**Hume on the Best Attested Miracles**

# The Acme Argument

The difference between a philosopher and a rhetorician is that a philosopher wants to offer good reasons for the right answer, while the rhetorician is interested in whatever will persuade.[[1]](#footnote-1) This doesn’t imply, however, that the philosopher is guileless and can’t recognize that social circumstances help determine which arguments audiences will find persuasive, nor does it imply that philosophers can’t exploit their opportunities, so long as they believe in the merits of their arguments. This turns out to be a useful framework for handling a slippery argument that Hume offers against the reliability of miracle stories.

His essay on miracles is section ten of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and has two parts. In the first part, he argues that testimony that the laws of nature has been broken needs to meet a very high standard in order to be accepted. In the second part, he gives four arguments that testimony for religious miracles not only does not meet the requisite high standard, but it is unusually unreliable.

The first of these arguments runs as follows:

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 (*EHU* 10.15).

Call this the Acme Argument: there has never been a sufficiently well-attested religious miracle in history. On its own, this paragraph won’t persuade anyone. Anyone who believes in testimony of some religious miracle believes its testimony is attested by sufficient numbers of good witnesses who aren’t trying to deceive anyone.

Not only does the Acme Argument seem unpersuasive on a first reading, but it might seem as if Hume contradicts himself a little later on. In the initial statement of the argument, Hume denies that witnesses of any alleged miracle have ever had all of the following desiderata: 1) “a sufficient number 2) “undoubted integrity” 3) “credit and reputation” 4) “good sense, education, and learning” and 5) living “in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable.” A little later, Hume claims that “a cloud of witnesses” (an allusion to Hebrews 12:1)[[2]](#footnote-2) testify to the healings around the tomb of the Jansenist François de Pâris in the cemetery of Saint-Médard, and “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” (*EHU* 10.27). Hume goes out of his way to say that these attestations meet the five desiderata that he earlier says are never met.

After quoting these texts, the English naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace exclaims, “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.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Richard Swinburne likewise suggests that Hume has forgotten his criteria in his discussion of the miracles around Pâris’s tomb: “the credibility of the witnesses in terms of their number, integrity and education is dismissed, not as inadequate, but as irrelevant.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

These remarks misunderstand the form of Hume’s argument. In his final analysis, he assumes that there weren’t any miracles at Saint-Médard, and he assumes his readers will agree with him.[[5]](#footnote-5) Hume emphasizes as far as he can the number, integrity, and education of the witnesses because he takes it for granted that his readers will deny that anything miraculous happened at the tomb.

The controversy over miracles has become generic, as if the dispute were between naturalism and an ecumenical Christianity, which can make it hard for us to see what Hume is up to in his treatment of the miracles. The Acme Argument only makes sense in the context of eighteenth-century sectarianism. The best attested miracles that Hume has in mind in the first instance are the purported Jansenist miracles around the tomb of François de Pâris in the 1720s and 30s, and he assumes that his Protestant readers reject these stories out of hand. If his readers are willing to grant that the best attested miracle stories are obviously false, they should be willing to grant that there has never been a miracle story that deserves belief.

In 1743, Britain enters the War of the Austrian Succession against France and as an ally of Austria and the Kingdom of Sardinia. In 1745, soon after the town council of Edinburgh decided not to offer Hume a position as Professor of Moral Philosophy, the city is occupied for a month by an insurrectionist army supported by a Catholic foreign power.[[6]](#footnote-6) Under the command of Charles Edward Stuart, theseJacobites attempt to restore a Catholic monarch to the British throne. The reaction against the rebellion of 1745 was the peak of anti-Catholic sentiment in Britain in the eighteenth century.[[7]](#footnote-7) Sermons are preached against popery, priests are imprisoned, and there are anti-Catholic riots across the island.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the 1740s the belief that the Pope was the antichrist flared up again,[[9]](#footnote-9) and inheritors of the Scottish Covenanter tradition treat both Jacobite rebels and England’s Catholic ally Maria Teresa as the antichrist’s servants.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is the context in which Hume publishes his essay on miracles.

Hume’s repetition of criteria for a well attested story in his initial presentation of the argument and in his description of the miracles surrounding the Abbé’s tomb isn’t an accident or a piece of forgetfulness. Without that repetition of language, the argument has no force. If, however, the reader grants that those purported miracles meet all the criteria without conceding that the miracles are genuine, then the argument starts to bite. Those miracles are the best attested that there are, and the attestation still isn’t good enough. So, no miracle is well enough attested to deserve being believed.

# The Form of Hume’s Argument

In his initial presentation of the purported miracles surrounding the tomb of the Abbé Paris, Hume emphasizes that the testimonia in defense of these miracles meet the do well under the five measure that he earlier offers for measuring miracle stories: number, integrity, reputation, learning, and being in a well-known part of the world. In the footnote that he adds in 1750 to develop his discussion of these stories, he is more explicit about the name and number of some of the witnesses: various witnesses before the bishop’s court under the sympathetic eye of Cardinal Noailles, who had a reputation for honesty and ability, twenty two priests who testified before Noailles’s successor, Cardinal Vintimille, a hundred and twenty witnesses testifying in support of the miraculous healing of m. le France, and the Duc de Chatillon testifying that one of his servants recovered from an ailment (*EHU* 10.27n25).

The point of this defense of the strength of the evidence for the miracles of the Saint-Médard cemetery is to defend a premise which is implicit in the initial version of the argument: the miracles around the Abbé’s tomb are better attested than the miracles of the New Testament. Hume begins the footnote with a pretense of sanctimony, pretending to criticize one of his sources of impiety:

There runs . . . through the whole of these a ridiculous comparison between the miracles of our Saviour and those of the Abbé; wherein it is asserted, that the evidence for the latter is equal to that for the former: As if the testimony of men could ever be put in the balance with that of God himself, who conducted the pen of the inspired writers (*EHU* 10.27n25.2).

Hume actually foists this comparison onto the anonymous author, who explicitly rejects it.[[11]](#footnote-11) Writing under the persona of someone who assumes that the works of the Old and New Testaments are written by authors infallibly inspired by God, Hume mocks the idea that merely human reports of miracles in Paris could be of equal quality to that testimony.

Hume then throws off that guise and tells us what he really thinks: “If these writers, indeed, were to be considered merely as human testimony, the French author is very moderate in his comparison, since he might, with some appearance of reason, pretend, that the Jansenist miracles much surpass the other in evidence and authority.” (*EHU* 10.27n25.2). That is to say, if you don’t assume that the authors of the Bible are divinely inspired, and you consider those works as human productions, then the comparison is understated. Our evidence for the Jansenist miracles is much stronger than our evidence for the miracles in the Bible.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Towards the end of the section, Hume argues against the credibility of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible,

a book, presented to us by a barbarous and ignorant people, written in an age when they were still more barbarous, and in all probability long after the facts which it relates, corroborated by no concurring testimony, and resembling those fabulous accounts, which every nation gives of its origin. Upon reading this book, we find it full of prodigies and miracles. It gives an account of a state of the world and of human nature entirely different from the present: Of our fall from that state: Of the age of man, extended to near a thousand years: Of the destruction of the world by a deluge: Of the arbitrary choice of one people, as the favourites of heaven; and that people the countrymen of the author: Of their deliverance from bondage by prodigies the most astonishing imaginable (*EHU* 10.40).

He doesn’t explicitly give an argument against the particular miracle stories in the Gospels, but the criteria that he gives in the Acme Argument suggest the dimensions along which Hume is comparing them to the miracles of Saint Médard. We don’t know the number, integrity, reputation, or education of the witnesses upon who Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John relied. Nor is Judea like Paris in being a celebrated part of the world, in which the detection of the deceit would be difficult.

It’s a premise in the Acme Argument that if you ought not believe in a well attested miracle story then you shouldn’t believe in one that’s less well attested. Hume argues, “a wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence” (*EHU* 10.4). His argument for the claim rests on the variability of the relation between past and future experience (*EHU* 10.3). We might fill in some of the gaps in this argument by looking at his discussion of probability in section 6 of the *Enquiry* and at the reasons that he gives for rejecting Pyrrhonism in section 12. Locke also gives arguments for this proportionality principle in chapters 17, 18, and 19 of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding.* The principle is plausible in its own right in its application to the present example. All other things equal, we shouldn’t believe in a worse attested story rather than a better attested one.

With these premises made explicit, we can present the Acme Argument systematically as follows:

1. Belief should be proportioned to evidence (Proportionality Principle)

2. The evidence for the miracles at Saint-Médard is stronger than the evidence for the Biblical miracles (Hume’s evaluation of the evidence)

So, 3. If you ought not believe in the Jansenist miracles, you ought not believe in Biblical miracles (1, 2)

4. You ought not believe in Jansenist miracles (British Protestant premise)

So, 5. You ought not believe in Biblical miracles (3, 4)

It’s not bad as this sort of argument goes. Notice that in order to avoid the conclusion while granting premises one and four it’s not enough to criticize the epistemic value of accounts of the Jansenist miracles. You also need to show that the evidence for Biblical miracles is stronger than that.

“What Hume does in his analysis of the Jansenist miracles,” according to Francis Beckwith, “is simply to beg the question in favor of naturalism.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Let me stipulate that an argument begs the question if no one in its intended audience is likely to accept its premises unless they already believe the conclusion. In that stipulated sense, Hume isn’t begging that question at issue by presupposing the falsehood of testimony of Jansenists. He isn’t writing for Jansenists. He’s writing for British Protestants in the middle of the eighteenth century. Hume takes a premise that almost all of his readers believe, that the Jansenist miracles aren’t genuine, praises the quality of the witnesses of those miracles to the skies, and infers that there’s never been sufficiently good testimony for a miracle.

His British readership would not have been inclined to believe in Catholic miracle stories in 1739. In 1748, after 8 years of war and rebellion, they were even less inclined to believe them. Given the anti-Catholicism at the time, Hume’s readers will reject Catholic miracle stories with at least as much confidence as Hume himself shows. He isn’t begging the question by assuming the falsity of the Jansenist miracles. He just knows his audience.

# Variations on the Theme

Because his intended readers believe in the cessation of miracles, Hume doesn’t need to find the miracle story that the best attested in all of human history in order for the Acme Argument to be persuasive. All he needs to do is to find a miracle story that his readers are unwilling to believe that is better attested than all the miracles that they are willing to believe. It doesn’t need to be the miraculous healing in the St. Médard cemetary. It just needs to be better attested than Biblical miracles, and a story that his readership is likely to dismiss out of hand.

Four of the miracle stories that Hume describes ought to be read in the context of the Acme Argument, understood as implausible miracles that are better attested than Biblical miracles: first, the healings at the Saint-Médard cemetery which we’ve been describing and which motivates the desiderata used in the statement of the Acme Argument; second, the healings attributed to Vespasian by Tacitus; third, the story of the healing of an amputated limb by the application of holy water reported by Cardinal de Retz, and, finally, the Miracle of the Holy Thorn, reported by various French luminaries, in which Pascal’s niece is cured of a debilitating eye infection. All the examples have the distinctive form of the Acme argument: these miracles are better attested than those of the Bible, and since his readers don’t believe in the better attested miracles, they ought not believe in those that are less well attested.

Hume points to the character of the historian, the character of the eyewitnesses, and the character of the person who purportedly carried out the miracle in defending the quality of attestation of Tacitus’ description of Vespasian’s purportedly miraculous healings of at the temple of Serapis. With respect to the historian, Hume says that Tacitus is a contemporary of the event, that he has a reputation for “candour and vivacity,” that he has a reputation for not believing in religious miracles and, indeed, that he might be “the greatest and most penetrating genius, perhaps, of all antiquity” (*EHU* 10.25). The witnesses of the event who passed the story on to Tacitus had, according to Hume, reputations for judgment and character, and they told their stories after the death of Vespasian and the fall of his dynasty, at a time when there would be no reward for lying (ibid.). Vespasian, according to Hume, was known as seriousness and honesty, and he didn’t pretend to be divine, unlike others in the ancient world (ibid.).

It's easy not to be impressed with the caliber of the purported miracles. Vespasian is said to have cured a person a person with impaired vision with his spittle and fixed a hand with dislocated joints by stepping on it. David Johnson reports on the unimpressive character of the proceedings and writes,

Suppose, then, that a Christian were to say that such evidence of marvelous occurrences pales in comparison to that given in favor of the Resurrection, which latter evidence involves reports, either written by eyewitnesses or earnestly conveyed by them to their acquaintances, of very salient and collectively observed appearances (involving talking, touching, and eating) made by a man who was formerly and uncontroversially *dead.* What historical error, exactly, would the Christian be making? (87)

Johnson is running together the question of the reliability of the report with the question of whether the reported events would be, if true, miraculous. Whether the gospels are presented as reports of eyewitness testimony is an interesting and controverted question.[[14]](#footnote-14) Even if they were, there’s a cleaner and seemingly more reliable testimonial chain from a figure who isn’t trying to prove that he’s divine, through disinterested witnesses, to a historian believed to be reliable on the basis of other writings. Jesus may or may not have thought of himself as divine, but his followers did, and they had a motive to present him as performing miracles. Tacitus’ report is in that respect more reliable, even if the events that he describes are, if true, less likely to be miraculous.

The example of Vespasian’s purported miracles is supposed to show that rational people don’t believe in well attested miraculous events. Anyway, if Johnson is right, as I suppose he is, that Tacitus is accurately reporting the occurrence of a non-miraculous event, then the example doesn’t work. Hume could have picked a more obviously supernatural example from Herodotus or Plutarch, authors whom he cites elsewhere as peddlers of miracle stories (*EHU* 10.28). Most of us are wise enough not to believe in pagan miracle stories. He chose Tacitus as an example for the sake of illustrating the Acme Argument: we don’t believe miracle stories from even the best and most reliable ancient historians.

Still, there may be something useful for Hume’s argumentative purposes in comparing the miracles of Jesus and Vespasian. Jesus is also supposed to have restored sight with his spit (Mark 8: 22-6, John 9: 6-11). One might think that similar cases ought to be treated similarly. Eric Eve observes that Vespasian’s purported healing occur in 70 AD, when the Gospel of Mark is being composed, and argues that the Mark shapes his story in light of the stories circulating about Vespasian.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Hume retells Cardinal de Retz’s report that he was told by all the priests associated with the Saragossa Cathedral that the door keeper had an amputated limb restored by holy water. [[16]](#footnote-16) Here again, Hume emphasizes the impiety of de Retz, so we won’t think that he had a motive to commit a pious fraud. Hume also emphasizes the number of witnesses (all the canons of the church, backed up by the residents of the town), and the impossibility of faking the recovery of a lost limb. De Retz doesn’t actually say that he doesn’t believe the story,[[17]](#footnote-17) but Hume infers his disbelief from his supposed “incredulous and libertine character” (*EHU* 10.26). In this case, as in the other examples we’ve been discussing, Hume assumes that his protestant readers won’t believe the story either, and he wants them to generalize their attitude to other miracles that aren’t as well attested.

The last example that I want to discuss is the curing of Pascal’s niece. Hume doesn’t cite any reason to doubt the miracle in his discussion of the case and he only cites evidence in its favor. He observes that Marguerite Périer’s recovery was witnessed by the residents of Port-Royal Abbey, who had a high reputation for austerity, learning, and honesty. The witnesses included in their number the luminaries Blaise Pascal, Jean Racine, Antoine Arnaud, and Pierre Nicole. Hume also cites the representative of the Queen Regent of France, who came out convinced of the genuineness of the miracle, even though she was an enemy of the Jansenists.

These remarks only make sense as an argument against believing in miracle stories only in the context of the argument schema of the Acme Argument. These miracles are better attested than the miracles of the Bible. These miracles aren’t sufficiently well attested to be believed, so the miracles of the Bible ought not be believed.

Hume makes some sly remarks that reveal his argumentative assumptions:

Our divines, who can build up a formidable castle from such despicable materials; what a prodigious fabric could they have reared from these and many other circumstances, which I have not mentioned! How often would the great names of Pascal, Racine, Arnaud, Nicole, have resounded in our ears? But if they be wise, they had better adopt the miracle, as being more worth, a thousand times, than all the rest of their collection. (*EHU* 10.27n25.12).

‘Our divines’ are theologians of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. The ‘despicable materials’ that constitute “the rest of their collection” are the miracle stories in the Old and New Testament. If Protestants looked for doctrine where they found the best attested miracles, they would begin with the Miracle of the Holy Thorn.

Hume continues: “Besides, it may serve very much to their purpose. For that miracle was really performed by the touch of an authentic holy prickle of the holy thorn, which composed the holy crown, which, &c.” (*EHU* 10.27n25.12). Little Marguerite was supposed to have been healed by the touch from one of the thorns from Jesus’ crown. Since the healing power of the thorn would be proof of the divinity of Jesus, granting the reality of the miracle would justify Christianity. What goes unsaid is that Hume knowns that his advice will be rejected, since contempt for the healing power of relics is one of the hallmarks of both Calvinism and rational Anglicanism. He knows that his compatriots hate Catholicism and its relics more than they fear deism or atheism.

John Earman observes that a frequentist could come up with an estimate of how reliable miracle stories are by going through particular cases and that “Hume’s review of miracle stories in Part 2 can be seen as an attempt to gather such data; but if so, the attempt is crude since not enough information is given to determine whether or not the witnesses were in fact deceived.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Whatever it is that Hume is doing, it isn’t going through these miracles stories and finding peculiar details that undermine their veracity. Instead, all the details *support* belief in the miracle story, and the reasons that Hume gives for rejecting the stories are generic ones familiar from part 1 of the essay and which could apply to every religious story about a miracle.

Hume is not trying to persuade anyone of the falsity of the cult of Serapis. He also thinks that no one who isn’t a follower of the cult would believe that Vespasian did anything supernatural. To the same degree, given the sectarian spirit of the time, he’s not trying to convince his readers of the falsity of Catholicism. Hume isn’t putting any effort into persuading his readers that the four well-attested miracles didn’t happen, because it would be like trying to knock down an open door.

The examples should be read in light of the Acme Argument. The conclusion of that argument is that no miracles are sufficiently well attested to be believed. He supports this conclusion by arguing that there are well attested miracles that he knows his readers will reject out of hand. Hume argues that these miracle stories are affirms by respectable people, put forward in public surroundings, and scrutinized by skeptical investigators not because he has forgotten which side he is on, but rather to show that these miracle stories are well attested, and, indeed, better attested than the miracle stories from the Bible that his readers do in fact believe.

# Hume’s Rational Justification

The explicit reason that Hume gives in all of these examples are considerations of the sort raised in Part I of his essay on miracles. Because the laws of nature are so well confirmed, we should hold miracle stories to a very high standard, and none of these stories meet that standard. We might worry that if those general considerations are ultimately doing the argumentative work, then Hume’s choice of examples is just an appeal to the prejudices of his readers. I think there’s a more sympathetic way of understanding his procedure. Hume thinks that it’s generally difficult to use reason in thinking about religion and his choice of examples are his way of making rational considerations cognitively available to his readers.

Let me go through Hume’s explicit justifications for rejecting these particular miracle stories before returning to the question of whether Hume’s argument is unfair because it’s bigoted against Catholics, Jansenists, or followers of Serapis. The conclusion of the Acme Argument is “there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle” attested by witnesses whose backgrounds “secure us against all delusion” and “of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others.” (*EHU* 10.15). That’s higher than the ordinary standard for accepting testimony. Hume is assuming the argument of part 1 raises the standard that we should require from testimony in order to show a violation of the laws of nature, and the Acme Argument attempts to show that the standard isn’t met in the best attested cases.

As I said, Hume assumes that his readers will reject the authenticity of the miracles surrounding the tome of the Abbe de Paris out of hand. Having evoked that reaction, he asks his readers to diagnose their judgments: “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.” (*EHU* 10.27). Hume knows that his readers will assume such miracles stories are false, and he feeds them a line of reasoning that will justify them in this assumption.

In the footnote in which Hume develops his analysis of the St. Médard miracles, he defends the analysis of Jean-Baptiste Silva, an eminent doctor who investigates the case of Marguerite Thibault, a woman who claims to have been healed at the Abbé’s tomb of edema and paralysis.[[19]](#footnote-19) Silva argues that if she had been paralyzed, we would expect to see more atrophy in her leg.[[20]](#footnote-20) Louis-Basile Carré de Montgeron replies that the only explanation of Thibault’s medical history is supernatural.[[21]](#footnote-21) According to Hume, Silva rightly reasoned

that it was impossible 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 (*EHU* 10.27n24.7).

Silva is Hume’s hero of the story, the person his readers would have identified with. According to him, Thibault can’t have been as sick as recently as witnesses say, since it would break the laws of physiology for her to recover so quickly.

Along the same lines, Hume argues that de Retz was right not to take to story of Zaragoza doorkeeper seriously:

He considered justly, that it was not requisite, in order to reject of fact of this nature, to be able accurately to disprove the testimony, and to trace its falsehood, through all the circumstances of knavery and credulity which produced it. He knew that, as this was commonly altogether impossible at any small distance of time and place; so was it extremely difficult, even where one was immediately present, by reason of the bigotry, ignorance, cunning, and roguery of a great part of mankind. He therefore concluded, like a just reasoner, that such 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 (*EHU* 10.26).

It isn’t worth investigating miracle stories, since the relevant witnesses to such things assert them zealously, uncritically, and without scruples. Religious miracle stories carry evidence of their falsity in their content, and mere testimony isn’t enough to justify them.

As interpreters of Hume, it’s useful to know the reasons Hume gives for denying that various Catholic miracles really happened. The reader may or may not agree with these reasons; I have some doubts myself. When considering versions of the Acme Argument as epistemologists of the past or, more generally, as people trying to orient ourselves in the world, it may be useful to abstract away those particular reasons. The reader probably doesn’t believe that a seventeenth century cathedral doorkeeper healed an amputated limb by rubbing holy water on it. If you don’t, it may be worth asking yourself why you don’t and whether those considerations have more general implications.

The reasons that Hume gives for rejecting the stories are generic ones familiar from part 1 of the essay, and they are that could apply to every religious story about a miracle. Someone might think that it follows that Hume’s choices of examples of miracle stories from part 2 don’t really advance the argument in the essay. All they do is appeal to the prejudices of his readers.

There is a more charitable way to view Hume’s procedure. He doesn’t think that people are always equally susceptible to rational arguments in every context, especially in religious contexts. Hume thinks that it’s easier to make the right rational diagnoses of irrational beliefs in miracles when these miracles belong to another tradition. Once we’ve made those diagnoses, it can be easier to properly analyze our own beliefs. It’s easier to see a mote in someone else’s eye than a beam in one’s own. Beginning with miracle stories that his readers will more readily reject is a way of making rational arguments more accessible. This is the motivating spirit behind the Acme Argument and its corroborating instances.

Hume thinks that religious beliefs usually come from sociological influences and not from one’s individual cognitive faculties. In a defense of James I’s intellect, Hume writes,

If he wrote concerning witches and apparitions; who, in that age, did not admit the reality of these fictitious beings? If he has composed a commentary on the Revelations, and proved the pope to be Antichrist; may not a similar reproach be extended to the famous Napier; and even to Newton, at a time when learning was much more advanced than during the reign of James? From the grossness of its superstitions, we may infer the ignorance of an age; but never should pronounce concerning the folly of an individual, from his admitting popular errors, consecrated by the appearance of religion (*H* 5.155)

Superstitious beliefs in society don’t reflect on the intellect of those who believe those stories. This explains how Newton, “the greatest and rarest genius that ever arose for the ornament and instruction of the species” (*H* 6.542), could believe that the Pope was the antichrist.

Hume thinks that the later days of Protestantism are uniquely suited for rational religion. In “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm” he argues that the first generation of protestant reformers are “more furious and violent” than Catholics, but their successors are “more gentle and moderate” (“Superstition,” 76). According to Hume, the enthusiasm that we see in the founders of Protestant sects is “founded on strong spirits” so “it naturally begets the most extreme resolutions; especially after it rises to that height as to inspire the deluded fanatic with the opinion of divine illuminations, and with a contempt for the common rules of reason, morality, and prudence” (77). The descendants of enthusiastic Protestants don’t share the same high spirits, and, since their predecessors destroyed the institutions and practices that sustained superstitious religion, the next generation relies more on their own natural faculties. As a result, “our sectaries, who were formerly such dangerous bigots, are now become very free reasoners” (78). By way of illustration, “the *quakers* seem to approach nearly the only regular body of *deists* in the universe, the *literati,* or the disciples of Confucius in China” (78). Protestant fervor burns down Catholic institutions, but then this fervor dies down, leaving reason to capture the field.

On Hume’s account, because he and his compatriots are living in a Protestant country after the fervor of reformation and civil war has burnt out, they are in a unique position to properly evaluate miracle stories. Hume’s argument isn’t supposed to appeal to the fanatic who believes that the Pope is the antichrist and Catholic miracles are the work of the devil. Instead, they’re supposed to appeal to the next generation of Protestants who lack the Manichean spirit of their forbears and who think that Catholic miracle stories are only the products of credulity, piety, and the love of wonder. Hume sees a kind of epistemic stepladder on the way to rejecting miracles. We first see that the miracle stories in other traditions are implausible, since the laws of nature are so well confirmed. We then apply that analysis to the miracles in the Bible, which aren’t different in kind.

The way of understanding the Acme Argument echoes an account that Hume gives of how he came up with the central argument in his essay on miracles. In a letter to George Campbell, he writes,

It may perhaps amuse you to learn the first hint, which suggested to me that argument which you have so strenuously attacked. I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits’ College of La Flèche … and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent, … this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but at last he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles;— which observation I thought proper to admit as a sufficient answer (*Letters* 1.361).

Hume invented his argument as a way of disputing a local Catholic miracle. His interlocutor says that the soundness of the argument would show that Biblical miracle stories are false. If the constancy of nature gives us good reason to doubt Catholic miracles, then it gives us good reason to doubt the miracles of the Gospels.[[22]](#footnote-22) Hume, unlike his interlocutor is willing to draw that consequence.

Partly this is just a matter of generalization. Hume and the Jesuit both think that a certain argument, if good, would apply to the miracles in the Bible, and Hume thinks the argument is good. Partly, I think this is a matter of taking intermediate rhetorical and epistemic steps. Hume and Campbell, a fellow Protestant Scot, both can see likely natural explanations behind Catholic miracles stories. Hume thinks that the exercise of finding this kind of explanation behind the stories in rival traditions makes it easier to take the next step.

Though Hume’s particular explanations of why we should reject the various disreputable well-attested miracles depend on his general arguments from Part 1 of the essay, that doesn’t mean that there’s nothing new or interesting in the Acme Argument. The argument schema of the Acme Argument has social, religious, and epistemic significance no matter what you think of the details of the argument of Part 1.

An argument like Hume’s still has force today. Even though most Protestants today don’t believe the Pope is the antichrist, they mostly believe that there are important differences between the branches of Christianity, and they would only reluctantly become Catholics. Generally speaking, members of Protestant denominations don’t believe in the miraculous powers of relics or pilgrimages, the intercession of saints, or in miracle stories surrounding medieval and modern saints. If you aren’t a Catholic, you probably don’t think Catholic miracle stories are true. Some Catholic miracles seem to be better attested than at least some Biblical stories, and reflective Protestants may wonder why they believe in the latter and not the former.

More generally, just about everyone doesn’t believe in some miracles stories. Those who want their beliefs to be rational and coherent may well ask themselves why they don’t believe in the stories. Those who believe in other miracle stories might well ask themselves whether these stories can survive a similar level of scrutiny. Through this back and forth method, we might hope to make epistemic progress.

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2. Pearce, “Hume's Polemic against Tillotson” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Miracles and Modern Spiritualism,* 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Concept of Miracle.* 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Noxon, “Hume’s Concern with Religion,” 76, Burns *Great Debate,* 174, Millican, “Twenty Questions,” 177-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mossner, *Life of David Hume,* 161-2, 177 Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography,* 206-7, 232-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism,* 118 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism,* 131-63 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Raffe, “Presbyterians and Episcopalians,” 586-88 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Colin Kidd, ‘Scots Covenanting Tradition,” 1166-67 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Recueil des Miracles* 6-46. See Campbell, *Dissertation on Miracles* 257-60 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Kreiser, *Miracles, Convulsions, and Politics*, 399; Pearce, “Hume’s Polemic” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *David Hume’s Argument*, 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* and Patterson, “Trust a Gospel?” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “Spit in Your Eye”. See also Riistan, “A Jesus who Spits” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Oeuvres du de Retz*, 4.550 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Wootton, “Hume’s ‘Of Miracles,’ 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Abject Failure,* 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Montgeron, *La vérite des miracles,* 14-22 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Montgeron, *La vérite des miracles,* 199 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Montgeron, *La vérite des miracles,* 200 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Gopnik, “Could Hume Have Known?,” 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)