

# The Paranormal, Miracles and David Hume

**Terence Penelhum**

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*Is parapsychology a pseudo-science? Many believe that the Eighteenth century philosopher David Hume showed, in effect, that it must be. In this article, Terence Penelhum explains and endorses Hume's arguments concerning testimony of the miraculous, but also explains why he believes there is now evidence of sufficient quality concerning the paranormal to make further investigation scientifically worthwhile.*

Parapsychologists, or psychical researchers, study what seem to be cases of ESP (where people seem to communicate without using the normal means like speech or writing, or to acquire information without using normal means like sense-perception), and PK (where people seem to bring about physical events like double-sixes on dice, without using normal means like touching or pushing or pulling). What makes these interesting is not the information acquired, or the physical changes brought about, which are often dull or trivial, but the very fact that they seem to violate natural regularities. We may feel there is strong evidence that they have happened, but we also feel that our scientific knowledge of the world tells us that they cannot have. Hence the term 'paranormal'. Many who fear the possibility of superstition obstructing the progress of science say that these phenomena are bogus. If they are right, parapsychology is a science without a subject-matter.

One argument that is sometimes brought to bear in the attack on parapsychology is that found in David Hume's essay 'Of Miracles'. As its title shows, this essay is not about paranormal phenomena at all. It was in any case written long before the word 'paranormal' was invented, but many think its argument applies to such phenomena in spite of this, and that it proves that reports of them should always be dismissed. I think the argument does indeed apply to them, but I want to suggest that if we consider carefully what Hume actually says, we can see that it does not have this negative result.

Hume published 'Of Miracles' as Section X of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which appeared in 1748.<sup>1</sup> The essay is his most famous piece of work, though most would agree it is not his best; and there have been many attempts to refute it. In his own words, Hume claims to show that 'no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any [...] system of religion.' He is arguing against those who believed, as many did then, that we can help to show the Christian religion is true by learning from history that its key miracles really happened. He mostly has in mind the miracle-stories of the New Testament, especially the resurrection narratives.

Hume's objective is an anti-religious one, but the arguments he uses are relevant to parapsychology as well. For the events that parapsychologists study seem to run counter to our natural expectations of how the world goes, in the same way miracles would, and we learn about them from the testimony of people who claim to have witnessed them, which is the way we hear about miracles. This is obviously true of what investigators call the spontaneous cases, like

hauntings and prophetic dreams. But it also fits the laboratory experiments such as card-guessing tests, because we learn of these too through the testimony of those who arrange and observe the experiments. So even though most parapsychologists do not have religious purposes in their work, those of us who take parapsychology seriously must respond to Hume's arguments. I think that if we look carefully at what Hume says and do not let ourselves be distracted by incidental remarks that he makes, we shall find that it is quite possible to accept his argument and yet continue with parapsychological researches undeterred, whatever we may feel about his judgement of miracles.

Let us turn, then, to his essay. The key thing to remember about it is that Hume is writing about how we should respond to *testimony* to miracles - about how we should react when we are *told* about one. He says nothing about how we should respond if we think we have observed a miracle ourselves.

The essay is in two parts. The first, and more original, contains a highly general argument about testimony, miracles, and natural law. The second part offers comments on the quality of the testimony to miracles that is actually available to us.

The general argument in the first part goes like this. When told about some event, a wise person, says Hume, will 'proportion his belief to the evidence'. To respond wisely in this way, we have to do two things. On the one hand, we have to consider how likely it is that the sort of event we are hearing about would happen. For this we have to rely on our past experience. Our experience may teach us that events of this kind always happen in these circumstances, or that they only do sometimes, or that they never do. Our experience can change, of course. Hume gives the example of an Indian prince who had never seen water freeze and mistakenly disbelieved stories about ice. When our experience is mixed, and events of the sort we are told about have sometimes been found to happen and sometimes not, we will feel there is only some degree of probability that the event will have happened, and that we cannot be certain one way or the other. What Hume calls 'infallible experience' (experience that has always been of one uniform sort) may yield a 'proof' that events can only have happened in one way.

The second thing we have to do is to consider the quality of testimony that we have to the event. Here too we depend on our experience - our experience of the truthfulness of the person who has told us of the event, of others who say they witnessed it, and so on. On the basis of this experience we may judge the testimony to be reliable, or unreliable, or impeccable. However, these two considerations may not point the same way, and we may find ourselves in a conflict. In particular, we may find ourselves torn between the fact that the testimony we have is of high quality and the fact that the event reported to us is an extraordinary one that is at odds with our past experience. In such circumstances wisdom suggests we suspend judgement, or remain in a state of what Hume calls 'counterpoise'.

But suppose now, Hume continues, that the event we are told about is not merely extraordinary but miraculous. In that case, it will be something that is 'a violation of the laws of nature'. This means that our prior experience is wholly against it. Then the proof against it, says Hume, 'is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined'. But what if the testimony in its favour is impeccable, and amounts, on its side, to 'an entire proof'? Then we have 'proof

against proof', each undermining the other. In such circumstances we cannot accept the testimony but must withhold our verdict. If someone reports a miracle, I can only accept what he tells me if 'the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates'.

Hume does not tell us what conditions would raise the quality of testimony to the level of a proof, although what he says later yields some hints. But it is striking that the argument does leave us with the theoretical possibility that we could have a proof for, and a proof against, the same event, with the negative one deriving from our experience of natural law and the positive one deriving from the quality of the testimony. (Hume is using the word 'proof' in an unusual way here. Normally we only apply the word when the proven statement is true. He seems to be using it to mean something like 'a set of reasons that we find it unreasonable to doubt'; and it seems that we could, at least in theory, find ourselves faced with reasons for, and reasons against, something, both sides seeming quite convincing when taken alone.) Hume obviously does not himself believe that anyone's testimony will ever be good enough to weigh as much as uniform past experience, but his argument requires this to be theoretically possible. If this were to happen the wise response would be to suspend judgement.

This is Hume's first, general argument. In the second part of the essay he tries to show that the actual testimony we have for miracles never comes near to being a proof of the events reported, so that actual miracle testimony must always be rejected. No miracle, Hume says, has ever been attested by enough sensible and educated witnesses without an axe to grind. In fact the very opposite is true: miracle-stories spread because people welcome exciting prodigies, do not have any urge to question them, and love to talk about them. Tales of miracles always come from 'ignorant and barbarous' communities, and the miracle-stories of one religion are in competition with those of other religions. Hume's arguments in this second part are less original than his general argument is, but their role is to show that the theoretical possibility that miracle testimony might be so good that it balances all the uniform evidence in favour of natural law is one that is never realised in practice. They also tell us, by implication, something of what such perfect testimony would be like: it would have to come from disinterested and educated people, it would have to be first-hand and not second or third hand, and it would have to come from a large number of witnesses, not just a few. (These are of course only partial criteria, and Hume makes no attempt to complete them.)

Ever since Hume published this essay, religious thinkers have attacked it. They have attacked his definition of what a miracle is. They have attacked his view that we can only judge the testimony of others by our own experience. And they have attacked his negative estimate of the credentials of the Biblical miracles. I will not enter these controversies, which are still going on. But what does all this have to do with stories of the paranormal? The answer is easy to see. The best-attested phenomena that parapsychologists have investigated have been reported by witnesses of seemingly high quality whom it is hard to convict of fraud or foolishness; yet they seem to run counter to what we think of as natural laws governing such things as communication or learning or action, laws that tell us, we think, that no one can find out what another person thinks unless that person tells them, that no one can learn what is on the hidden side of a card without looking at it, and that no one can bend a spoon without touching it. Although Hume says that a miracle would be something brought about by God, or by some 'invisible agent', what his argument

depends on is the fact that miracles would violate natural law, and, if there are real examples of ESP and PK, they look as though they are violations of natural law too.

So we can ask ourselves whether Hume's case against miracles, if it is a sound one, shows that parapsychology is a pseudo-science whose claims should always be ignored.

I think the answer is no. My reason is this. Once again, his general argument requires us to recognise that there might be situations in which a 'proof' from prior experience collides with a 'proof' from impeccable testimony. I submit that what is only a theoretical possibility in the realm of miracle stories is the actual situation we find when we look at the best parapsychological evidence.

Parapsychological evidence challenges firmly entrenched assumptions. Those who doubt these assumptions may welcome this evidence, and choose to ignore the power of Hume's argument that all the experience that has caused us to make them weighs against the testimony on which the evidence rests. I think this is an irresponsible attitude. But those on the other side who are unwilling to entertain the possibility that there are more things in heaven and earth than our assumptions permit us to believe in, have to stare down the high quality of some of the testimony, and insist it must always be due to error or fraud. I think this looks like foolishness also.

Wise parapsychological investigators are in neither group. They are aware that the best material they study leads at once to the tension of competing proofs. But this tension can be healthy and creative. A rational mind cannot rest content with an unresolved conflict like this, but a rational mind (Hume's wise person) should not move to resolve the conflict too hastily. It is essential in the first place to be sure that the quality of the testimony meets the highest standards possible. It is also necessary to consider very carefully whether the scientific knowledge we already have may perhaps show that even if the phenomena are genuine, they can be accommodated within the laws of nature as we understand them. If they cannot, the pressure to uncover fraud or error in the testimony will grow, and although this pressure is often offensive and due to inertia or bigotry, it is still healthy. One needs courage to go on assembling the evidence in the face of the risk that such accusations may turn out to be well-founded and the discipline's subject-matter may evaporate. But there seems to me to be no alternative but to persevere in assembling and scrutinising the evidence, doing one's best to accept as real only those phenomena that satisfy high testimonial standards, and to live with the unpleasant fact that some of the data one has so painstakingly accumulated will eventually be debunked. To refuse to function in this intellectually demanding way is either to relapse into credulity, or to adopt the sort of attitude that hindered the transition to Copernican astronomy or to evolutionary biology.

Having said this, I must note that there is an important difference between the challenge that is presented by the data of parapsychology, and the observations that influenced Copernicus and Darwin. No one had to take Copernicus' word for it; there were the movements of the planets to observe. No one had to take Darwin's word for it; there were all the fossils in the rocks, not to mention the tortoises and the finches on the Galapagos, and the pigeons. But a recognition of the significance of paranormal phenomena requires an acceptance of testimony. For this reason such recognition can only come very slowly. But if the accumulated testimony is good enough, and

cannot be debunked, it will eventually become clear even to sceptics that past experience is not, after all, uniformly against the reality of telepathy or clairvoyance or psychokinesis, and that some of that testimony embodies records of past instances of just such events. But reaching this decision takes time, and during that time the parapsychologist has to go on living dangerously.

**Note**

1 There are many editions of this work. The best one available is in the Oxford Philosophical texts series, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).