HUME, FLEW, AND THE MIRACULOUS

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I

In his account of Hume's Enquiry, Professor Flew not only provided valuable exegesis of Hume's discussion of miracle, but also tried to improve on it in the light of his analysis of Hume's pattern of argument in the Enquiry as a whole. Since then Flew has made use of his allegedly improved version of Hume's thesis, but my examination of his views will be confined to his first and most fully developed presentation of them. My aim is to suggest that, in the last resort, his attempted emendations cannot serve to strengthen Hume's thesis in the way he requires and, more positively, I wish to mount a defence of the traditional concept of a miracle as a permanently inexplicable anomaly. In so doing I should avow a theological motive at the outset, since much discussion by New Testament scholars can seem merely to assume that the traditional concept of miracle must be an unthinkable one. But I do not wish to reinstate the apologetic function of miracle, as it has often been understood in the past. Rightly Hume and Flew stress that, if alleged miracles are to provide self-sufficient and decisive proof of the existence and action of God, they must be of insufficient weight for the purpose. However, my claim is that this is not because of the impossibility of ever having sufficient evidence to believe that a miracle had occurred; rather one can, as I shall try to, give an account of the kind of situation in which one could judge that an occurrence was a permanent and inexplicable anomaly. But if one is then to see such an occurrence as evidence of God's action, then some prior understanding of the more general notion of God's action is required; without it one might marvel at the mysterious event, but this would not ipso facto involve any reference to God. In effect, for my argument to have any point I must assume that the concept of God's action is a possible one, and confine myself to suggesting how, within that context, the traditional concept of miracle can be rendered intelligible. Critical questions can and must remain as to how and when one could apply such a concept. My contention is that the solution of these difficulties need not be prejudged by the mere

1Hume's Philosophy of Belief (London, 1961). All references to Flew are to this work. References to Hume are to the Enquiry, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 2nd ed., 1902), by paragraph numbers.


3Compare Bultmann in Kerygma and Myth, ed. H. W. Bartsch (New York, 1961), p. 5: "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail oneself of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."
assumption that the concept is an impossible one, since closer examination of Hume’s arguments, even as improved on by Flew, shows that one can have good grounds for questioning the assumption.

Flew provides an apt characterization of the two stages of Hume’s argument, the first emerging as a priori in character, but in a quite legitimate way, while the second is meant to strengthen the thesis by further and a posteriori considerations. Critics have fastened on one phrase in the second part which does suggest a priori assumptions that would certainly be un-Humean, and could scarcely be sanctioned on any empiricist view. For, in alluding to one example of a possible case of a miraculous occurrence, Hume speaks of “the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events”.4 Surely, critics urge, this suggests the very un-Humean view that our knowledge of the laws of nature is such that we can never find our expectations based on experience to date falsified by the subsequent course of events. But, as Flew points out, if properly understood, Hume’s argument in the first part cannot be faulted in this way; rather it requires that the concept of miracle is a possible one, that is, that one could entertain the concept of an occurrence such that it was, in Hume’s words, “a violation of the laws of nature”.5 What then does Hume have in mind when, in the first part, he claims: “As a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against the miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire an argument from experience as can be imagined”.6

Flew suggests, surely correctly, that the strength of this argument is that it is “directed at the difficulties of his opponent”,7 and does not answer his challenge with a priori assumptions of an illegitimate and questionable kind. On the one hand, the believer is regarding an event not just as not explained at present, but as never adequately explicable by the scientist; what he can account for in terms of the laws of nature is the whole range of cases where the initial conditions resemble those that precede the miracle. But, if one is thus regarding an event as “a violation of the laws of nature”, does it not follow that one needs “both the rule and the exception”8 and that these requirements are in conflict? In consequence one finds, in Hume’s words, “a mutual destruction of arguments”9 and is able to interpret him more favourably. What he is trying to demonstrate is not that “as a matter of fact miracles do not happen”;10 this would involve him in an attempt to settle a dispute about a “matter of fact” by an illegitimate kind of a priori argument. In Flew’s judgment what Hume correctly demonstrates by a legitimate kind of a priori argument is

6Ibid.
8Ibid.
10Flew, op. cit., p. 176.
that we can never have adequate evidence to judge that miracles occur. For: "... from the very nature of the concept—'from the very nature of the fact'—there must be a conflict in the evidence to show that they do".\(^{11}\)

How then does Hume move to the stronger and apparently inconsistent claim that is implied by his subsequent talk of "the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events"? In the second part he is seeking to show that his concession that the concept of miracle is a possible one was at best theoretical; for when one comes to look at the relevant cases (and for Hume this is equivalent to assessing the veracity of testimony), one sees that the outcome of the conflict is a foregone conclusion, namely in favour of what science and common sense suggest to be possible, and against any presumptions to the contrary. The possibility ceases to be a real possibility in any important sense of the word, and so Hume moves naturally, if not wholly justifiably, to the stronger and blunter thesis that to regard an event as a miracle is *ipsa facta* to render it impossible. We could never come to apply the concept, and, in the light of the more cautious argument of the first part, it is doubtful whether we could ever render it coherent in the first place.

This allegation of incoherence will be discussed later. But, if I understand Flew correctly, he wishes not only to emphasize this first thesis, but also to provide some justification for moving to the bolder claim that Hume implies. Thus in the second part Hume seems to deem it sufficient to berate the believer for his ignorance, gullibility and *folie de grandeur*; thereby he claims to provide an explanation of the fantastic claims that have been made about unlikely occurrences by appeal to "the known and natural principles of credulity and delusion".\(^{12}\) Just as we can expect the universe to continue to be orderly, though in theory it might not be, so we can presume, and with much more confidence, that certain undesirable traits, most commonly found in connexion with the establishment of a new religion, will lead to specious and preposterous claims. By contrast Flew wishes to advance the discussion beyond mere polemic and to show on properly logical grounds why the nature of historical evidence is such that mere testimony could never justify us in disregarding our presumptions based on the normal course of events. In this connexion he makes use of a distinction between logical and physical impossibility, his aim being to show that he or any other Humean can have the open mind that the Humean position requires as to what conceivably might occur, but yet in practice be able to exclude any anomalies that would be too extreme and disruptive. I wish to question both these alleged improvements on Hume's arguments, considering first the use Flew makes of his distinction between two kinds of impossibility when he is assessing the strength of testimony for the miraculous that presumes to confront well-established laws of nature.

\(^{11}\)Ibid.

To avoid the charge that his methodology is no less arbitrary than Hume's when he discounts any specific testimony for the miraculous, Flew wishes to concede that in such a case he will grant bare logical possibility. That is, any alleged event, no matter how far removed from what we normally suppose to be intelligible and possible, could conceivably occur. But, once we consider the nature of the evidence for these alleged anomalies, then we are to see that it must be too weak and deficient to overthrow our normal presumptions. In the nature of the case we would be relying on sporadic and isolated pieces of testimony, not on a body of experimental data and theorizing which we could verify in subsequent cases and so establish on a sound basis. In this way the relevant laws of nature can "be tested at any time and by any person": by contrast "the candidate historical proposition will be particular, often singular and in the past tense".\(^\text{13}\) It must follow, in Flew's judgment, that while historical evidence could lead us to question our presumptions, derived from science, about what is possible and what is not, yet the result must be a foregone conclusion. There is an apparent and genuine conflict between science and history, which yet can be resolved in only one way, namely in favour of science, once we are aware of the intrinsic superiority of the whole corpus of data and theorizing which science provides. But is not this type of objection to testimony for the miraculous in danger of discrediting much else besides? For example, one individual's temperament could be so distinctive that to explain its effects on the course of human history one could not invoke some general and law-like presumption about human psychology or, if one could apparently do so, then one would not be doing justice to the distinctive character of the individual in question. Admittedly this is to assume, rather than to establish, the thesis that historical and scientific explanation are not akin, in that the historian need not be able to formulate and apply law-like statements if his explanations are to be reputable. But it is sufficient to my argument to point out that, as Flew draws the contrast, he can seem to claim, correctly enough, that historical explanation does not require the same basis and structure as does scientific explanation, and yet to imply that historical explanation is thereby rendered defective. Therefore, unless one wishes to endorse this conclusion, one cannot mount objections against testimony for the miraculous solely on the grounds of the inherent weakness of historical as opposed to scientific evidence.

This attempt to foreclose discussion of possible instances of the miraculous, on the grounds that no historical evidence could ever be sufficient to convince us that such a concept had application, is at least an improvement on the second part of Hume's thesis. The appeal is not merely to the psychology of the believer; rather awareness of the logical features that historical testimony must have is to lead us to see that facts of the kind vouched for in testimony for the miraculous can never be sufficiently well supported to

\(^{13}\text{Op. cit., p. 208.}\)
be credible, and therefore instead we should seek an explanation in terms of "the known and natural principles of credulity and delusion". But, apart from the more general doubt this seems to lead to about the worth of historical evidence, cannot the believer retort that this is at best to beg the question? In the nature of the case miracles would be occasional and unusual occurrences, vouched for by isolated pieces of historical testimony, but not supported by the kind of evidence the scientist can cite in giving an account of the laws of nature. To demand such evidence to support testimony vouching for the miraculous must be logically inappropriate, and the contrast between these two kinds of evidence cannot be invoked to settle the issue. What is more to the point, and must be admitted by the advocate of the miraculous, is that even if testimony of this kind is not in itself problematic, what it vouches for in the case of the miraculous must be so, since in that case the events which testimony vouches for are specified by their lack of conformity to our current understanding of the laws of nature, or to any possible extension of them. Wrongly, in my judgment, Flew tries to reinforce his argument for the impossibility of the miraculous, by suggesting that the impossibility in question is all the more apparent when one considers the nature of the evidence one has for the miraculous. Either the concept is a possible one, in which case one's assessment of the relevant evidence is vitally affected; or else it is not, in which case consideration of the nature of the evidence becomes superfluous.

What then is the worth of Flew's attempted distinction between logical and physical impossibility? It is important to note that Flew's aim is not merely to vindicate Hume in his treatment of the miraculous. He first wishes to improve on Hume's defective account of the laws of nature, and in consequence to show that one can and should maintain Hume's understanding of the limitations of inductive reasoning, and yet be equipped with a scientific methodology which will justify us in our rejection of the concept of miracle. Hume's error, Flew points out, was to suggest that our attempts at inductive reasoning are faulty specimens of deductive argument, lacking an essential premiss. What Hume should have realized is that in our predictions and retrodictions we are not necessarily making specious claims of an a priori character when, as we must, we go beyond the evidence to date. Our expectations do not have this undesirable and inappropriate character just because we admit that they are and can be based only on our experience to date, and so are prepared to expose them to falsification and subsequent revision. It is against this background that we are to look for regularities in the world and express them in terms of nomologicals, that is in universal statements of a law-like character, which justify our deduction of further instances from them. We are not thereby committing ourselves to a system of scientific laws that are immune to change. Paradoxical as it may seem, we are entitled to appeal to and rely on our understanding of the laws of nature to guide our expectations and explanations,

just because we are prepared to revise them when necessary. It is in this way that Flew wishes to give a rational and positive account of scientific method, while endorsing Hume's view that the regularities we draw attention to by means of nomologicals should in no way be thought of as inherent in nature. But it must follow that when Flew seeks to discredit the concept of miracle, he should in no way imply, as Hume almost seems to, that occurrences are to be ruled out as impossible, solely on the grounds that they would be in conflict with the scientist's nomologicals. The whole point of the robust confidence Flew would have us place in the scientist's theorizing and subsequent predictions, is that the nomologicals are well-established and soundly based just because they are open to revision and emendation, not because they have the doubtful privilege of being necessarily true.

But in this case how is Flew to deal with Hume's talk of "the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events"? Surely there is either a covertly a priori claim or else the phrase cannot be strictly justified. Flew claims the solution to this apparent dilemma is a simple one, and for the purpose introduces his distinction as follows: "The impossibility involved is not logical but physical... and the criterion of physical as opposed to logical impossibility simply is incompatibility with a law of nature in the broadest sense". That is, from our understanding of the laws of nature (whether or not we are acquainted with the relevant scientific theory) we can deduce what it would be rational to expect; should there be an occurrence not in accord with our expectations we would, in one sense, be faced with a contradiction; this of itself could not settle the issue in favour of the law as previously formulated, for the rational procedure in such a situation would be to ask whether a revision of our previous formulation is required; but, the implication is, our knowledge of some regularities is so well-established that it can provide evidential canons, decreeing what we can and cannot suppose to be possible and so guiding our assessment of cases where testimony confronts us with anomalies that seem too extreme to be assimilated. So, rather than find that we need to impugn established nomologicals, the rational course is to seek some other account of how belief in the actuality of such incredible occurrences could have arisen. Thus Hume's critique is freed from the taint of specious and a priori claims, and his alternative explanation in terms of "the known and natural principles of folly and delusion" emerges as fully justified.

But does Flew really escape from his impasse by means of this distinction between two kinds of impossibility? At this point a reference to Bradley's views is not irrelevant. Flew himself alludes to the essay in question ("On the Presuppositions of Critical History"), describing it as "a curiously Humean pamphlet". I wish to suggest that the converse is nearer the

15 Vide op. cit., pp. 135-139.
truth, namely that it is Hume's arguments, even as amended and improved on by Flew, that suggest a curiously Bradleian conclusion. In his dis-
cussion Bradley does not refer to the miraculous as such. His aim is the
more general one of showing why the historian must employ critical stan-
dards as he appraises testimony about past events, and of explaining what
those standards must be. Given his epistemological position he is emphatic
that mere passive sensation cannot yield any knowledge; rather, before we
can form any reputable judgment, we must interpret the brute data of
experience, making inferences from our general assumptions about what is
possible and what is not, and so forming a properly reasoned conclusion
about what can be supposed to have occurred in any particular case. The
basis of this reasoning must be the assumption of the uniformity of nature
and so Bradley writes: "... our facts are inferential and their actuality
depends on the correctness of the reasoning which makes them what they
are."19 By contrast Hume raises his well-known difficulties about the
justification of such an assumption, but, as we have seen, he does allow that
in practice we can and do rely on such an assumption, regarding our
expectations as sufficiently justified, provided there is enough warrant from
our experience to date. In both cases, however, a similar difficulty seems
to arise; through stress on the uniformity of nature both Bradley and
Hume are using a line of argument which would exclude not only miracles,
but also events which at present appear to be anomalous and inexplicable,
but which may in time be incorporated into our pattern of explanation.
This damaging corollary follows consistently enough in Bradley's case. On
his account no room has been left for the distinction that should be made
between a system of scientific laws and the facts which support it, and in
consequence no provision can be made for any drastic revision of those
laws. But, to be consistent with his initial scepticism, and the more adequate
account of scientific method it suggests, Hume should avoid this Bradleian
conclusion. My suspicion is that he cannot, even with the aid of Flew's
distinction between two kinds of impossibility.

Flew's suggestion is that "if we are to have any evidential canons at
all we have got to be prepared to dismiss a vast range of logical possibilities
as impossible in fact."20 At a later date we may revise our judgment, but
only if "we now have reason to believe that the occurrences reported were
after all possible". For example, considered in isolation the New Testament
accounts of miraculous healings should be treated with scepticism. But,
only once is able to cite other apparently similar cures which can be explained
in terms of some theory of psycho-somatic interaction, then these same
accounts should be reinstated as credible, since what they vouch for is
rendered intelligible and so possible. Certainly a Humean can suppose, as
does Bradley, that once a scientific law is formulated and applied, it is
regarded as universal in its application, so that the relevant facts are, in a

sense, subsumed under it and thereby rendered intelligible. But what cannot be conceded, if one is to be a consistent Humean, is that this intelligibility is a precondition of actuality. In Hume's sceptical arguments about inductive reasoning his case rests on the point that, however well-founded a law of nature may be, intransigent facts may yet be found such that a revision of the law is required, no matter how drastic. From this two corollaries must follow. First, if such odd and apparently anomalous facts are to limit the pretensions of established laws of nature, then, prior to their assimilation within a suitably revised set of laws, they can and do have a bona fide status as actual facts; but equally, before the first formulation of the law, the facts later to be subsumed under it are isolated data which have to be brought together to form the basis of a law, but which could and should be regarded as actual facts prior to that. A Humean cannot avoid these corollaries unless he is to be involved in a position which is inconsistently Bradleian and so damaging in its consequences. Certainly exceptions to well-established laws of nature must, in the nature of the case, be regarded as highly improbable; but if they are also to be spoken of as impossible, albeit in some allegedly non-logical sense, then one is either repeating the force of 'improbable', though apparently strengthening it; or else one is indeed committing oneself to the kind of claim which would be acceptable to Bradley, but which must be anathema to Hume and his disciples. Necessarily a miracle would not be conformable to what we are already familiar with and so expect. But to exclude it as impossible on these grounds alone would render scientific theory too static, that is too immune to counter-evidence and subsequent change.

III

So far then I have attempted to show that when Flew tries to re-state Hume's stronger thesis in these two related ways his argument must fail just as Hume's did. But this only serves to throw into sharper relief Hume's initial thesis as I explained it, following Flew's exegesis. As Flew stresses, one needs a concept of miracle such that "the miraculous can be sharply distinguished from the merely marvellous".21 It is not enough to show that an event can be regarded as possible, even though a scientific explanation is not forthcoming at present; the scientist need have no qualms about accepting evidence for such an occurrence, indeed he must if he is to avoid importing an undesirably a priori character into his account of the laws of nature. What must be repugnant to him, but is required to give a distinct sense to the concept of miracle, is the claim that an event has occurred which is strictly uncaused, in that no complete explanation could ever be available by means of scientific methods of enquiry. This is the central difficulty that remains, but the argument so far is not rendered irrelevant. Not only has consideration of the nature of historical evidence and scientific method thus isolated the problem; it has shown that, to

decide what is credible within one particular piece of testimony, one must first answer the more general question of what is thinkable and what is not. This question could arise equally whether one was looking for evidence of the miraculous in the testimony of others, or considering how it might be found within one's own experience. But, *pace* Hume, it must be this latter form of the question that is the basic one.

With this proviso then, what judgment should now be made on Hume’s original thesis in terms of “a mutual destruction of arguments”? The traditional concept of miracle implies that one could recognize an occurrence to be remarkable and exceptional in the strongest possible sense, without thereby calling in question the law or set of laws which one would normally and justifiably regard as applicable to the situation. To this Flew objects that such a claim cannot be coherently stated, since it requires one “to prove simultaneously both the rule and the exception, but still without ‘a mutual destruction of arguments’.” But is not this to impose an apparent contradiction which, in one sense at least, is clearly avoidable? For to believe that a miracle has occurred one is not committed to asserting that with reference to one and the same occurrence a given law both does and does not apply; the point is, rather, that with reference to one and the same law, it is true both that it seems to be applicable in a situation, and yet that it is shown not to be so by the subsequent course of events. This is then not a case of two concurrent and conflicting claims. That charge could be brought only if the exception were merely apparent and in time could be assimilated within a suitably revised law. By contrast, the whole point of the believer’s claim that an exception is miraculous in character is to give it a different status, so that it does not remain as an exception of the kind that science can and must investigate. It is claimed to be already sufficiently intelligible by reference to God’s action; that is, not only is knowledge of specific causal factors not available; it need not be so since the reference to God can of itself provide an explanation and removes the need to regard a miracle as a problematic anomaly.

It is at this point that the assumption of the intelligibility of the notion of God’s action becomes relevant. But, within the terms of my argument, it is sufficient to point out that, given this theological context as the one in which claims have been made about the miraculous, some reason could be given for supposing that, *qua* miracle, an event could be regarded as not in accord with the relevant scientific laws and yet not requiring their revision. This is not to imply that theological explanation is wholly distinct and *sui generis*; consideration of the nature of historical explanation would again be relevant. As Dray has argued (and also Hart), to provide an explanation can often be to show how, in an otherwise stable situation, a human agent intervenes; it is not general statement of a law-like character

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that are central, but an account of the specific actions of an individual. Further, this suggestion would be most relevant in the case of Christian theology, most notably with reference to the Resurrection, in that miracles are alleged to occur in a particular historical context about which unique claims are made, so that our assessment of probabilities outside that context need not be affected. However, it will not suffice to introduce suggestions of this kind to show that, when the concept of miracle is invoked, it is not the case that one is left with no explanation, or that the scientist’s requirements are being disregarded in a wholly unprincipled way. Underlying such suggestions must be the assumption that, pace Hume and Bradley, “... a fact which asserts itself as (loosely speaking) without a cause or consequence”\textsuperscript{25} is indeed a fact. Moreover, as Flew implied in talking of laws of nature “in the broadest sense”, it is not only scientific method but also untutored common sense that is flouted by the concept of miracle. Doubts about the coherence of the concept can be allayed only if it is shown more positively how and why the presumptions of science and common sense can be overruled. But, if this can be done, then the objection that to claim that a miracle has occurred goes against scientific procedure and common sense will be dealt with more effectively; the argument will have given some positive justification for making a claim of this kind, not merely rebuttals of sceptical arguments.

To give substance to my thesis I would cite the Resurrection as that case of the possible application of the concept which is crucial, and not only on account of the theological consequences that might be involved. For the tradition seems to make the following claim: a specific group of witnesses could be cited who had met and recognized one who was before dead but now alive again, if transfigured in certain mysterious ways, and in consequence whether on the basis of common sense or through reflection on the relevant nomologicals, the discontinuity with the normal course of events is at its most extreme.\textsuperscript{26} There must therefore be a considerable difficulty in assessing precisely what the evidence implies or asserts to have been the case, and New Testament scholars may raise perfectly proper critical questions about this. What I am concerned to examine is what would have been involved in claiming to have been a witness to the Resurrection oneself; critical questions must remain, but they would be vitally affected by the answer to this prior and philosophical question.

At this point it is relevant to allude to Flew’s earlier comments, not specifically on the concept of miracle, but on the general issue of the uniformity of nature. When dealing with this topic in relation to Hume’s treatment of liberty and necessity, he cites Hume’s claim that, confronted with an apparently inexplicable action, one should suppose that “the in-

\textsuperscript{25}Bradley, op. cit., p. 23.

\textsuperscript{26}Compare Aquinas’ distinction between supposing that God intervenes “by producing the effects of secondary causes without them” and “by producing certain effects to which secondary causes do not extend” (Summa Theologica 1, Qu. 105, Art. 6).
ternal principle and motives may yet operate in a uniform manner, notwithstanding these seeming irregularities". Thus it seems that Hume wishes to claim of human actions as he does of physical events that in every case they can and must be rendered explicable by reference to some uniform law; and that his way of putting the point suggests that he is making it in the form of "a substantial empirical generalization". But, Flew observes, Hume speaks more appositely when he refers to such an assumption as a "maxim", guiding our expectations and methods of enquiry. Similarly in his previous discussion of Hume's error of presenting inductive argument as a faulty version of deductive argument, Flew suggests that we should regard the "inductive principle" as "a rational rule of procedure to guide us in shaping always fallible expectations . . . as a rule and not an assertion". Thus far Flew's thesis seems clear enough, but then, in the later passage I have already cited, his position has to be qualified:

It is on the other hand a mistake to reduce all talk of the uniformity of nature to principles of scientific procedure. . . . It is a most important matter of contingent fact that Nature has at least those regularities which scientists have so far found. Once this qualification is made the possibility of an intelligible concept of an "uncaused event" begins to emerge. Once Flew admits that it is a contingent, if important, matter of fact that the universe is as uniform as we find it to be, can he not seem to imply that conceivably the universe, or particular parts of it, might not be uniform? True, it is hard to see how any such phenomena could be talked or thought of. But, once one has indicated some content for one's claim with reference to a particular miracle (as I have attempted to do with reference to the Resurrection), then, I would argue, one can indeed entertain and apply the concept of an uncaused event, providing one supposes that it is only contingently true that in most other cases the universe is indeed uniform.

Bradley would find such a thesis repugnant since, on his account of the matter, the concept involved would be a contradictory one. But for Flew, or any other disciple of Hume in the empiricist tradition, it could be the more correct since the more empiricist approach to accept the alleged evidence for the miraculous, at least in the one crucial case. Clearly in the case of the healing miracles in the Gospels Flew would have some ground for claiming that he could accept the evidence, just because what it vouched for could now be seen to be intelligible in the light of some subsequent and reputable theory of psycho-somatic medicine. But, given the account I have offered of the Resurrection, it is hard to see how that could be thus understood and so assimilated; in so far as this has been attempted by liberal theologians it has had to involve a reductivist account of the dis-

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27Hume, op. cit., par. 68.
28Flew, op. cit., p. 148.
29Hume, op. cit., par. 67.
ciples’ alleged encounters. But what is the state of the case if one imagines oneself to have been Thomas, not merely now accepting testimony about his state of mind? In spite of the presumptions derived from the worth of nomologicals or from common sense, could one not claim that the correct empiricist procedure would have been to accept, as Thomas did, that Jesus was indeed present and recognizable although, whether in a technical sense or not, the state of affairs that this claim presupposes was strictly inexplicable? To dispute this evident fact within one’s experience would be to go against one’s experience in a way that should not be congenial to an empiricist. An unnecessary question-mark would be raised not only over the alleged anomaly, but also over our normal and quite justifiable expectations about what usually happens. And to persist in the attempted search for an explanation, of the kind one could sanction on scientific grounds, would cast an unnecessary doubt on our standard assumptions about the uniformity of nature, and not only on our formulations of the particular laws in which that uniformity consists. According to Flew the advocates of the miraculous are incoherent when “in the face of something which actually happens, or is believed actually to happen, they still insist that here we have an example of something which nature left to her own devices could never manage”.

But, on my account of the matter, such a judgment could appear to be the only rational one—unless one removes the dilemma by saying that it is not the anomalous occurrence that is actual, only the belief that it was so, and therefore is still left with the question of how the belief arose.

The position I adopt does not merely suppose that “the maxim that ‘every event has a cause’ must be ceded; the intractable events we are studying can only properly be described as ‘causeless’.” My argument is meant to provide the concept of an uncaused event with sufficient content to justify its retention, but without implying that the presumptions derived either from common sense or from scientific method are thereby endangered; while these presumptions can be overruled, their worth and authority is not diminished, but must indeed remain. But, even if I have made this position a coherent one, cannot Flew finally protest that to distinguish in this way “between the order of nature and interruptions of it” must be of no avail, unless it can be shown that “certain things which do happen must nevertheless be disqualified from that order”? The objection seems plausible but the reply to it is implicit in my preceding argument. I have claimed that in some cases, particularly that of the Resurrection, one can make sense of regarding as actual events which, on any unstrained account of the laws of nature, are inexplicable. But, if this is granted, it seems beside the point to suggest that one should hesitate to apply the concept in case some explanation of the mechanics involved might

\[32\text{Op. cit., p. 203.}\]
\[33\text{Vernon Pratt, “The inexplicable and the Supernatural”, Philosophy, 1968, p. 257.}\]
become available. On my account the Resurrection could have a striking significance just because it goes against all our normal expectations and appears as a permanent and unassimilable exception to the order of nature. Perhaps some explanation may subsequently be suggested, for example through some unexpected development in theory about basic particles; but, even if this possibility were realized, the Resurrection would, at the macroscopic level, remain a highly exceptional event. Flew’s scepticism on this final point appears to be well founded, but surely this is only because he contrives to put the onus of proof in a misleading way. To think of the Resurrection in the way I have outlined, the believer is supposed to wait on the findings of the latest scientific theory before he can have adequate grounds for believing that it is indeed a miracle. But I would suggest that he first accepts it as a group of events which appear to be inexplicable, whether or not he knows of possible and relevant advances in scientific theory. Once he becomes reflective about the matter he sees that, in the context of scientific advance, he must mount some defence for his belief, since what he asserts to have occurred still seems far removed from what science suggests to be possible; but one attack which must seem unreal is that there is not sufficient evidence to show that what he claims to be actual and miraculous is indeed exceptional enough for his purposes. The sceptic may contrive to suggest that there can be no adequate ground for regarding even the Resurrection as a miracle; in practice he would surely wish to deny the actuality of the Resurrection, just because it seems too exceptional in character, too unrelated to the rest of his experience.

IV

It should be evident that my final thesis is akin to that offered by Professor Holland in his article on “The Miraculous”. What I have sought to do en route is to pay more detailed attention to Hume’s arguments, and in particular to Flew’s attempts to render them impregnable. Further, as my allusion to the Resurrection has implied, my interest in the topic is a theological one, since it is only in that context that the issue becomes important and contentious. If my arguments are correct then, like Holland, I have shown that the concept of miracle is a possible, that is an intelligible one. To bring to the fore the paradoxical nature of this position Holland describes the occurrence of a miracle as the actual occurrence of that which is “conceptually impossible”, and in substance I agree with this. For, while one has to avoid the charge of incoherence, the most telling of the objections brought by Flew and Hume, to claim that a miracle has occurred would be to claim as actual an occurrence which one’s normal presumptions would exclude as impossible. I have refrained from using Holland’s terminology only to avoid confusion, since clearly a major part of his argument and mine is designed to show that, however unlikely and exceptional a

miracle would be, it cannot on these grounds be debarred as strictly impossible. But this, I think, is only a difference of terminology, since for both of us the one essential contention is that such an occurrence can be regarded as actual, without those normal presumptions being called in question.

In fact the issue on which Flew's position is least easy to fault is one which Holland scarcely touches on and I have not the space to develop. For, granted that the concept emerges from this analysis as a possible one, what is the nature of one's methodology should one seek to apply it, for example in the case of the Resurrection, but yet be diffident about other alleged instances? This is also the central theme of Van Harvey's recent and important work on the relation of faith and history and, though the philosopher he appeals to is Bradley and not Hume, his argument is strikingly akin to Flew's at many points, not least when he attempts an equally questionable distinction between logical possibility and the kind of possibility the historian relies on in his assessment of testimony. In view of the analysis I have given, this perhaps reflects the fact that one's diffidence about applying the concept becomes all the more extreme if one has major reservations about regarding it as a possible concept in the first place, but clearly, even if my treatment of the first and strictly philosophical question is successful, difficulties remain about the question of its application. What I have been concerned to argue is that, confronted with the second question, one should not merely assume that the concept is impossible and so inapplicable. One does have to face the more difficult philosophical issue of what cognitive meaning can be given to assertions about God acting in the world and so revealing himself. But there is no need to suppose that there is some further and insuperable difficulty about the concept of miracle.

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38 This paper was completed prior to the publication of R. G. Swinburne's "Miracles", this journal, October 1968. But I would regard our arguments for the rationality of the concept as essentially complementary.