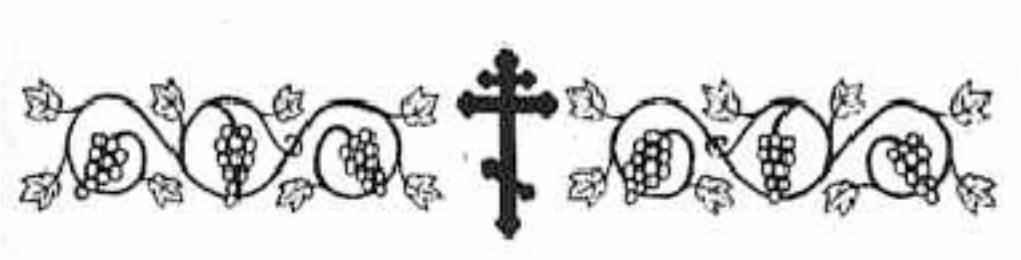

David Hume (1711-1776) and His Attack on Divine Action (Miracles) and Providence: From Empiricism to Skepticism and Naturalism

Prayer Before Studying Theology:

O God, who has prepared for them that love you such good things as pass man's understanding; Pour into our hearts such love toward you, that we, loving you above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

-- Book of Common Prayer, Trinity 6

The Rejection of Miracles and Skepticism about Claims for Divine Action and Revelation in History:

David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ch. 10 "Of Miracles" (=Tom L. Beauchamp [ed.], *David Hume. An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, pp. 44-48,169-186,245-253)

Opening Questions:

What would count as a miracle?

- In other words, how would you know if something was a miracle?
- What criteria would you look for?

Why is the topic of miracles relevant?

- Why should we even bother discussing it?
- Would it really make any difference if there weren't any such things? Why or why not?
- To what extent is Christian belief or practice really dependent upon the notion of miracles?
    - If there were none, would it really alter the basic pattern of Christian belief?
    - Would it really affect the basic way we live our everyday lives?
- Isn't the only miracle that really matters the miracle of love (the miracle that changes us from within)? Aren't all other purported external miracles really just beside the point?

Looking for a Background to the Argument: "I have a dream..."

We all have dreams about what a better world might look like.

- From the very short selection you've read from Hume, can you speculate what (in Hume's view) a better world or existence might look like?
- What are the obstacles that (in Hume's view) have prevented (or work against) the realization of this dream?
- In Hume's view, how would we need to change our beliefs or the way we approach the world in order to pursue this goal or realize this dream?

Hume's Life:

Born in Edinburgh in 1711, he entered college at a young age and became keenly interested in philosophy. Upon leaving college, he resolved to devote himself single-mindedly to philosophy:

> When I was about 18 Years of Age [1729]. there seem'd to be open'd up to me a new Scene of Thought, which transported me beyond Measure, & made me, with an Ardor natural to young men, throw up every other Pleasure or Business to apply entirely to it...I cou'd think of no other way of pushing my Fortune in the World, but that of a Scholar & Philosopher.

By 1737 Hume had produced a manuscript of lengthy, difficult and daring but somewhat uneven work entitled, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which was published in three volumes in 1739-1740 and largely criticized by the limited number of people who read it. This was really a devastating blow and source of ongoing bitterness for Hume.

Hume recognized that his philosophical work would never receive a fair hearing unless one had already developed a reputation for being a man of letters, so he devoted himself to cultivating his literary style and writing clear, elegant essays on questions of the day, which were eventually published as *Essays Moral and Political* (1741-1742).

Having established his literary reputation, Hume returned to systematic philosophical writing and tried to recast his ideas into a more accessible and elegant literary form. His first major publication was *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), from which your reading for this week was taken (it is section 10 of that work). Hume never was able to obtain a teaching position at a university, so spent his life in a variety of senior political and administrative positions.

Introduction: A Brief Outline of the Principal Features of Hume's Philosophy

This is not all strictly necessary to know but may help you to see
(a) why he sets up the argument against miracles in the way he does and
(b) why the argument against miracles eventually fails.

Background: the Enlightenment

- disillusioned with religious conflict (Thirty Years War in Germany and Bohemia 1618-1648--enormous loss of life, displacement of refugees, malnutrition, epidemics, and undermining of the economy and the very fabric of society)
    - consequent distrust of tradition, especially
        - ♣ religious tradition and

        - ♣ claims about revelation
    - criticism and rejection of traditional authorities, especially
        - ♣ religious authorities or
        - ♣ members of the civil government who were inclined to cooperate with the religious authorities in suppressing free thought, religious dissent or scientific enquiry
- hoping to build a better society based on
    - universal reason and
    - the New Science with its
        - ♣ empirical investigation of the universe and
        - ♣ identification of natural laws, allowing for the prediction--and thus possible control-- of natural phenomena
        - ♣ ability to provide an empirical check and counter-balance to speculative reason
- This <u>empiricist</u> approach to
    - the scientific study of the natural world (examining what could be directly observed by the use of the senses) and
    - the identification of predictable regularities in nature (natural laws)

  stood in contrast to the <u>rationalist</u> philosophy that had previously prevailed.
    - The rationalists had felt that sense data alone could only take one so far and that one could only develop a deeper, more systematic understanding of reality if one started by examining the nature of the mind and the fundamental processes of human thought.

The Building Blocks of Empiricism: Impressions and Ideas

<u>Impression</u>: the immediate sense-impression (seeing the cat on the mat)

- (<u>Question</u>: Are the reports of the senses always reliable and an accurate guide to reality? Think of the man crossing the desert who thinks he sees water in the distance, but it is only a mirage.)

<u>Idea</u>: the memory of that sense impression (remembering seeing the cat sitting on the mat).

- Like ancient Stoicism, Hume tends to treat the idea as virtually identical in form to the original sense-impression (i.e. idea/memory is like an impression of the original in wax).
    - (<u>Question</u>: Is it really true that memories are simply copies of the sense-impressions we had at the time of the original event (minus a bit of vividness due to the passage of time)?
        - In other words, are memories always roughly identical with original perception of the event?
        - Can memories be substantially altered by later perspectives (imagination or fantasy) or by the act of rehearsal itself?
- Hume does recognize however that the original impression can include an affective component (a sense of vividness or attendant emotions like elation, depression, fear, anger, agitation, etc.).

- (Question: Are reports of the senses that contain an affective or emotional component always reliable and an accurate guide to reality?)

Processing and Connecting Impressions and Ideas

- The imagination combines ideas according to certain definite patterns to create more complex ideas.
- This previously determined pattern for mechanically associating ideas is "the cement of the universe" (without which all the ideas in our minds would be unassociated and independent) and depends upon connecting ideas according to:
  - resemblance (you think of your one true love when you see a photograph of him/her);
  - contiguity (nearness) in time and place (you see a photograph of the hotel at which you stayed in Cancun and think of the nearby beach);
  - causation (you look at the paper cut on your finger and have a brief recollection of pain. Why? Because a cut causes pain.)

  (Question: How universal are these connections? To what extent is the way these are understood and defined something that changes with time and from culture to culture?)
- Note that this model depends heavily upon the individual's own past or present sense-experience.
  - Beliefs not based on one's own past or present sense-experience are not reliable and should be treated with a certain amount of skepticism
    - ♣ Question: If one adopts this skeptical attitude toward all beliefs not based on one's own past or present sense-experience, can one arrive at a sufficiently comprehensive view of the world to be able to live one's life?
    - ♣ Question: Is our experience of the world too limited and parochial to make this work? Think about the Indian prince on p. 172, §10.10, who justly [!] refused to believe that frost existed.
  - One can never be certain about the future, because the future is not an object of past or present sense-experience. (At best one could make predictions about future events that one regarded as probable in view of past connections that one had made between cause and effect in view of perceived events. See p. 170, §10.3-4.)
    - ♣ To be able to deal with the future, one needs to assume that nature is uniform (in all times and places the same relations of cause and effect obtain between particular objects). It is therefore legitimate to believe that future events will resemble past events and be conformable to them.
    - ♣ Note also that we normally assume there is a necessary connection between a cause and its effect (only one outcome is possible: if I cut my finger, then necessarily pain follows).
      - Hume can't say that there is a necessary connection between two events or two external objects because you can't have sense -experience of the causal connection between two objects.

- According to Hume's view, all you can have is the mind's inference that because
    a) cutting my finger has been regularly followed by feeling pain and
    b) nature is uniform,

  one can reasonably infer that cutting my finger will always result in feeling pain.
  See p. 171, §10.5, lines 1-3; p. 172, §10.8, lines 3-5.
- This leaves Hume with no coherent account of causes. For example:
  Every time I walk across the university campus at noon, I hear my watch chime sound and then immediately afterward I hear the bells in the university bell tower ring. My mind forms an impression of how the two events are related; when my watch chime rings, then invariably the university bells begin to ring. It would be legitimate to conclude based on past experience and belief in the uniformity of nature that
    a) the ringing of my watch chime will always be followed by the ringing of the university bells;
    b) the ringing of my watch chime causes the ringing of the university bells.

  Since this is obviously nonsense, Hume lacks a coherent notion of cause that can distinguish things that are merely contiguous in time and place from things that are causally related.
    - Question: If one can't develop a coherent notion of cause, can one ever develop a scientific view of the world?

Setting Up the Argument against Both Traditional Christian Thought and Deism
Hume's treatment of religion may be thought of as having two parts.

1) The first part of the argument is to question whether divine action is discernible within history; if not, then claims for revelation and miracles should be treated with skepticism.
    a. Insofar as traditional Christian faith depends upon claims about divine action within history (i.e. revelation and miracles), the traditional Christian faith should be treated with skepticism.
    b. If it is questionable whether God acts in history, the most one could really hope to claim about God's action would be that perhaps God acted in originally and ordering the world (i.e. Deism).
2) In the second part of the argument hopes to close off the possibility of this latter possibility--not only is the traditional Christian faith unacceptable, so is the idea that the world has been ordered in a way that reflects a higher purpose or intelligent design.

a. Deism too must go. It can no longer serve as a halfway house where those who have lost faith in traditional Christianity may continue to claim to a nominal Christian identity and some common ground with traditional Christian belief.

I. Miracles: Credible or Not?

Hume's argument depends in part on the narrow way in which he defines natural laws, miracles and credible testimony.

- What are the principal miracles he aims to argue against? (p. 169. §10.1, lines 6-7; p. 184, §10.37, lines 2-6)
- What is the principal form of testimony he aims to argue against? (p. 169, §10.1, line 6; cf. p. 186, §10.40, lines 6-13)

A. Can Testimony Be Credible?

Christianity makes (and depends upon) claims (testimonies) made about past miracles.

- In Hume's view, why is this a less suitable way to arrive at belief (a belief one could build one's life upon), as compared with relying on one's own present-day sense-experience of the world? (p. 169, §10.1, lines 7-12.15-17)
    - Why is testimony often unreliable (p. 171, §10.7)?
    - According to Hume, why should testimony about the marvelous or extraordinary be treated with caution and seen as suspect? (p. 171, §10.8), lines 1-3; pp. 174-175,p. 175, §10.16, lines 9-15; 10.17, lines 5-16, 10.18, p. 176, §10.19, lines 3-17; 10.20; p. 177 §10.22, lines 4-7; pp. 182-183, §10.29-30)

Question: Do you accept this argument? What are its strengths and possible weaknesses?

B. Can Natural Laws Be Violated?

Given that

a) regularities can be observed within nature and
b) since nature is uniform, the regularities observable in one place may reasonably be assumed to exist in any other time or place,

our firm and unalterable experience of the regularities existing in the natural world would seem to exclude at the outset (i.e. on an *a priori* basis) the possibility of these laws being violated and miracles occurring (see p. 173, §10.12; p. 183, §10.35)

Note that, according to this argument, because

a) one has no personal experience of miracles, only of regularities in nature (see p. 176, §10.21, line 2) and
b) nature is uniform,

one can reasonably and legitimately reject at the outset as improbable (i.e. exclude on an *a priori* basis, apart from sense-experience and without further enquiry or investigation) all claims made about miracles (see pp. 174, §10.13-16; ; p. 177, §10.22, lines 8-11; pp. 180-181 §10.27; p. 183, §10.31; p. 184, §10.31, lines 9-10; pp. 184-185, §10.37; p. 185, §10.39, lines 9-10)

This assumes that events that occur on an occasional basis and which do not fit a previously-existing scheme should be viewed as less than credible.
Note how this subverts scientific enquiry by refusing to recognize the existence of any events that do not conform to the existing research paradigm.

- This actually prevents the critical revision of existing hypotheses to take account of new data and hence prevents scientific advance!

Hume tries to justify this by claiming that because

a) we have evidence of pious frauds in the case of miracles and
b) nature is uniform,

one can reasonably and legitimately assume that any claim made for miracles is a pious fraud.

- Question: How is this argument supposed to work?
    - Even if one were to quantify the number of pious frauds as a percentage of the total and make a generalization that more claims for miracles were pious frauds than were not, would this show on an *a priori* basis whether any particular claim about a miracle was a pious fraud?
        - Contrary to Hume, every purported case of miracles should be evaluated on its own merits, without being dismissed because of some prior bias (statistical or otherwise).

C. Miracles Are Claimed among Peoples of All Religions

Hume: If the virtue of miracles is supposed to be

a) that they establish which particular religious system is the true one (p. 178, §10.24, line 11) and yet
b) many different religions claim to show miracles in support of their claims to be the one true religion,

then one should reasonably be skeptical about all such claims (since obviously there can't be more than one true religion and miracles have already been seen to be highly improbable on other grounds)

- Question: Is it true that contradictory claims are mutually destructive?
    - Hume assumes that contrary impressions should lead one to suspend judgment about the matter.
        - This claim about the suspension of judgment (*epochê*) is derived from the skeptical philosophy of Aenesidemus (first century B.C., as known through the writings of Sextus Empiricus (late second to early third century B.C.), which were of great interest to educated, reform-minded readers of the late sixteenth to early eighteenth century.
- Question: Is it true that God only performs miracles for the purpose of indicating the one true religious system?
    - Might God do miracles for other reasons? If so, why?
    - Do you believe that God does act supernaturally in non-Christian environments in ways that tangibly affect non-Christians but are not directly connected with the authentication of religious belief?

II. Hume's Attack upon Divine Providence and Skepticism About Natural Theology and Claims

Natural Evils, Moral Evils and the Rejection of Traditional Christian Theodicies:

David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* §§ X-XI

(J.C.A. Gaskin [ed.] *Principal Writings on Religion*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press 1998, pp. x-xxvi,95-115,207-209)

Having raised skeptical arguments against God acting within history (a belief central to traditional Christianity but denied by Deism), Hume now raises skeptical arguments against God originally ordering the world in accordance with a higher purpose (a belief common to both traditional Christianity and Deism). If this latter point is established, not only traditional Christianity but even Deism ought to be regarded with skepticism.

- This also means that Christians cannot claim that their religion agrees with what would be evident to most people (i.e. that there is a design or purposive order evident within the world, which even the Deist would admit) and then use this point to claim that their religion is a reasonable one, agreeing with the basic beliefs which all rational people would and should accept (the traditional way that Christians had appealed to "natural theology" to support and ground their arguments in favor of revealed religion).

Does the Pervasive Existence of Evil and Disorder Contradict the Claim That the World Is Ordered Toward a Divine Purpose and Reflects the Underlying Moral Character of God

Hume's principal aim here is to ask how one can infer the existence of an all-powerful God with the moral attributes of justice, benevolence and mercy from the morally ambiguous world in which we live, in which many evils exist.

- If one were to turn the question around and deduce from an all-powerful God's attributes of benevolence, justice and mercy what the world logically should look like, that picture would have little relation to the way our world actually looks, showing just how unwarranted the assumption that one can move from looking at the world to saying something about God really is.