God didn't act at a given time and place, in the past.
- E.g. further experiments to see if humans can walk on water don't provide any evidence that Jesus didn't do this.

Can miracles be used to persuade unbelievers?

“Here one party to the debate is initially at least agnostic, and does not yet concede that there is a supernatural power at all. From this point of view the intrinsic improbability of a genuine miracle, as defined above, is very great, and **one or other of the alternative explanations in our fork will always be much more likely**—that is, either that the alleged event is not miraculous, or that it did not occur, that the testimony is faulty in some way.”

(Mackie, p. 477)

Observation vs. *a priori* commitments

- 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. ... I assert that **whenever the scientific men of any age have denied the facts of investigators on *a priori* grounds, they have *always been wrong*.**
- (Wallace, p. 122)

- Boue, 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.
- In 1825, Mr. McEnery, of Torquay, uncovered 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 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.**