

Miracles and the case for theism

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I wish to examine the question of whether miracles can play a significant part in a case for theism. Although some Christian apologists claim that the evidence for certain miracles is sufficient to prove to all reasonable persons that God exists, I think J.L. Mackie is right in arguing that this claim is mistaken. But I will also argue that Mackie is mistaken in contending that miracles cannot form part of a case for theism. If there is evidence that certain events deviate from the ordinary course of nature, and if affirming the existence of God would render that evidence more comprehensible than otherwise, then it must be admitted that evidence that these events have occurred is evidence that God exists.

1. Hume's argument

The modern dispute concerning miracles has for the most part centered around David Hume's famous "Of Miracles," section X of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.¹ According to Hume, reasoning concerning matters of fact always involves trying to integrate current information with past patterns of experience. This type of reasoning is employed in our consideration of testimony as well as in other matters; we tend to believe what other people tell us if on the whole we find that they make relatively reliable observations and

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report those observations accurately. But our experience with human fallibility, not to mention mendacity and gullibility, indicates that human testimony is rather undependable in comparison with those well-established regularities we call laws of nature. Since, on Hume's definition, a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, a person presented with a miracle claim must decide which is more dependable, her experience with human truthfulness and freedom from deception, or her experience with the stability of the laws of nature. Since experience strongly supports the stability of the laws of nature and only weakly supports human veracity, there is a very strong presumption against miracles, and it is for all practical purposes impossible for testimonial evidence to defeat this presumption.

Hume's argument, as it stands, suffers from various well-known difficulties. For one thing, Hume relies heavily on the concept of a law of nature, and yet he fails to define what a law of nature is. It is difficult for him, therefore, to say just what it is about *miracles*, as opposed to other unusual events, that requires the presumption against them to be so strong. As even Antony Flew admits, Hume is unable to make the sort of sharp distinction between the marvelous and the miraculous that his argument presupposes.² Second, his argument seems not to give adequate consideration to the possibility of changing our minds about what are and are not laws of nature. Thus if I receive testimony (by reading about an experiment in a newspaper, for instance) that something has occurred that is not in accordance with what I take the laws of nature to be, it is possible for me to accept the testimony and revise my views concerning what the laws of nature are. Because his argument leaves a great deal unclear, I am inclined to think of Hume's argument against miracles as a kind of argument schema, which can be filled out in various ways by opponents of the miraculous.

2. Mackie's reformulation of Hume's argument

One of the most interesting contemporary attempts to fill out the Humean schema is to be found in J.L. Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism*. Mackie endorses Hume's definition of a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature, on the grounds that miracles cannot support theism (or other religious claims) if anything at all unusual can count as

miraculous. Laws of nature, for Mackie, are ways in which the world works, rather than patterns in experience, as they would have to be for Hume. But due to difficulties in defining violations of natural law on the assumption that natural laws work indeterministically, he actually ends up defining a miracle as “a supernatural intrusion into the normally closed system that works in accordance with (natural) laws.”³ This definition neither mentions nor entails that all miracles must be violations of natural law. On my view speaking of miracles as intrusions into or interferences with the natural order by supernatural beings is much preferable to speaking about miracles as violations of the laws of nature. Contrariety to naturalistic expectations no doubt has an important role to play in *identifying* miracles, but I think it a mistake to take anomalousness to be the primary defining feature of the miraculous. For the religious believer breaks in the natural order of events are not of interest simply because they are breaks in the natural order, rather such breaks are of interest because they possibly indicate the activity of God or other supernatural beings.⁴

Nevertheless this does not, in itself, make Humean arguments impossible. Providing and accepting naturalistic explanations for the occurrences we encounter is our usual procedure, and we are not inclined to attribute an event to supernatural intervention unless more ordinary kinds of explanation appear inadequate. And in making that kind of judgment our knowledge of nature and its laws is necessarily relevant.

Mackie’s argument centers around a principle he draws from Hume: “that we have to weigh the unlikelihood of the event reported against the unlikelihood that the witness is mistaken or dishonest.”⁵ He does note, however, that likelihood is always relative to a body of information, and that it can change as new evidence comes in. Further, he concedes that “It is more difficult than Hume allows here to arrive at well-supported generalizations ... about how the world works.”⁶ So we may be in doubt as to whether certain occurrences, such as the sudden recovery of limb use after years of paralysis, are contrary to the laws of nature. Still, someone coming back to life whose heart has stopped beating for forty-eight hours, or water turning into wine, can pretty safely be regarded as contrary to the laws.⁷

But this, he contends, offers no comfort to the defender of miracles. The defender of miracles must claim, after all, not only that certain events have occurred but also that that they contravene true laws of

nature. Thus the person who claims a miracle must admit, by virtue of the fact that he is claiming a miracle, that the antecedent probability of his claim's being correct is minimal.

It is therefore not enough for the defender of a miracle to cast doubt (as well he might) on the certainty of our knowledge of the law of nature that seems to have been violated. For he must himself say that this *is* a law of nature: otherwise the reported event will not be miraculous. That is, he must in effect *concede* to Hume that the antecedent improbability of this event is as high as it could be, hence that, apart from the testimony, we have the strongest possible grounds for believing that the alleged event did not occur. This event must, by the miracle advocate's own admission, be contrary to a genuine, not merely a supposed, law of nature, and therefore maximally improbable. It is this maximal improbability that the weight of the testimony must overcome.⁸

Mackie offers a two-pronged defense against miracle claims: either the alleged event really would violate the laws of nature and therefore probably did not occur, or it may well have occurred but in accord with the laws.

Correspondingly, those who deny the occurrence of a miracle have two alternative lines of defense. The first is to say that the event may have occurred, but in accordance with the laws of nature. Perhaps there were unknown occurrences that made it possible; or perhaps what were thought to be laws of nature were not strictly laws; there may be as yet unknown kinds of natural causation through which this event might have come about. The other is to say that this event indeed would have violated natural law, but for that reason there is a very strong presumption against its having happened, which it is most unlikely that any testimony will be able to outweigh.⁹

Mackie does allow that in a context in which all the participants in the dispute accept theism, supernatural intervention need not be regarded as being outside the range of reasonable expectation.

Since they agree that there is an omnipotent deity, or at any rate

one or more powerful beings, they cannot find it absurd that such a being will occasionally interfere with the course of nature, and this *may* be one of those occasions. For example, it would not be unreasonable to weigh seriously the evidence of alleged miracles as some indication whether the Jansenists or the Jesuits enjoyed more of the favor of the Almighty.¹⁰

But, according to Mackie, the situation is very different where the existence of God is at issue, since in that case one of the parties in the dispute denies the existence of any supernatural being. Such a person will find the antecedent probability of a miracle to be so low as to render it highly unlikely that testimony in its favor will outweigh that predisposition. It will invariably be more reasonable for a person not already committed to theism either to deny the occurrence of the event in question, or to assume that the event will prove, in the final analysis, not to be miraculous. Therefore, whatever role evidence for miracles might play in disputes among theists, such evidence cannot be adduced in favor of theism as opposed to atheism or agnosticism. Arguments from miracles are incapable of proving the existence of God, indeed they cannot even be a significant *part* of a case for theism.¹¹

3. Testimony and intrinsic credibility

Mackie's discussion of this issue is in many ways circumspect and illuminating. Mackie's claim that we have to weigh the likelihood of the event reported against the likelihood that the witness should lie or be mistaken is, I think, on the right track, but I think it more accurate to say that we ought to consider the intrinsic likelihood of the event reported when we decide how likely a witness is to lie or be mistaken.¹² Intrinsic likelihood is not a factor to be given separate consideration alongside the credibility of the witness's report, it is part of what we use to assess his credibility. But what is right about Mackie's principle can be seen when we consider what happens when one peruses the headlines of one of the "scandal sheets" that are to be found in grocery stores. Inevitably the headlines include some spicy gossip about television and movie stars, some information about a new diet, and the report of some strange occurrence that apparently cannot be accounted

for in terms of the laws of nature. Now we are usually inclined to be skeptical of such papers even when they report divorces and affairs among movie stars, but we usually assume that since such events are common, reports of them at least stand some chance of being true. On the other hand, even those of us who are supernaturalistic feel perfectly sure that the miracles they claim simply did not occur. And reasoning of this kind does not exclusively concern witnesses known to be unreliable. Hume quotes the Roman saying "I would not believe such a story if it were told to me by Cato."¹³ Surely Keith Parsons speaks for most of us when he says that "If Mother Theresa herself were to tell me that she flew to pick up her Nobel prize not in an airplane but simply by flapping her arms, I would have no qualms about disbelieving her."¹⁴ So the Humean principle seems right that in assessing testimony the intrinsic credibility of the event testified to must be considered as well as the general reliability of the witnesses.

But some refinements need to be considered. I do not think the witness's general reliability is always the best test to use when considering the reliability of a particular report; the *kinds* of falsehoods someone is likely to assert have to be taken into consideration as well. Jim may lie to his wife about his whereabouts in order to conceal the affair he is having with his secretary, but may not be the sort of person who likes telling strange and unusual stories. Perhaps it would embarrass him were it discovered that a strange story he told turned out to be false. On the other hand, Al may be scrupulously truthful with his wife, but have the passion for spreading wonderful stories that Hume discusses in Part II of his treatment of miracles. Jim's overall reliability may be no greater than Al's, but a miracle report from Jim must carry greater weight than one from Al. Also, since it is natural for us to interpret our experience in terms of our beliefs, testimony to strange events that support the testifier's prior convictions ought in general to carry less weight than those that are contrary to prior convictions. So general considerations concerning the comparison between the reliability of testimony and the initial probability of events may be overturned in the specific investigation of some particular case.¹⁵

4. Miracles and God

As a prelude to some criticisms I will be making against Mackie I would

like to consider a concession he makes to those who use miracles as evidence. Mackie claims that if someone is a theist already, then she already is committed to the existence of one or more supernatural beings, and therefore can legitimately account for the existence of certain apparent miracles by appealing to such beings. This is a concession Hume did *not* make, and other opponents of miracles, such as Antony Flew, do not make it either.¹⁶ According to Flew, God, by virtue of the infinity of his attributes, cannot be appealed to account for the occurrence of any particular event, miraculous or otherwise. Therefore God's existence or nonexistence cannot render the occurrence of a miracle any more probable, because it gives us no information as to why *this* event occurred as opposed to some other event. Due to the infinite nature of God, his activities are impossible to predict, and therefore belief or nonbelief in his existence makes no difference as to whether or not to believe miracles reports.

In response to this objection, it seems clear that even though theists believe God to be omnipotent, they nevertheless have some ideas, based on their own theology, about how God can be expected to use his miraculous power. Even though believers may be unable to predict miraculous occurrences, they are prepared to assign higher or lower probabilities to some miraculous occurrences on the basis of what they believe God to be like. If they are Christians they expect God to exercise his miraculous power in the way that Jesus did (especially if they believe Jesus to be God Incarnate). Thus Christians are more likely to believe reports that God healed someone or raised someone from the dead than they are to believe that God levitated Gregory Hall for 15 minutes in order to disrupt philosophy classes at the University of Illinois. The mere belief that God is intelligent and has purposes renders those miracles that serve some apparent divine purpose more likely to occur than miracles that seem to be just thrown into the universe for no reason. And other properties attributed to God, such as benevolence, will provide some reason to think that certain miracles are more likely to occur than others.

Flew thinks that having theories and expectations about what sort of miraculous activity God might be expected to engage in should be regarded by the believer as blasphemous. He notes that believers are all too eager to insist that God's way are not our ways when faced with the problem of evil, and therefore are in no position to claim that their theistic beliefs have testable consequences. It is true that we cannot have the sort

of detailed expectations concerning the activities of God that we have concerning the activity of electrons. But seeing through a glass darkly is not the same as being totally blind. If a lot of purposeless interference with nature were to occur, I think I would have to admit that such occurrences would tend toward the falsification of my belief in divine benevolence (not to mention divine sanity). And if some interferences can disconfirm my belief that God is benevolent, it would seem that other interferences can confirm that belief as well.¹⁷

A second objection is that if it is necessary to postulate some powerful intelligent agent to account for one or more apparent miracles, it is surely always preferable to attribute them to a being with less than infinite power. Better still, we ought always to prefer a being who is part of nature, such as a space invader employing an advanced technology, to a being who has power over nature itself. For this reason, it might be argued that evidence for apparent miracles can never be evidence for the existence of God, and that theism cannot make strange and wonderful events any more likely than they would otherwise be. As Hume put it in Section XI of the *Enquiry*:

If the cause be known only by the effect, we ought never to ascribe to it any qualities beyond what are precisely required to produce the effect; nor can we, by any rules of reasoning, return back from the cause and infer any other effects from it than those by which alone it is known to us.¹⁸

But three responses can be made to this objection. First, if miracles are put forward as part of a cumulative case for theism, then what is argued for is a being capable of producing all the effects that provide the evidence adduced in favor of his existence. Postulating a common cause for a variety of effects has more explanatory value than postulating separate causes for each, even though it may require committing oneself to the existence of a being more powerful than that required to produce any one of the effects in and of itself. Second, if God is the only being among those who are already believed to exist (or who are considered at all likely to exist) that could be responsible for certain events, that would be a reason for attributing these events to God as opposed to some newly invented being that is postulated merely to account for the events in question. Third, it is possible that the deity in question might provide us with information concerning his (or her)

nature that could reasonably be taken into account when considering the question of just what sort of being is performing all these mighty deeds. Suppose we become convinced that a very powerful being, named Susan, has been healing people, accurately predicting the future, raising the dead, and so on. And suppose Susan proves to be an invariably veracious being, and that we derive great benefit from trusting her. Now, if Susan were to tell us that she (or the beings for whom she works) possess some of the attributes of the traditional God, would it not be reasonable to take her claim seriously, if not to believe her? Given a person's overall belief system, he might think that certain events are better explained with reference to the theistic God than without reference to God. It does not seem that we can, *a priori*, determine that the theistic explanation will always be less adequate than the non-theistic explanation.

5. A reply to Mackie's Humean argument

Mackie seems to be right in admitting that those who already believe in God might reasonably regard certain extraordinary events to be miraculous. But he also wants to say that for people who do not believe in God, miracles are maximally improbable events. But what does it mean for some event to be maximally improbable? Maximally improbable, if taken to mean literally that than which nothing less probable can be conceived, would have to mean probability zero. Now if, as Mackie implies, the probability of miracles given theism is not zero, then the only way in which the probability of miracles could be zero is if the probability of theism is zero. But that is an odd premise for someone to use whose entire book is intended to *argue* for the conclusion that "The balance of probabilities, therefore, comes out strongly against the existence of a god."¹⁹ Mackie may have been a very firm atheist, but we are given no reason to believe that he thought that the probability of theism is zero, nor has he given us any reason for supposing that all or even most atheists consider the probability of theism to be zero. Therefore he cannot maintain that miracles, for the atheist or for the theist, are maximally improbable.²⁰

Mackie might reply to this by suggesting that for a naturalist, the probability for miracles, while not zero, is nonetheless so low as to make serious investigation of reported cases not worth the trouble.

But I do not see that this is correct either. A person who considers the existence of God highly unlikely will, of course, be less likely to consider seriously the possibility that certain miracle claims are well-supported, as indeed such a person might be less likely to consider seriously other types of evidence for theism. Someone who thinks all arguments for the existence of God to be silly, the problem of evil to be devastating, and the impact of Christianity on the world to be only a source of sexual repression will surely not change his whole worldview because he cannot explain away a few miracles, nor can we brand him irrational for failing to do so. But some naturalists are not nearly so entrenched in their naturalism, and the parts of a cumulative case argument for theism are designed each to increase the probability of theism sufficiently to render its acceptance reasonable. So to evaluate the claim that arguments for miracles could not play a significant part in a cumulative case for theism, we must consider the impact of evidence for miracles on someone who is in the process of deciding whether or not to accept theism: someone who perhaps thinks that theism is false but not overwhelmingly improbable. For such a person evidence for miracles might well be taken seriously because miracles are the sorts of events that are much more likely if theism is true than if naturalism is true. I am inclined to think that a naturalist is in a position with respect to miracles not unlike that of a scientist with respect to events that are possible only on a theory he thinks is false. A scientist's belief that such events cannot happen will make him more skeptical than other scientists of claims that there is evidence that such events have occurred. Further, his skepticism can reasonably be expected to vary in inverse proportion to his probability assignment for the theories that would render such events possible. But he should not consider the events in question to be maximally unlikely or to close his mind to the evidence for them because their occurrence would entail the falsity of a theory he holds.

It is true that in order for miraculous occurrences to play a role in a case for theism, it must be the case that such events contradict naturalistic expectations. But it does not follow that, from the point of view of naturalism, these events have to be maximally improbable. Other events that contradict naturalistic expectations to a greater degree can be passed off as mere anomalies because no plausible theistic explanation is available to tempt the naturalist to alter his beliefs about the way the world works. Paul Horwich gives an account of what it is

for an event to be surprising that may shed some light on this matter. He claims that it is necessary to distinguish between unlikely events and surprising events, since many unlikely events do not surprise us. If I were to flip a coin 100 times and get heads every time it would surprise me, even though any other sequence of heads and tails would be equally unlikely. What distinguishes surprising events from other unlikely events is the presence of an alternative account of the circumstances under which the event occurred, an account not previously accepted, that would diminish the improbability of the event in question. Thus in the coin-tossing case the possibility that the coin might not be fair causes me to wonder if the world is in fact the way I, who am accustomed to coins being fair, previously thought it to be. This explains why it would not be surprising if Jones were to win a lottery amongst a billion people, but it would be surprising if Smith were to win three lotteries amongst a thousand people, even though it is more probable that Smith should win his three thousand-person lotteries than that Jones should win a billion-person lottery. This is because the Smith case gives me reason to change my background assumption about the fairness of the lotteries in a way that the Jones case does not. Thus surprisingness, for Horwich, does not vary with improbability, it varies with the degree to which events force us to change our hypotheses about how things happen in the world.²¹ In cases where there is evidence that a miracle has occurred, it is the combination of natural improbability and the availability of supernatural explanation that makes the evidence surprising from the point of view of naturalism, not the improbability alone. So perhaps we can attribute Mackie's insistence that miracles are maximally improbable for atheists to the fact that good evidence for miracles would be maximally *surprising* for atheists; for persons with a naturalistic bent the acceptance of miracles requires a thorough revision of their view of the world. (Miracles would also surprise theists, if they were not expecting God to act in the way he did and would find it necessary to change their view about what God is like). However, as Horwich has shown, surprisingness is not strictly a function of improbability; therefore Mackie is mistaken in assuming that since miracles are maximally surprising they must also be maximally improbable.

In a well-known paper Mackie defends what he called the relevance criterion of confirmation, according to which "an hypothesis (h) is confirmed by an observation (b) in relation to a body of background

knowledge or belief (k) if and only if what is observed would have been more likely to occur given the hypothesis together with our background knowledge, than it would have been given that background knowledge or belief alone.”²² This principle, which I take to be beyond reproach, can be used to show what is wrong with Mackie’s treatment of miracles. For if, as we have shown, an atheist’s prior probability for miracles need not be zero, and if a theist can have better reason than an atheist to believe that a miracle has occurred, it must be the case that events we are likely to call miracles are events that are more probable in a theistic universe than in an atheistic universe. If that is the case, then it must also be true that evidence that such events have occurred is evidence that God exists, since it is more probable that such evidence will be found in a theistic universe than in an atheistic universe. Mackie’s concession is therefore a Trojan horse. If he is going to admit that miracle reports are more credible than otherwise if theism is believed already, then he must also admit that evidence for miracles can be evidence for theism.

In the foregoing I have been responding to Mackie, whose atheism is of the naturalistic sort. But if we take miracles to be interferences with nature by a supernatural power, then it is possible for miracles to occur in a world in which God does not exist. Nevertheless miracles are more likely in theistic universes than in atheistic universes, because all theistic universes contain at least one supernatural being, while the same cannot be said for all atheistic universes. Of course, the mere fact (if it is a fact) that there is evidence for a miracle will not disconfirm any miracle-tolerant form of atheism, rather such atheisms will be confirmed by this mere fact. Nevertheless, if the miracle for which there is evidence is more likely to have been performed by God than by any other sort of supernatural being (and my discussion has indicated how that might be so) then that evidence is evidence for the superior adequacy of theism to any other world-view, miracle-tolerant or otherwise.

We can illustrate the problem of reasonably believing that nature has been interfered with by using the example of a poker game. Now it is certainly possible for events to occur in a poker game that are impossible given its rules, e.g. if five aces were to be dealt in a poker hand, that could only occur if someone had tampered with the deck. On the other hand, consider a game in which the dealer’s best friend gets royal flush after royal flush. Were the dealer to be accused of

cheating, he might suggest that the charge of cheating had not been proved, since it is after all possible that the hands dealt came up at random. Nevertheless, players in the game would be well advised, for the sake of their own pocketbooks, to regard such hands as the result of intelligent “interference” on the part of the dealer with the ordinary random pattern of dealing. There are always players, of course, who are inclined to suspect cheating every time they get a run of bad luck; just as there are people who are inclined to jump to the conclusion that a miracle has occurred every time someone testifies to something the least bit unusual. On the other hand, continued refusal to suspect interference on the grounds that, after all, it is possible for a string of unusual hands to work by chance to the advantage of the dealer’s best friend, would clearly be irrational and hazardous to one’s wealth.

Of course, if someone does not believe that there *is* an intelligent dealer, then he can reasonably be expected to be more reluctant than otherwise to suspect foul play. If, for example, there were a supposedly tamper-proof dealing machine, more evidence than ordinary would be required to convince us that the cards were being interfered with. Yet if the evidence were strong, or if we had some doubts to begin with about the machine’s being tamper-proof, we might be convinced that some bright young hacker had rigged the machine. If a coherent story can be told about how the machine came to be rigged, and that story generates expectations about what we should expect to occur, then that account can be confirmed or disconfirmed by future events. Similarly, in the case of miracle claims, we can ask ourselves whether the evidence, all things being equal, is more like what we should expect given a miracle, or more like what we should expect if there had been no miracle. If the evidence more resembles what we should expect given the miracle, then this evidence is more like what we should expect if theism is true than if naturalism is true. Thus evidence for miracles can be evidence for theism.

But it does seem that Mackie is right in saying that a case against the modern naturalist cannot be founded entirely or even primarily on reported miracles. When an argument of this type proves persuasive, background beliefs about the plausibility of a miracle-working God have to be already at work, in order to prevent the whole case from being dismissed out of hand. The theistic hypothesis has test implications for a wide variety of phenomena,²³ and for this reason there are many other types of evidence to consider when trying to decide wheth-

er or not to be a theist. Making miracles in general, or some particular miracle (such as the Resurrection of Christ) into an *experimentum crucis* seems clearly to be unwarranted. A naturalist might conclude that there is some substantial evidence that certain miracles have occurred, and yet decide to remain a naturalist because, for example, he can find no answer to the problem of evil. Suppose there is good evidence that, say, the alleged portents at Fatima in 1917 really took place. Our naturalist might very well say "I see that no good naturalistic account of the evidence fits the facts as well as your theistic account. But if I accept your theistic account I would have to accept theism, and if I accept theism then I would find myself unable to account for all sorts of evils in the world that are perfectly explicable from the point of view of naturalism. Therefore, I'm just going to assume that there is a good naturalistic explanation for all the evidence for the supposed miracles at Fatima, since if I don't, I will be accepting a cure that is worse than the disease." I might add that in most cases it is impossible to be persuaded by an argument from miracles unless one takes the time to investigate some alleged cases. People do not have unlimited time to investigate these sorts of things, and they cannot reasonably be expected to investigate miracle claims unless they think there is a fairly high antecedent probability that they might prove correct. Unless there is some massive public intervention such as is supposed to occur at the Second Coming of Christ, it is highly unlikely that there should be overwhelming evidence that any event is permanently beyond the reach of naturalistic explanation. Therefore there seems to be little hope that any argument from miracles should be able to prove to all reasonable people that theism is true and naturalism is false. Indeed, most Christian philosophers are willing to concede as much.²⁴

Nevertheless Mackie is wrong when he says that miracles cannot form a significant *part* of a case for theism. According to Hugo Meynell, if evidence for an event stands up to impartial scrutiny, if it continues to resist explanation in terms of the ordinary laws of nature, and if it coheres with a religious system's claims about the activities and promises of God, then it can reasonably be called miraculous, and can form part of a case for theism. It may not prove to every rational unbeliever that God exists, but it can be appealed to as something that a theistic view makes intelligible and that an atheistic view leaves mysterious.²⁵ This claim of Meynell's seems to be basically correct. It is to be noted that Hume's account of reasoning concerning matters of fact fails to

take into account the formation of hypotheses as a means to ascertaining an adequate explanation of events. Similarly, Hume and Mackie seem not to take adequate account of the interpretative schemes in which miracles supposedly make sense. Justification for accepting one interpretative scheme as opposed to another must take account of a great deal more than reported miracles, but it still seems correct to say that evidence for miracles can play a role in the case for a theistic scheme of interpretation.

Notes

1. David Hume, *On Human Nature and the Understanding*, ed. with a new Introduction by Antony Flew (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 115–136.
2. Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (New York: Humanities Press, 1961), pp. 204–206.
3. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 22.
4. A full-dress attempt to develop a maximally adequate concept of a miracle would, I think, require a separate paper. I do not think that my critique of Mackie's argument against miracles turns on a rejection of the Humean concept of a miracle. For some good criticisms of defining miracles as violations of natural law see C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, Macmillan Paperbacks Edition, 1978), pp. 57–60; William P. Alston, "God's Action in the World," in *Evolution and Creation*, ed. Ernan McMullin (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), pp. 209–210; and Robert Hambourger, "Need Miracles be Extraordinary?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 (1987):437–439.
5. Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, p. 23.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Keith Ward, in "Miracles and Testimony" *Religious Studies* 21 (1985):132–134, makes this point very forcefully.
13. Hume, *Human Nature*, p. 118.
14. Keith Parsons, "Miracles and Christian Apologetics" (presented at a colloquium at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, October 1984), p. 6.
15. For an excellent discussion on the subject of evaluating testimony to the miraculous, see Bruce Langtry, "Miracles and the Principles of Relative Likelihood" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 18 (1985):123–131.
16. "Though the Being to whom the miracle is ascribed be in this case Almighty,

it does not, on that account, become a whit more probable, since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being otherwise than from the experience we have of his productions in the usual course of nature." Hume, *Human Nature*, p. 134, see also Flew, *God: A Critical Enquiry* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1984), pp. 145–146.

17. Flew contends that there is no *natural* basis for making conjectures about what God can be expected to do, and conjectures based on revelation beg the question, since in order to accept a revelation, it is necessary to believe already that miracles have occurred. But it can be replied that it doesn't matter *where* the conjectures come from so long as they are confirmed by evidence. For example, Kekule' hit upon the structural formula for the benzene molecule while dozing in front of the fireplace and seeing the flames dancing in snakelike arrays. See Carl Hempel, *The Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 16. The theist who formulates a hypothesis based on revelation is operating within the context of discovery, where imaginative freedom holds sway. That hypothesis, however, must be subjected to testing in the context of justification, where the rules of scientific scrutiny are rigorously enforced. See Wesley Salmon, *Logic*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984), pp. 10–14.
18. Hume, *Human Nature*, p. 140.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 253. One can take "the probability of theism" to mean the probability of theism relative to a person's total evidence, or simply as a person's degree of confidence that God exists, without affecting the present argument.
20. Jordan Howard Sobel, in his paper, "On the Evidence of Testimony for Miracles," *Philosophical Quarterly* (April 1987) 166–186, tries to put Hume's case against miracles on a Bayesian foundation by claiming that miracles (defined as natural impossibilities) have an infinitesimal antecedent probability. But this view has serious problems. Patrick Maher has suggested to me that there are perfectly natural events (such as the moon's moving at the *exact* velocity that it is in fact moving at this moment relative to the sun) that have an infinitesimal prior probability. And Sobel seems unjustified in claiming that miracles should be given such a low probability. On the assumption that nature is all there is, miracles have zero probability. But if you believe (or at least think it somewhat likely) that there is something other than nature, then why should considerations of natural possibility or probability be the only determinants for prior probabilities? For other criticisms of Mackie's claim that miracles are maximally improbable for non-theists see Plantinga, "Is Theism Really a Miracle?" *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (April 1986:110–114; and Kelly James Clark, "Probabilistic Confirmation Theory and the Existence of God" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1985), pp. 47–54.
21. Paul Horwich, *Probability and Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 100–104.
22. J.L. Mackie, "The Relevance Criterion in Confirmation Theory" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 20 (May 1969) p. 27.
23. Although there may be problems with treating theism in general the way one treats a scientific hypothesis, it seems to me that at least insofar as we are con-

sidering the impact of empirical arguments on theistic belief, the scientific model is not inappropriate.

24. For a good discussion of this see Stephen T. David, "Is It Possible to Know That Jesus was Raised from the Dead?" *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (April 1984): 147–159.
25. Hugo Meynell, *God and the World* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972), pp. 95–96.