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THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF MIRACLES:  
WHY HUME'S CRITIQUE OF MIRACLES IS SUPERFLUOUS

*Introduction*

The argument from miracle seeks to prove that a religious deity exists on the premise that a miracle occurred, and only a religious deity could have caused it. David Hume's "Of Miracles" has proven to be the most important philosophical discussion of this argument. In his essay, Hume develops a sophisticated case against the reliability of testimony on behalf of a religious miracle.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, there is much debate about what his argument actually is, and whether or not it succeeds in the end.

Perhaps the most fundamental divide among commentators turns on the question: Does Hume's objection to the argument from miracle aim to rule out religious miracles *a priori*, or does his argument make room for the possibility that a miracle might be proved on the basis of testimony? The latter is my preferred reading: Hume aims to argue that religious miracles are provable in principle but virtually impossible to prove in light of the historical unreliability of religious testimony. Perhaps this reading's strongest proponent is Robert Fogelin, whose later work on the topic argues that Hume's critique of miracles is widely misread and misunderstood.<sup>2</sup>

In section 3 of this paper I develop an objection that undermines Hume's argument, based on Fogelin's reading. My claim is that Hume's case against religious miracles is superfluous. It is superfluous because it is impossible to prove a religious miracle on epistemic evidence alone. To show that no miracle can be established so as to be the foundation for a system of religion, it is not necessary to show that testimony on behalf of religious miracles is unreliable, for religious miracles have an ineliminable subjective component that makes them logically impossible to prove epistemically. Epistemic considerations can establish an event and its cause, but not how one ought to react toward either.

My critique of Hume has a bit also on a traditional reading, which asserts that Hume's argument intends to rule out the possibility of religious miracles.<sup>3</sup> Such interpreters typically perceive an aprioristic critique of

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, "Of Miracles," in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. Beauchamp Tom (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 2 of Fogelin's book criticizes misconceptions of Hume's argument in David Johnson's *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* and John Earman's *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*. For a critique of Fogelin's reading of Hume, see Robert A. Larmer, "Interpreting Hume on Miracles," *Religious Studies* 45 (2009), <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0034412509009962>. Larmer defends the traditional reading of Hume's thesis in "Of Miracles."

miracles in Hume's discussion of the clash of proof against proof at the end of part 1. The traditionalist reading holds that miracles are impossible to prove because a full proof of a law of nature always trumps a full proof of a miracle. The objection I defend in section 3 undermines this argument, for a clash of proof against proof erroneously presumes that it is possible for there to be a full proof of a religious miracle. No clash of proof against proof is possible however, if satisfying a subjective condition is essential to the occurrence of a religious miracle. I conclude that a proof of a "Humean religious miracle" is not a proof of a religiously significant event.

This paper will proceed as follows. The first two sections are exegetical. Section 1 presents Hume's two definitions of "miracle," and argues that Hume believed there are two types of miracle, religious and non-religious.

Section 2 argues that Hume's account of religious miracles presupposes a view of (ontic and epistemological) religious significance. Being a non-religious person, it is not surprising that Hume nowhere develops an analysis of religious significance in explicit terms. His silence notwithstanding, a Humean account of religious significance can be reconstructed from what he thinks distinguishes religious and non-religious miracles.

Section 3 develops an objection to Hume's argument, which targets his conception of religious significance. I defend a subjective condition of epistemological religious significance which the Humean account cannot accommodate without undercutting the epistemic significance of religious miracles.

## 1. Humean Religious Miracles

Hume does not present an *a priori* argument against miracles, nor does he provide independent arguments in parts 1 and 2 of his essay. Rather, the arguments of both parts 1 and 2 are *a posteriori* (grounded in experience) and are meant to be read together: they build a cumulative and comprehensive case against miracles. What follows is a crude summary of Hume's argument in parts 1 and 2, as explained by Robert Fogelin.

### 1.1 Hume's argument against religious miracles

Part 1 articulates an epistemic framework of reliable testimony that consists of two tests, the direct and reverse tests.<sup>4</sup> The *direct test* provides criteria for evaluating the quality of the reports and the qualifications of reporters. Hume's criteria applies to all forms of testimony and not just to testimony on behalf of miracles. These criteria include *consistency* (witnesses concur

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<sup>4</sup> These labels are Fogelin's (see *A Defense*, 6-7), not Hume's. Textual support for the direct test: "We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary, with too violent asseverations. There are many other particulars of the same kind, which may diminish or destroy the force of any argument, derived from human testimony" (Hume, "Of Miracles," 171). Textual support for the reverse test: "Suppose, for instance, that the fact, which the testimony endeavours to establish, partakes of the extraordinary and the marvelous; in that case, the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual" (ibid., 171-72).

with one another, rather than contradict one another), *number* (they are many, not few), *character* (they are of unimpeachable, rather than of doubtful, character), and similar conditions. To the extent that reports of a single event meet these criteria, the probability of the reported event increases, perhaps amounting to what Hume calls a "proof." A proof in Hume's sense denotes testimony that is certain—as certain as anything can be, in the light of past experience. "Uniform testimony" is Hume's term for a set of reports of a single event that *flawlessly* pass the direct test, thereby rising to the level of a proof. Rarely are reports of a single event flawless. Nonetheless, an event that is less than uniform can be (highly) probable, for reliable testimony is a matter of degree.

The *reverse test* appraises the intrinsic probability or improbability of an event attested; that is, an event is assigned a probability prior to examining the evidence on its behalf, based on how likely or unlikely it is given past experience. When testimony attests to a common form of experience (such as running into an acquaintance by chance) the prior probability of the event is normal, and the testimony passes the reverse test. However, when a rare event is attested—including extraordinary and marvelous events—the prior improbability of the event can be so high (before considering the evidence) that it supplies support for asserting its non-occurrence. In the limit case, the reverse test yields a proof of the non-occurrence of the event.<sup>5</sup> Fogelin defends the reverse test by arguing that we apply it in our day-to-day lives, not just when evaluating miracle reports. He asks us to suppose President George Bush is said to have been observed tightrope-walking over his swimming pool. Most people's initial reaction would be disbelief. The sheer bizarreness and improbability of such an event's taking place casts immediate doubt on the force of the testimony offered on its behalf.<sup>6</sup> Fogelin argues that a marvelous event can never be disproved by testimony alone, because such events are compatible with past experience, that is, have some basis in it. A disproof on the reverse test can only be achieved when the event attested is a miracle, which Hume defines as a violation of the laws of nature. Because laws of nature are backed by a firm and unalterable experience, a miracle, such as walking on water, runs *contrary* to the whole of experience. Thus, for every putative miracle, the reverse test yields an immediate and automatic proof against its occurrence.

Fogelin argues that Hume's two methods for evaluating testimony set the stage for the possibility of a clash of proof against proof. This occurs when we have a proof that a miracle occurred on the direct test, and a proof that it did not occur on the reverse test. In the clash of proof against proof, we cannot determine *a priori* which proof to reject and which to accept. We must therefore apply the following principle: "If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then,

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<sup>5</sup> Fogelin argues that assigning prior probabilities and improbabilities is partly a contextual matter. Consider a report of someone tight-rope walking. Normally it is unusual to witness this event during a casual walk; however, this is not unusual for someone passing through a tightrope-walking community.

<sup>6</sup> Under normal circumstances, it seems more reasonable to treat the report as a hoax or misinterpretation. To be sure, there may be video footage and other compelling evidence available that undermines our initial reaction (i.e., refutes the event's prior improbability). If such direct evidence of the event is sufficiently uniform, extensive and reliable, it may well refute the reverse test.

and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion."<sup>7</sup> Fogelin clarifies this principle thus: "A proof on a par in strength with its counterproof yields no more than a draw. A direct proof stronger than the reverse counterproof will still be diminished in strength by the counterproof it surpasses. What is needed—to put it metaphorically—is a direct proof that outdistances the reverse counterproof by the full length of a proof."<sup>8</sup> This completes the first part of Hume's case against miracles, and part 1 of his essay.

In part 2, Hume argues that, as a matter of fact, no attested miracle—especially of the religious variety—has passed the direct test. He provides four considerations in support of this claim: (1) first, no testimony in behalf of a miracle has ever been very extensive and uniform; (2) second, humans are psychologically prone to believe marvelous and surprising claims, and this tendency can overpower good sense; (3) third, miracles are observed chiefly among "ignorant and barbarous nations" (in Hume's objectionable terms)—i.e., miracle reports originate in societies that are susceptible to the epistemic vices of gullibility, dogmatism, and uncritical deference to authority; (4) fourth, and finally, miracles often aspire to establish the truth of one religion over all others; in such cases, miracle reports which support one religion are incompatible with miracle reports which support a rival religion, and since only one religion can be uniquely true (and assuming that competing miracle reports are equally compelling) we have good reason to doubt all miracle reports. The rest of part 2 provides a brief assessment of the veracity of some well-known miracle reports; Hume argues that all of them fail the direct test. This concludes part 2 of Hume's essay, and with it, his case against religious miracles.

### 1.2 Hume's two definitions of "miracle"

Accurately reading Hume's "Of Miracles" is important for understanding his conception of religious significance. As we have seen, Hume's case depends upon his definition of "miracle" as a violation of the laws of nature. I call this first definition the *Humean account of miracle*—or *Humean miracle*, for short. In this section, I argue that Hume's case against miracles more accurately depends upon his second definition of "miracle" (a definition buried in a footnote of part 1 of his essay). My premise is that Hume's argument against miracles requires the distinction between religious and non-religious miracles. With this distinction on hand, I will proceed, in section 2, to unpack his account of religious significance.

In a footnote, Hume provides a definition of "miracle," more elaborate than the first: "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.*"<sup>9</sup> The *Humean account of religious miracle*—(*Humean*) *religious miracle*, for short—posits two necessary and sufficient conditions for a religious miracle: (1) a violation of the laws of nature (2) caused by a religious deity or invisible agent (presumably, acting in behalf of a religious deity). One

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<sup>7</sup> Hume, "Of Miracles," 174. Hume reiterates this point in part 2: "When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other, and embrace an opinion, either on one side or the other, with that assurance which arises from the remainder" (ibid., 184).

<sup>8</sup> Fogelin, *A Defense*, 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> Hume, "Of Miracles," 173.

question we may have is whether Hume's second definition is an unpacking of the first definition or whether Hume thinks there are two kinds of miracles (which correspond, respectively, to his two definitions)? I argue for the latter interpretation.

Hume uses the term "religious miracle" only twice in his essay – in both cases, he points out that religious miracles are more improbable (hence, more difficult to prove) than non-religious miracles. For example, in the first passage, Hume argues that humankind has a strong, natural propensity to believe the "extraordinary and the marvelous"; to this he adds that human passions – which incline "the greatest vehemence and assurance" – are stronger in the case of "religious miracles."<sup>10</sup> In the second passage, he makes a similar observation: "As the violations of truth are more common in the testimony concerning religious miracles, than in that concerning any other matter of fact; this must diminish very much the authority of the former testimony, and make us form a general resolution, never to lend any attention to it, with whatever specious pretence it may be covered."<sup>11</sup>

This textual evidence shows that Hume distinguishes religious miracles from marvelous and mundane events. However, it falls short of showing that Hume distinguishes religious miracles from non-religious miracles. Moreover, it might be thought that Hume's second definition adds nothing of substance, since it merely makes explicit what is implicit in his first definition. That is, one might think that the very essence of a Humean miracle entails supernatural agency; hence, that a natural entity cannot be the cause of a violation of the laws of nature. Let us consider this objection more closely.

Philosophically, why should we think, as a purely *a priori* matter, that miracles are and must be effects of supernatural causation? One might attribute this position to Hume based on the premise that to bring about a miracle an agent must act in a way that violates the laws of nature and it is impossible for a natural entity to so act, because it is part of the essence of natural entities that they are governed by the laws of nature. If the behavior of natural entities is limited to possibilities set by the very laws which describe their behavior, then natural entities can never violate them but can only be compelled to behave in ways that are consistent with them. On this argument, a miracle is, analytically, a *supernatural effect* – the product of supernatural causation – and never a *natural effect* – the product of natural causation.

Hume, for one, seems to disagree with the conclusion of this argument, for he explicitly asserts that a violation of the laws of nature might be caused by the "interposition of some invisible agent," and it is unclear that an invisible agent must be a supernatural entity. It might be replied that Hume's references to "religious deities" and "invisible agents" can be plausibly interpreted as references to supernatural agents. However, I find it just as plausible that an invisible agent might be a natural entity. Is a ghost, for example, a supernatural being? In any case, this reading is inconsistent with textual evidence supporting the possibility of non-religious miracles. A *non-religious Humean miracle* is a violation of the laws

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 185.

of nature that has a natural cause; as such, it is naturalistically explicable, at least in principle.<sup>12</sup> In what follows, I provide textual evidence to show that Hume rejects the notion that all miracles are religious miracles.

Upon concluding that religious miracles cannot be established on the basis of testimony, Hume writes: "For I own, that otherwise, there may possibly be miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony; perhaps, it will be impossible to find any such in all the records of history."<sup>13</sup> To illustrate this, he provides a hypothetical example of an eight-day eclipse:

Thus, 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: suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: that all travellers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction: it is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived. The decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature, is an event rendered probable by so many analogies, that any phenomenon, which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform.<sup>14</sup>

The aim of this passage is to stress the difficulty of establishing a religious miracle. For though extensive and uniform testimony might establish the eight-day miracle – which, for Hume, is a non-religious event – no amount of extensive and uniform testimony can establish a religious miracle. If there is any doubt that this is Hume's position, he removes it in the paragraph immediately following the above quotation. After the quoted passage, Hume articulates a hypothetical religious miracle which he says he would immediately reject because he believes that its overt religious significance is a sure sign of a cheat:

But suppose, that all the historians who treat of England, should agree, that, on the first of January 1600, Queen Elizabeth died; that both before and after her death she was seen by her physicians and the whole court, as is usual with persons of her rank; that her successor was acknowledged and proclaimed by the parliament; and that, after being interred a month, she again appeared, resumed the throne, and governed England for three years: I must confess that I should be surprised at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances, but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. I should not doubt of her pretended death, and of those other public circumstances that followed it: I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was, nor possibly

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<sup>12</sup> Hume's account of non-religious miracles is an ontic account. However, it is one that has epistemological ramifications. An event that is naturalistically explicable in principle may be an event that is currently unexplained; it may be an event that is inexplicable given the current state of the evidence. It is naturalistically explicable if a thorough and complete understanding of the relevant facts would yield an explanation in natural terms alone (i.e., if a rational and disinterested agent would provide a naturalistic explanation).

<sup>13</sup> Hume, "Of Miracles," 184.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

could be real. You would in vain object to me the difficulty, and almost impossibility of deceiving the world in an affair of such consequence; the wisdom and solid judgement of that renowned queen; with the little or no advantage which she could reap from so poor an artifice: All this might astonish me; but I would still reply, that the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence, than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature.<sup>15</sup>

Faced with uniform and extensive testimony on behalf of Queen Elizabeth's rising from the dead, Hume says not only that he would reject this claim on grounds that religious testimony is unreliable, but that he would conclude it "neither was, nor possibly could be real." Hume is here speaking hyperbolically, as Fogelin argues; he does not literally mean the Queen Elizabeth miracle is *impossible*. Rather, he means that its prior improbability is so high that, even if the testimony in its behalf is so extensive and uniform as to persuade all historians of England that it occurred, this proof would be *less* probable than that stating the Queen faked her death. Fogelin offers two reasons in support of the hyperbolic reading of Hume's strong anti-religious language.<sup>16</sup> First, the hyperbolic reading is supported by Hume's explanation of his peculiar use of the term "proof" elsewhere in his writings.<sup>17</sup> Second, Fogelin appeals to something like the principle of charity (which requires that whenever a passage is ambiguous, the most plausible interpretation should be attributed to its author). Given this principle, if Hume's strong language against religious miracles can be read in one of two ways—say, either as hyperbolic language or as expressing overt anti-religious bias—we ought to be charitable in ascribing the reading that most strengthens the author's position. The former is the more charitable in the present case, because it renders Hume's strong language against religious miracles consistent with the epistemic framework of testimony he develops in part 1. From a logical point of view, religious miracles *can* be proven; however, for practical purposes, they *cannot* (better: very probably will not) be proven. For there has never been very extensive and uniform testimony on behalf of a religious miracle.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 184-85.

<sup>16</sup> Fogelin describes his two reasons as "levels of scrutiny" for proper textual interpretation (*A Defense*, 17).

<sup>17</sup> Hume's use is not the logician's use. Unlike a demonstration in deductive logic which is infallible in that the conclusion of an argument is true whenever its premises are, a Humean proof is essentially fallible because proofs are always based on past experience and the future might not resemble the past. "A proof, commonly understood," writes Fogelin, "is something that settles a matter—something that makes further investigation unnecessary, perhaps even irrational" (ibid., 16). This understanding is based on the following passage, from Hume: "Mr. LOCKE divides all arguments into demonstrative and probable. In this view, we must say that it is only probable all men must die, or that the sun will rise to-morrow. But to conform our language more to common use, we ought to divide arguments into demonstrations, proofs, and probabilities. By proofs meaning such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition" (Hume, sect 6, n. 10). The fallibility of a Humean proof is evidence that his argument is epistemological rather than ontological: it measures rationality, *based on past experience*, rather than truth.

<sup>18</sup> Fogelin provides a hypothetical case of a religious miracle that he thinks Hume's method requires him to accept: "To alter Hume's own example, suppose that for

Hume's view that religious miracles are virtually impossible to prove on testimony explains why he calls his second definition of "miracle" more accurate than his first definition. It is more "accurate" in that it is the definition religious apologists tacitly presuppose when they argue that the occurrence of a miracle provides a just foundation for a system of religion. That is, condition (2) of the second definition specifies a necessary condition of *religious* miracles. Though Hume is skeptical of all arguments from miracles, the textual evidence suggests that religious miracles are his primary target. Perhaps the most telling passage to this effect is his thesis statement, which he repeats twice (in almost identical phrasing): "I beg the limitations here made may be remarked, when I say, that a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion."<sup>19</sup>

We have seen that Hume's second definition—his account of religious miracles—is not a mere unpacking of his first definition. Hume seems thus wedded to the possibility of two types of miracle: non-religious miracles (per his first definition) and religious miracles (per his second definition). Succinctly put, *not all miracles are religious miracles*. Were he committed to the view that all miracles are religious miracles, he would not be able to claim, as he does, that religious miracles have a heftier evidential burden than non-religious miracles.<sup>20</sup> Yet, Hume thinks only miracles that happen to be religious miracles can confirm the truth of religious claims. Indeed, the capacity for a miracle to confirm a religious claim is essential to what Hume means by "religious miracle."

The question I shall now consider is this: If not all miracles are religious miracles, how does Hume differentiate the two? How does he determine that, for two Humean miracles M1 and M2, the former is religiously significant and the latter is not? The nature of the cause of each event will

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eight days all was dark save for an illuminated face that simultaneously appeared throughout the world, speaking in a way intelligible to all, offering many proofs of his or her magnificence, and so on. (The story could be further filled in with universal cures, resurrections, whatever.) We would then have a case that does parallel Hume's example of a natural miracle, and it would surely be a matter of prejudice for him to reject the testimony in behalf of the religious miracle while accepting the testimony in behalf of the natural miracle. Hume's point, however, is that the local, sect-serving testimony that has been offered in behalf of religious miracles falls hopelessly short of standards of testimony satisfied by Hume's imagined case of a natural miracle" (*A Defense*, 29).

<sup>19</sup> Hume, "Of Miracles," 184. The evidence against religious miracles, claims Hume, is so overwhelming that only a charlatan or self-deluded individual could believe otherwise: "human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority. A religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality: He may know his narrative to be false, and yet persevere in it, with the best intentions in the world, for the sake of promoting so holy a cause[...]" (*ibid.*, 175).

<sup>20</sup> The conclusion of my argument is one Fogelin agrees with. Regarding Hume's second definition, Fogelin writes: "[Hume] seems to be making the intervention of a divine (or at least invisible) agent an essential feature of a miracle. Yet elsewhere, indeed, even in this very footnote, Hume uses the notion of a miracle in a wider sense that includes the notion of nonreligious miracles. The discussion in part 2 relies on this contrast between religious and nonreligious miracles. It seems, then, that Hume's intention here cannot be to narrow the notion of a miracle to religious miracles, but only to define one particular kind of miracle—those that are supposed to depend upon divine intervention" (*A Defense*, 14, note 6).

prove to be the crucial factor in settling this question: to establish a religious miracle we must know that a religious deity is responsible for it. Given this position, identifying the cause of the miracle is the most important thing. What criterion does Hume invoke when he infers religious supernatural causation? Hume's own examples can be used to illustrate our concern: What justifies Hume's belief that the Queen Elizabeth miracle is a religious event, but not the eight-day miracle? What makes the former religious and the latter non-religious? The difference in these two cases is the cause of the event, yet we still need to understand how Hume identifies religious causes. It is to this question that I now turn.

## 2. Humean Religious Significance

### 2.1 *Why religious significance matters*

The question of what, for Hume, makes a miracle a religious event is not of mere historical or scholarly significance. For without a criterion of identity of religious miracles, without the ability to identify religious miracles among the class of Humean miracles, it is impossible to know that a religious miracle occurred. This becomes evident as soon as we consider that Hume's case against miracles is not a case against their occurrence, but against knowledge of their occurrence. His is an epistemological argument. The possibility of establishing a miracle *so as to be the foundation for a system of religion* implies not only that there are objective conditions under which it is rational to infer that a miracle occurred, but also that there are objective conditions under which it is rational to infer that a miracle is religiously significant. For suppose we concede the former and deny the latter. Then an individual that objectively proves the occurrence of a miracle M (say, the Queen Elizabeth miracle) would be incapable of objectively proving that M is a religious event; therefore, one will not have established a miracle so as to be the foundation for a system of religion. Without an epistemological account of the conditions under which rational religious belief becomes warranted given belief in a Humean miracle, Hume's argument against religious miracles becomes superfluous. It thus seems that Hume owes us an account of religious significance.

To this end, my aim in this section is to unpack Hume's account of epistemological religious significance. Such an account specifies objective conditions for *knowing* that a Humean miracle is a religious event. To articulate Hume's epistemological account, it will prove necessary to articulate his account of ontic religious significance. The reason for this is that ontic and epistemological religious significance are intertwined on Hume's account. Given Hume's desire to preserve the objectivity of establishing miracles, this is hardly surprising; the premise of his argument requires a link between what is knowable and what is the case.

The philosophical upshot of specifying a set of objective conditions that are necessary and sufficient for Humean epistemological religious significance is that his account occludes a subjective condition of religious significance; that is, it forecloses the possibility that an ascription of religious significance is essential to the religious character of a religious miracle. My argument will proceed by discussing the dialectical role of religious context on Hume's objective account of religious significance. In section 3, I lay out my case for thinking Hume was wrong to think that religious significance is a purely objective matter.

## 2.2 *The relevance of religious context*

Given an analogous comparison of two miracles—a situation in which there is very extensive uniform testimony on behalf of the eight-day miracle and equally extensive uniform testimony on behalf of the Queen Elizabeth miracle—Hume unequivocally states he would accept the former and reject the latter. This initially seems puzzling. For, in both cases, Hume describes a full proof of the event on the direct method of appraising testimony. For this reason, one might conclude that Hume betrays his own anti-religious bias against the Queen Elizabeth miracle. I think this view is mistaken. Hume's rejection of the Queen Elizabeth miracle and his acceptance of the eight-day miracle does not betray an anti-religious bias on his part, for he has principled reasons for rejecting religious testimony (as I've explained in section 1). In particular, he argues that religious testimony is notoriously, historically unreliable. Even here, however, the high prior improbability of a putative miracle does not mean that religious testimony can never succeed—it simply means that to succeed, it must be very, very extensive and uniform, and religious testimony to date has not met such a standard. That said, it is true that Hume rejects the Queen Elizabeth miracle because he takes it to have religious significance. His awareness of the event's religious significance is inferred from the religious context of the event, and assessing a context for religious significance is a purely objective matter, for Hume.

It may be helpful here to note that Hume considers and rejects two iterations of the Queen Elizabeth miracle. In the first iteration, the event is not ascribed religious significance; in the second iteration, it is ascribed religious significance. In the former case, he imagines historians arguing that extensive and uniform testimony on behalf of the miracle ought to lead the objective observer to accept it (our historians avoid ascribing religious significance to the event). In the latter case, Hume imagines people arguing that extensive and uniform testimony on behalf of the miracle provides a just foundation for a new religion. Interestingly, on both iterations, Hume says he would reject the Queen Elizabeth miracle. This requires explanation. Why in the first iteration of the Queen Elizabeth miracle, where it is *not* ascribed religious significance, does Hume emphatically reject it when it is clearly analogous in strength to the eight-day miracle which he accepts?

If the eight-day and Queen Elizabeth miracles are analogous with respect to the quality and extensiveness of the reports, then the difference must lie elsewhere. Hume locates the relevant difference in their prior improbabilities. Puzzlement regarding Hume's differential assessment of the eight-day and Queen Elizabeth miracles is easily dissolved by reference to Hume's reverse method. Recall that the reverse test requires assessment of an event's prior probability or improbability. Hume seems to think that the Queen Elizabeth miracle is more intrinsically improbable than the eight-day miracle because the former event has religious significance, which Hume thinks creates the potential for bias, deception, gullibility, and the like—rendering the reports epistemically unreliable. His reason for suspecting bias, deception, and the like, however, is not his own anti-religious bias; it is past experience and what it suggests about religious testimony. Given that the miracle in question comes with the implication that the Christian religion is true, the rational observer must take account of the fact that, to put it metaphorically, the well of testimony on behalf of this event has likely been poisoned.

Unlike the eight-day miracle, the reporters on the first iteration of the Queen Elizabeth miracle have an interest in lying; apart from that, reporters may be inclined or susceptible to believe the occurrence of the event without critically assessing the evidence. There is more than one psychological reason for this: because of their inclination toward the marvelous, because of their potential desire to see Christianity confirmed, and so on. The religious context of the Queen Elizabeth miracle, in short, creates the potential for biased reporting at both conscious and unconscious levels. Therefore, if past experience of testimony generally (particularly within religious contexts) is any indication of the quality of future reporting of religiously significant miracles (and this is all we have to go on, on the reverse method), the historical unreliability of religious testimony outstrips the uniform and very extensive testimony in behalf of the Queen Elizabeth miracle, rendering it improbable on the final analysis.

Hume's reasoning tacitly draws upon the religious context of the Queen Elizabeth miracle. He tacitly assumes that the religious context confers religious significance to the event and thereby makes an ascription of religious significance rational. Describing this religious context in some detail may be helpful here. Queen Elizabeth was a Protestant Christian. In England at the time of her reign both the political and religious authority of the state were inextricably intertwined as kings and queens were widely held to be divinely appointed by God. For this reason, a rational person with this background knowledge would take the Queen's rising from the dead to be a religious sign, confirmation of the Protestant God's favour upon her as an inspired figure and upon England as a nation that stands upright with God; ipso facto, the miracle would be evidence of God's existence. Because all of this is conveyed from the religious context in connection with the miracle, the religious context alone – no ascription of religious significance required – is sufficient for conferring religious significance. For example, a religious ascription on the part of the historians (on the first iteration) is unnecessary, because an inference of religious significance follows from the event in conjunction with a proper understanding of the relevant background information. (Hume assumes that if a rational person with the relevant background knowledge is able to infer the truth of Christianity from the miraculous rising of Queen Elizabeth, this inference is epistemically justified regardless of whether anyone makes this inference; in this way, the relevant context in which an event occurs ought to be considered in determining the event's prior probability. From this he concludes that a rational and disinterested observer *should* assign a significantly higher prior improbability to the Queen Elizabeth miracle than to the eight-day miracle.)

From this example we can infer a Humean account of religious significance. As we have seen, Hume's inference that the Queen Elizabeth miracle is religiously significant *does not depend on an ascription of religious significance to the event*. An ascription on the part of historians (in the second iteration) is unnecessary, for it is possible to "read" the religious significance right off the event, as I have argued. For example, one needs historical knowledge of the fact that Queen Elizabeth was a Protestant Christian, that the authority of kings and queens was believed to be ordained by God, and other pertinent historical facts. One also needs theological knowledge of what Christianity involves, for example, that the Christian God is a personal agent that desires to guide the course of history, that God reveals himself to his creation through miracles, that God uses miracles to confirm the

authority of individuals acting on his behalf, and so on. Given the relevant background knowledge, the best explanation of Queen Elizabeth's rising from the dead is that the Christian God caused it.

Experience thus teaches an important lesson about the nature of religious testimony, to wit, the latter is generally more unreliable than the former. This lesson translates into a very high prior improbability that a miracle occurred – an improbability that can only be overcome by a direct-method proof so uniform and extensive that it surpasses the reverse-method proof that the miracle did not occur (i.e., the proof that the regularity it opposes is a law of nature), and it must surpass it by the full length of a proof. The Queen Elizabeth miracle, with and without ascribed religious significance, simply does not meet this threshold. We have now shown that Hume presupposes an account of religious significance and that it requires a religious context that informs the assignment of prior improbabilities, on the reverse method. The success of Hume's argument crucially relies on an epistemological condition involving comprehension of said context. This condition is an objective one, on Hume's argument, for it is a matter of fact whether one comprehends the relevant religious context.

### 2.3 *Ontic and epistemological religious significance*

Let us now combine the various elements of Hume's account of *religious significance* in a more formal analysis. It has two major components, which may be presented as ontic and epistemological theses. The *ontic thesis* states that a Humean miracle is religiously significant in virtue of serving a religious purpose or furthering the religious aims of the deity.

This ontic claim is consistent with Hume's observation that a miracle can be religiously significant – can serve a religious purpose – without anybody knowing it.<sup>21</sup> For example, even if there is no witness to the miraculous birth of a child otherwise destined to death, a supernatural agent might have intervened in the natural course of events to preserve its life. Suppose now that the supernatural agent is the God of Christianity, and that God's reason for saving the child is that he knows the child will grow up to be a powerful evangelist and conveyor of the Christian message. Then, though the act of saving the child is unknown to us mere mortals, it is no less a religious miracle.

The ontic thesis is of limited value, for supernatural causation is necessary but not sufficient for religious significance. It is widely appreciated that religious beings act for religious purposes. What is less appreciated is that knowing this religious purpose is crucial for understanding that a religious event occurred. A miracle might be caused by a non-religious supernatural agent. This agent will not act with a religious purpose in mind. Suppose that from time to time some non-religious supernatural agent randomly violates the laws of nature for its own fancy. Here we have a Humean miracle that lacks religious significance. To determine whether a miracle is religious or not, one must know the religious purpose of the miracle.

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<sup>21</sup> "A miracle," says Hume, "may either be discoverable by men or not. This alters not its nature and essence. The raising of a house or ship into the air is a visible miracle. The raising of a feather, when the wind wants ever so little of a force requisite for that purpose, is as real a miracle, though not so sensible with regard to us" ("Of Miracles," 173, note 23).

Hence, the next condition of Humean religious significance is an *epistemological thesis*. A subject S knows that a miracle M has religious significance if and only if (i) S knows that M has a supernatural cause G, in conjunction with knowledge of the religious identity of G. For S to know the religious identity of the cause of M, it must be the case that (i) S knows the religious tradition to which G belongs, including all relevant historical knowledge, such that S understands G's religious role at the moment of acting. To know the religious role of G, however, it must be the case that (iii) S knows the religious purpose of M. Conditions (i)-(iii) can be summed up in this statement: S knows that a miracle has religious significance if and only if S is able to fully understand the event within the context of the relevant religious tradition. An example will help illustrate the account.

Suppose we witness a Humean miracle involving a weeping statue of the Virgin Mary. If the evidence is adequate for this (as we are supposing), then it is plausible to infer that the event was supernaturally caused. Are we justified in inferring the religious identity of the supernatural being? Presumably, we are justified in doing so, at least if we are familiar with the religious tradition of Catholicism. An eyewitness justly infers the Catholic deity's involvement if the following minimal facts are known by her: she must know something about the nature of the God of Catholicism and the Virgin Mary; that Catholicism has an important miracle tradition; the significance of the Virgin Mary within Catholicism; and the importance of veneration of religious statues in Catholicism. Apart from this knowledge, a witness would at best be justified in inferring "generic supernatural causation" – that some action was performed by a supernatural agent the identity of which lacks further specificity. However, given knowledge of the proper religious background and the role of the miracle relative to it, a witness is justified in inferring two things. First, the religious nature of the deity ("specific supernatural causation"): knowledge that a particular religious deity, namely, the Virgin Mary and/or the God of Catholicism, caused the event. Second, the witness is justified in inferring the significance of the deity's action: for example, that (part of) the point of the statue's weeping is to prompt veneration of the Virgin Mary.

Notice that reporters of a Humean (religious) miracle need not understand the event's religious significance for it to be religiously significant. This is the point of distinguishing ontic and epistemological religious significance. A Humean miracle is epistemologically religiously significant if and only if a rational person with the relevant background knowledge would understand it as such. Reporters who attest to the weeping statue, for example, may not know of the Catholic religion, much less the religious significance of the event. But this is immaterial to whether the event is or is not religiously significant. Comprehending a miracle's religious significance is essential only to those who wish to justify religious claims on the premise that a miracle occurred. The salient point for Hume is that anyone who comes to believe in the occurrence of the miracle – whether by witnessing it personally or by inferring its occurrence from the reports of others – must have the religious background knowledge to properly call it a religious event. Without knowledge of the requisite religious context, the miracle amounts to a "failed miracle." To repeat: I do not mean that it fails ontically, of course, for God might perform a miracle that achieves its religious purpose (e.g., resurrecting a dead person for the purpose of bearing witness to the religion) even if those who witness the event (or learn of its occurrence) fail to *see* its religious significance. Rather, the sense in which the miracle fails is psychological, epistemological and evidential.

Those who learn of the event fail to see it as religious; hence, for these individuals, the event does not confirm a religious tradition.

Is Hume's account of religious significance plausible? It seems there is good reason to accept the Humean insight that religious context is essential for religious significance, for this can be motivated outside of the context of religious miracles. The act of handwashing is not ordinarily called a religious event. But if the act occurs within a distinctly religious context, its religious significance is immediately evident. Even nonbelievers agree that handwashing, under certain circumstances, is a distinctly religious event. Hume is thus correct that whether an act acquires religious significance depends in part on whether it occurs in a religious context, which the agent is obliged to comprehend if she is capable of invoking it evidentially to ground religious claims.

### 3. Essentially Personal Religious Ascriptions

#### 3.1 Religious ascriptions

Hume's argument against miracles presupposes that a religious miracle is one that rationally obligates the assent of a rational agent in relevant evidential contexts. If a religious miracle can be established, then only the irrational fool would reject it. This section argues that Hume was wrong to think that it is logically possible to prove a miracle so as to justify an important family of religious claims – namely, normative religious beliefs, for such beliefs are essentially personal matters. I present a sustained argument to this end, which includes, among other things, thought experiments inspired by the religious reflections of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rush Rhees, and D. Z. Phillips.<sup>22</sup>

One important implication of the Humean account of religious significance is that religious ascription is inessential to religious miracles. To pin down the meaning of "religious ascription," as I use this term, let us first distinguish *explicit* and *implicit* ascriptions. If I assert (i.e., vocalize my belief) that an event is a religious miracle, then my ascription of religious significance is explicit; if I make no such assertion but understand the event to be a religious miracle anyway, then my ascription of religious significance is implicit. In what follows I use the term "ascription" of religious significance in an inclusive sense, to encompass explicit and implicit ascriptions.

Let us next distinguish two kinds of ascriptions: *factual* and *normative ascriptions*. A factual ascription is an ascription of knowledge concerning a matter of fact. A normative ascription is an ascription of an endorsement or value. For example, I might ascribe the factual belief that God exists to someone who may or may not be a devout follower of a theistic religion. Alternatively, I might ascribe the normative belief in God to someone who considers herself a devout follower of a theistic religious tradition. To capture this distinction, I will use the locution "belief that God exists" to signify factual belief, and "belief in God" to signify normative belief. These

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<sup>22</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lectures on Religious Belief," in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967; reprint, 40th Anniversary Edition), 53-72; Rush Rhees, "Miracles," in *On Religion and Philosophy*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 322-27. I cite Phillips below.

are not the same thing. For to believe *that* God exists is to believe that a particular supernatural agent exists with the understanding that this being belongs to a particular religious tradition. By contrast, to believe *in* God is not just to believe that a particular supernatural being exists but to acknowledge its power as *morally* authoritative and its religious character as *worthy* of one's praise, fellowship, deference, worship, and the like.

With these distinctions in place, it seems that the Humean account requires an ascription of religious significance on the part of the subject. But what is the character of this ascription, and is it adequate to ground his case against religious miracles? It seems to me that Hume's analysis of religious significance entails factual ascriptions of religious significance, but not normative ascriptions of religious significance. I argue that Hume's case against religious miracles tacitly and falsely presupposes that *a factual ascription of religious significance suffices for establishing a normative ascription of religious significance*.

Said differently, I argue that two aspects of religious significance that Hume builds into his use of "religious miracle" sometimes drift apart. These dual aspects can be parsed as follows:

*Meaning one (factual significance):* The epistemological religious significance of a Humean religious miracle consists in the fact that it satisfies all three of Hume's conditions of epistemological religious significance.

*Meaning two (evidential significance):* The epistemological religious significance of a Humean miracle consists in the fact that the miracle confirms a system of religion for a subject, and serves as a foundation for it.

Drift in these accounts of religious significance is possible because satisfying Hume's three conditions of epistemological religious significance entails a factual ascription of religious significance, whereas *what is required for religious significance that is evidentially significant is an ascription of normative religious significance*. Said differently, satisfying Hume's three epistemological conditions yields mere factual knowledge. It entails belief that a religious deity exists and caused an event for a religious purpose. Comprehending this does not entail religious belief *in* the deity, nor that one ought to so believe. Hume's argument against religious miracles is superfluous because no miracle that serves as a just foundation for believing that a religious deity exists and has intervened in the course of nature constitutes a just foundation for believing in it. If such an argument is possible, it does not seem derivable from the establishing of a Humean religious miracle alone.

### 3.2 *The sense of "miracle" that matters*

Surprisingly few commentators have advanced this basic criticism (we may call it the "drift" objection) against Hume's argument. One glaring exception is the Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion, D. Z. Phillips.<sup>23</sup> In *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, Phillips puts it this way: "In the case of certain miracles, it is a necessary condition of so regarding them, that no causal explanation of them has been found. But although that is a

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<sup>23</sup> D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

necessary condition, it is not a sufficient condition."<sup>24</sup> The principal questions Phillips is interested in are these:

1. What counts as a miracle in everyday religious discourse?
2. Does Hume's second (more accurate) definition of "miracle" accommodate standard religious usage of this term?
3. If not, how (if at all) does the disconnect between Hume's philosophical usage and standard religious usage of the term "miracle" impact his case against religious miracles?

I consider each of these questions, in turn.

Phillips answers *question one* with a crude but helpful definition: "To be a miracle, the event must reveal something about God." He is concerned with epistemological religious significance. Specifically, he means that the event must have normative religious significance for a subject. Notice how his account differs from Hume's. Hume claims that a religious miracle must *actually serve* a religious purpose and that an individual must *know* what this purpose is for the event to be religious. Phillips claims that the purpose of the miracle must be "revealed" to the subject. Revelation here is not a factual form of realization. Rather, he means that the subject has a normative attitude of *accepting* or *endorsing* the religious purpose of the miracle. Phillips provides several examples, some of which I discuss below. However, I want to emphasize a neglected, atypical example, which cannot be accommodated by either of Hume's philosophical definitions of "miracle."

Neither of Hume's philosophical categories of religious and non-religious miracles correspond to the grammatical category of "religious miracle." For suppose we wanted an account of religious miracles that captures everything falling under the extension of this term in everyday religious discourse. It is evident that the extension of this term will be much larger than the extension of "Humean religious miracle," for the extension of "religious miracle" in religious usage covers *any and every event that is ascribed normative religious significance*. I call such events *ordinary religious miracles* (ORMs). An ORM is an event that is called a miracle by a believer to ascribe normative religious significance to the event. As the term "miracle" in its ordinary religious sense applies to both natural and supernatural events, we may distinguish two kinds: *natural* and *supernatural* ORMs.

According to Hume, "Nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happens in the common course of nature."<sup>25</sup> This is false. Natural ORMs are naturally caused events that are called miracles to ascribe normative religious significance to them. Natural births, for example, are often called miracles, for they are seen as blessings and gifts of the divine.<sup>26</sup> By contrast,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>25</sup> Hume, "Of Miracles," 173.

<sup>26</sup> We might question the legitimacy of such usage based on the etymological meaning of "miracle." Consider David Corner's remarks in "Miracles," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed 13 June 2020, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/miracles/>: "As a rough beginning, however, we might observe that the term is from the Latin *miraculum*, which is derived from *mirari*, to wonder, thus the most general characterization of a miracle is as an event that provokes wonder. As such, it must be in some way extraordinary, unusual, or

supernatural ORMs are events that involve a violation or transgression of the laws of nature by a supernatural agent, which are ascribed normative religious significance by the subject. The resurrection of a dead man, for example, may be an ORM if it has normative religious significance for an individual.

Natural ORMs provide particularly good support for the claim that religious significance is grounded in personal religious ascriptions, because the source of their significance cannot be analyzed in causal terms. No theist would dream of denying that the birth of a child is naturalistically explicable. Theists know just as well as atheists do that child births occur regularly, are caused by natural processes, and accord with the laws of nature. Theists do not think that establishing natural births ought rationally to persuade atheists to believe in God, yet they are ascribed religious significance for that. The religious significance of natural ORMs is logically independent of their causal source. Whence then their religious significance? The believer, I submit, is a partial determiner of religious significance, for it is the believer who determines her personal religious ascriptions and does so vis-à-vis her personal, logically antecedent, religious convictions. Essential also is the *role* of the religious attitude *in the life* of the believer. Thus, we have some reason to concur with Phillips that religious significance is determined in part by essentially personal ascriptions, for religious ascriptions are expressions of (and thus are internally related to) the believer's religious attitudes and form of life.

It might be objected that a purely subjective account of religious miracles fails to acknowledge the obvious fact that religious significance cannot be determined by the subject alone. For one thing, an event cannot be a miracle if there is no religious context for it. Without a religious purpose a personal religious expression seems to become incoherent. Religious miracles are intimately connected with other religious concepts, such as religious salvation, liberation, and the like. Such links, however, take us well beyond the subjectivity of the believer. This point is implicitly acknowledged by Hume and seems to be the inspiration for his second (more accurate) definition.

The objector is correct that subjectivity alone does not, and cannot, determine the various elements of the religious context which confers ontic religious significance to a miracle. However, I have not denied this fact; my argument is not that the believer's subjectivity is necessary and sufficient for *every* religious miracle (ORM). My contention, to begin, is limited to epistemological religious significance; next, my contention is that subjectivity (and its connection to religious life) is a necessary condition of both natural and supernatural ORMs, at least as understood within traditional theistic religions. It is not a sufficient condition. Personal

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contrary to our expectations. Disagreement arises, however, as to what makes a miracle something worth wondering about. In what sense must a miracle be extraordinary?" (ibid., sect. 1). Given Corner's question, is it inappropriate to call the birth of a child a miracle? Corner's analysis invites us to ask: What makes the birth of a child wonder-worthy? From both moral and religious perspectives, there is much to wonder about. How and why does a human being so pure and innocent as a child come to be so impure and imperfect as a human adult? What makes a parent worthy of so wonderful a gift as a child? Why have I been selected by God to have this child? These and similar such questions have religious components that cannot be reduced to naturalistic explanations.

religious ascription is insufficient even for natural ORMs, for religious ascription cannot link up with elements of religious life if it does not reveal something about God (thereby taking us into the objective realm).

Having outlined what is perhaps the most important essential feature of religious miracles tout court, I next turn to *question two*. It is evident that Hume's two uses of the term "miracle" fail to accommodate ordinary usage of the term "miracle," for although he captures some significant aspects of supernatural ORMs—namely, their inexplicability in natural terms and their source in supernatural agency—he does not capture the essential religious component of subjective religious ascription, despite this feature's being essential to *all* religious miracles. This brings us to *question three*: How does the disconnect between philosophical usage and normal religious usage of "miracle" impact the philosophical debate about miracles?

Phillips discusses the disconnect between philosophical and ordinary usage in the context of philosophical attempts to extend the grammar of religious terms—such as the terms "God," "omnipotence," and "miracle"—beyond their religious contexts of use. He argues that such extensions render religious vocabulary meaningless or insignificant. By this he does not mean that the new usage has no application outside of the religious context—it may or may not have an interesting and/or useful application outside religion. Rather, he means that the new usage is insignificant within the religious contexts from which the vocabulary was taken. For the new philosophical meaning "bypasses" the religious meaning and context. He offers a familiar but instructive example to illustrate the disconnect between religious and philosophical usage of the term "miracle" and its philosophical upshot.

Phillips invokes John Perry's example of a miracle as a foil for assessing the debate over whether religious propositions can be objectively proved. Perry, engaged in the same dialectical debate as Hume, asks us to suppose that an individual witnesses the gentle rising and setting back of the Rock of Gibraltar "for no apparent reason."<sup>27</sup> Phillips comments that by "no apparent reason"

[Perry] means that no causal explanation has been found for it rising. He does not mean that God has done it for no apparent reason, but for all he says about the religious significance of the miracle, Perry's character could be read in this way. He has no idea what it means to attribute the miracle to God. But, then, how does he know he is describing a miracle? Apparently, because he thinks it makes sense to do so. But what *sense* is that? Where does Perry's character get it from? Certainly, not from religion.<sup>28</sup>

Phillips' point is not merely that the meaning of "miracle" is insignificant within a religious context. Phillips is also stressing a dialectical point. Applying the religious term "miracle" outside of its normal religious context—say, to denote unexplained events, like the rising and setting back

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<sup>27</sup> John Perry, *Dialogue on Good, Evil, and the Existence of God* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 1999), 39-40.

<sup>28</sup> The quotation continues: "Otherwise, what would be religious about it? Why would it be a miracle? What does the 'rising up' and 'setting back' of the Rock of Gibraltar show us about God? We are given no idea. Why, in that case, should we put 2 in the conceptual category of 'the miraculous'?" (Phillips, *Problem of Evil*, 15).

of the Rock of the Gibraltar – is unhelpful for the philosopher's dialectical purpose of assessing whether miracles can provide a just foundation for religion. For unless a religious reason is given for the rising and setting back of the Rock of Gibraltar, we cannot properly call this event a *religious* miracle; ipso facto, the event cannot serve as a just foundation for a system of religion. A subject that is able to prove the occurrence of the event but unable to identify its religious purpose has no reason for attributing it to a religious deity (or religious tradition). It follows that definitions of "miracle" that stress causal relations but say nothing about religious significance are inadequate. A truly religious miracle reveals something normative about religion – and reveals it to a subject. The sense of "miracle" that matters to discussions about the rationality of believers is the normal religious use.

Consider Phillips' analysis of a miracle discussed by Rush Rhees. The miracle in question is Lazarus's rising from the dead. Suppose Lazarus, not understanding what happened to him, lives the rest of his life bewildered and silent. To this let us add that thereafter he leads a tormented life because he is unable to see why the miracle happened to *him*. Here the event would not be a miracle in the religious sense, except perhaps as a "failed miracle," which is to say, an event that intended a certain outcome that is unrealized. The event's religious inexplicability for Lazarus explains why it has no such significance for him. The event is a failed miracle *in virtue of* its religious inexplicability. Suppose that Lazarus acknowledges the "religious context" of the event (that a man named Jesus performed the miracle, etc.), but feels that getting a second chance at life is too much for him to bear – that he didn't deserve it, perhaps. In that case, the religious sense of "miracle" is lost on him; the event does not serve its intended religious purpose. It might be objected that it remains a miracle in Hume's sense. If we insist upon this point, Phillips' reply is a simple one: "Fine, but what's this got to do with religion? Why call it a religious event?"

Again, if the point of the Lazarus miracle was a religious one, it is one that seems to fail in the case of Lazarus. The argument that he ought to believe in Jesus holds no weight with him. So no objective foundation for Christianity can be based on it. Phillips' claim that ORMs capture the heart of the religious concept of miracle implies that dialectical attempts to establish religious systems on an objective rational foundation are confused. The rationale behind his claim seems to be that ORMs, unlike Humean miracles, have subjective and objective components: they involve personal religious ascriptions, on the one hand, and events that are connected to a wider religious context, practice, and history, on the other. The former, however, seems to preclude the possibility of establishing the rationality/irrationality of religious belief on epistemic (factual and logical) grounds, alone.

### 3.3 *Is religious disbelief irrational?*

A plausible objection to Phillips' analysis is that Lazarus' reaction to Jesus' miracle is unwarranted because the context is underdescribed. (Perhaps it also trades in attributing implausible mental states to Lazarus.) Why, for example, could not Jesus reveal the religious significance of Lazarus' resurrection to Lazarus himself? The same objection, it seems, can be raised against a similar reaction to a Humean miracle. Phillips discusses Rhees' own reaction to the Lazarus event. Rhees says he would be amazed by the event, but admits his awe would be directed at a "natural" event – that is,

an anomalous, naturalistically inexplicable event, lacking religious significance. The event is "natural," not in the sense that it comports with the laws of nature (for it appears not to), but in the sense which contrasts with the term "significant" (as in religiously significant). That is, the event is non-religious, for Rhees has no religious reaction to the event; the Christian message associated with the miracle does not compel him.

The difference between Rhees and Lazarus' reactions can arguably be explained by a lack of information and understanding. Lazarus does not see himself as *worthy* of God's special favor, nor does he understand *what* religious purpose his resurrection serves. Rhees, by contrast, says he lacks appreciation for the Christian message and wonders whether additional context about early Christianity – for example, whether knowledge of crucial details essential to appreciating the role of miracles within the New Testament – might inspire religious faith or at least a religious reaction from him. The Humean miracle is "miraculous" for Rhees in the ordinary sense that it is marvelous and awe-inspiring. However, it is not "miraculous" in the sense required for normative religious ascription – that is, it does not inspire faith and hope, does not compel repentance, and so on. In both cases, an intended religious aim is unmet; hence, it fails to be religious.

Nevertheless, it might be objected that a deepened understanding of the religious context may be sufficient to change Rhees' minds. In that case, I would point out that other reactions are possible.<sup>29</sup> A more plausible example for Phillips' dialectical purpose is the following. We can imagine Rhees rejecting the Lazarus miracle and accepting his fate for doing so. Suppose he understands that, because of his refusal to accept Jesus' message of salvation, he will spend eternity in a place that Jesus calls "hell," a place of eternal separation from God. Perhaps Rhees believes Jesus can make good on his threat, for he has personally witnessed Jesus exhibiting his supernatural power. Nevertheless, his stubborn insistence that Jesus' message of cleansing away sin strikes him as unearned, as a cheap form of salvation.

To consider an example that more powerfully illustrates the point at issue – namely, a just rejection to an otherwise obvious religious miracle – suppose sufficient evidence proves that the God of Christianity exists. The evidence consists of God's simultaneous appearance to all Muslims throughout the

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<sup>29</sup> It is important to emphasize the diversity of apparent *rational* reactions to Humean miracles. Lazarus, Rhees, and my hypothetical atheist's (see below) reactions to my hypothetical Christian Humean miracle are not the only non-religious reactions. Wittgenstein, for example, speaking of the miracle in Lourdes, France, says he would treat the event as a poorly executed experiment, implying he would be dubious of all ascribed supernatural implications, for reasons having more to do with his faith in science than religious skepticism ("Lectures on Religious Belief," 60-61). A more recent example is found in Keith Parson's "The Conception of the Miraculous and Christian Apologetics" (Masters Thesis, Georgia State University, 1997), [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/keith\\_parsons/thesis](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/keith_parsons/thesis). Parson argues that "so far as we know the cosmos could contain beings whose intelligence and powers exceed our own as much as ours exceed an ant's. Yet these beings could have evolved with the cosmos over a long period of time just as we have... In fact, however, those events would have been brought about in accordance with the laws of nature by beings who are just as much a part of the cosmos as we are" (ibid., "Three Criticisms").

world. He explains to them that he is tired of their worshipping the wrong deity. He demands that every last Muslim bow her knee and every last Muslim tongue confess that he is the one and only true God. Failing to heed this warning, says God, will have dire consequences. Ultimately, those who resist God's message are destroyed on the spot. I now consider, in turn, two atheistic reactions to the event.

The first reaction is of an atheist who stubbornly refuses to believe what she observes. She denies the "miraculous" slaughtering of Muslims as it takes place and denies the existence of the being causing it. She closes her eyes and says to herself it is more likely that she is going mad than that a supernatural being exists. Here we have the kind of example which suits the objector. For one wants to say that the stubborn atheist's refusal to "accept the facts" renders her reaction irrational. She faces an *epistemic gap*—a lack of understanding, predicated perhaps on epistemic or moral vices and attitudes, that must be rectified for right understanding. Ultimately, she must be made to acknowledge the evidence before her. Our first atheist thus seems irrational.

Given that one is present to witness God killing all Muslims and that one has the relevant background knowledge to comprehend the event's evidential significance, every rational person ought to infer *that* the God of Christianity exists and is causally responsible for the event. This is an epistemic obligation, and perhaps a moral one. Does it follow that our atheist should believe *in* God? Should she describe the event as a miracle? Suppose that a religious reaction is precluded by her moral commitments. Her anti-religious reaction does not strike me as irrational, for her resistance presupposes the epistemic acceptance of all pertinent facts. Her resistance is a direct response to the evidence. It is because she has seen God's moral face that she concludes: "This 'deity'—despite whatever anyone may call it—is a horrific monster, a self-serving and unjust tyrant." If our atheist lacks an epistemic obligation to believe *in* God, might she have a moral obligation to do so? Plausibly, she does not. For there is a strong case to be made that God acts unjustly, or at least that such a being is not worthy of worship.

To tell the atheist that she *must* believe in God is to insist that she ought to ascribe religious significance to God's Humean religious miracle. Yet this Humean miracle is no religious miracle in the ordinary sense (an ORM), at least not for many ethically-minded persons. To accept the Humean miracle of murdering all Muslims in the religious sense is to accept the death of every last Muslim as having religious significance *for one's own life*. Embracing the Christian purpose of the miracle amounts to endorsing God's conduct, in some sense. This surely strikes many of us as morally outrageous. To say that one is irrational for not embracing a "deity" that could murder an entire group of people for disbelief is to advance a normative judgment that goes well beyond the issue of meeting one's epistemic duties. It seems to require a moral argument of sorts that has little if anything to do with the epistemic possibility of proving Humean miracles.

Given the possibility of non- and even anti-religious reactions to failed religious miracles, it might be conceded that an evidentially significant miracle must contain the two aspects of religious miracles I have emphasized in my account of ORMs. First, the miracle must contain the subjective quality captured in normal religious usage of the term "miracle."

Second, it must contain the objective (ontic) quality that exists in some religious usage of the term "miracle" (expressed in Hume's account of religious miracle). Given this concession, one might go on to argue that supernatural ORMs might prove to be a just foundation for a system of religion. To establish a supernatural ORM one needs two lines of argumentation: an argument that a Humean religious miracle occurred (which the subject comprehends as a religious event) and an argument that it would be irrational to affirm the occurrence of the Humean religious miracle without accompanying this with a normative religious ascription. The idea might be that if personal religious ascriptions are more than expressions of normative attitudes and commitments (for they are connected to objective aspects of the world), then this objective dimension entails certain moral and epistemic obligations. `

Unlike Phillips, I am not completely averse to this line of thinking. The only point I would emphasize here is that there is nothing trivial in the concession that "*establishing*" the rationality/irrationality of religious claims is not possible on epistemic considerations alone. Neither is it trivial to concede that a distinctly *normative* argument is necessary to establish religious claims. If such an argument is possible and necessary, my point still stands that such a case cannot be made by *mere* reference to facts about whether certain types of events occur. First, the miracle debate cannot be settled by reference to mere facts about whether violations of the laws of nature occur. Second, it cannot be settled by mere reference to mere facts about whether a supernatural agent caused the violation. Finally, it cannot be settled by reference to mere facts about whether a supernatural agent satisfies the description of this or that religious tradition, unless of course the description includes normative titles, terms, and propositions that entail religious commitment on the part of those using them. In that case, the dispute about miracles necessarily turns on the question of whether the supernatural agent merits those titles; that is, it turns on the identity of the supernatural agent, which requires a normative determination about the moral status of the agent and its conduct. So again, we cannot settle the issue by appeal to mere facts alone.

If I am right, then it is possible to believe that God exists without believing in God. It follows that it is highly misleading, if not misguided, to assert that mere belief that God exists is a genuine form of religious belief. After all, to say such a thing can come close to committing blasphemy, for no Christian would say of the atheist who rebukes God's conduct that she has "seen and believed." Hume's critique of miracles is thus superfluous (as it currently stands). If we call the resurrection of Lazarus a miracle and mean by this a mere string of facts—that a Humean miracle occurred; that it had a describable supernatural cause; and so on—then we are still faced with the existential problem of what if anything calling it a religious event means for our lives. Mere acknowledgement of a Humean miracle is not sufficient motivation for devoting one's life to a being that has superpowers any more than an individual's acknowledgment of God's existence is sufficient motivation for her to worship the God who murdered every last Muslim. A religious sensibility is crucially vacant here.

### 3.4 Conclusion

The problem with the Humean-philosophical use of 'miracle' is not that it is false, but that it is not a religious use of the term. No argument for the existence of God can establish the religious significance of an event—not an

extraordinary event, nor yet a violation of the laws of nature. Whether one believes or disbelieves in God may presuppose factual belief in the existence of a supernatural entity. Yet, this does not cut to the core of the matter. Most fundamentally, belief in God is a matter of the heart, not of the mind. This does not mean that evidential considerations are completely irrelevant to religious faith. Rather, this means that a subjective religious ascription is essential to seeing the point of a miracle in the ordinary (religious) sense of this term. Hume can accommodate my subjective condition of religious significance only by undercutting the basis for debating the possibility of establishing a just foundation for religion.