

# Hume on Miracles

# Starting Off

- “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.” (AW 577a)

- “In our reasonings concerning matter of fact there are all imaginable degrees of assurance from the highest certainty to the lowest species of moral evidence.” (AW 577b)
  - Better weather in June than December
- Proof versus Probability
  - “Infallible experience” and “opposite experiments”

# On Testimony

- “There is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life than that which is derived from the testimony of men and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators” (AW 577-578)
- We trust testimony because we usually agree with the testimony itself, not because of an “*a priori*” tendency to find truth in testimony.

# “The Indian Prince”

- Did not believe the first reports of frost and ice because the testimony “arose from a state of nature with which he was unaquainted and which bore so little analogy to those events of which he had constant and uniform experience.” (AW 579a)
- Note: The reports did not go against his experience, but were completely outside of it
  - More on that soon

# What is a Miracle?

- “A miracle may be accurately defined *a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent.*”  
(AW, fn 26, 579)
- So Ice to the Indian Prince, though marvelous, was not miraculous, and therefore believable.

## So...

- Can miracles exist?
  - Short answer for Hume: no
  - “...no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony is of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish.” (AW 579b)
  - This in itself is nearly impossible...

# Continued

- “It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die on a sudden... 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 a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a 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.” (AW 579b)

# We're Not Done Yet...

- “But it is easy to show that we have been a great deal too liberal in our concession and that there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence.” (AW 580a)

- Hume references some miracles that seem to be supported almost universally by testimony:
  - Vespasian
  - Cardinal de Retz
    - When faced with a so-called miracle, Cardinal de Retz 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” (AW 583b)
  - Abbé Paris’s tomb
    - “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 reason” (AW 584b)

- First: No man can present testimony proclaiming a miracle without there being a doubt of his inaccuracy
- Second: It is all too easy to believe something which, in itself, should be nearly, if not completely, unbelievable.
  - Eloquence's power over the general public
- Third: Miracles are more popular among 'barbarous nations'
- Fourth: "There is no testimony for any [miracle]...that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses, so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of testimony, but the testimony destroys itself" (AW 582a)

# Limitations

- “Suppose all authors, in all languages, agree that from the first of January 1600 there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days” (AW 584a)
- Instead of disregarding this, we must look for ways that would allow for this to happen.
  - “No human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any...system of religion” (AW 584b)

# Conclusion

- Man is compelled to find uniformity and continuity around him
  - Miracles are a contradiction of this continuity
- What happened to the “secret powers”?
  - If our understanding of the laws of nature are found to be reversible, and that the ‘powers’ of things can change, then miracles aren’t miracles after all. We must just adjust our understanding of natural laws.