

Hume's Syndrome: Irrational Resistance to the Paranormal

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Abstract—One of the obstacles to progress in psychical research is irrational resistance to the phenomena. Among eighteenth-century Enlightenment writers, one type of resistance was evident that has persisted until present times. To illustrate, the present paper looks at David Hume's discussion of miracles in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748/1955). Hume's essay actually lays out a good case for some extraordinary events reported about the death of the Jansenist Francois de Paris—phenomena produced by the so-called “convulsionaries of St. Medard.” The contradiction is resolved by Hume himself, who naively reveals what motivates him to deny the overwhelming testimony he reviews: namely, his fear of validating religion. This paper notes the same pressure to deny “miracles” in another eighteenth-century writer, Edward Gibbon; Gibbon, however, unlike Hume, yields to the pressure of evidence and admits one startling instance of a well-documented preternatural event. A third figure from the same century is cited, a rationalistic *Promotor Fidei* of the Catholic Church, Prosper Lambertini, who, ironically, may be cited as having advanced the cause of the scientific investigation of psychic phenomena. The lesson from history is not to be seduced by stereotypes: an empiricist can deny and distort facts; a religious believer can be critical and objective.

Keywords: David Hume—miracles—convulsionaries of St. Medard—Edward Gibbon—Prosper Lambertini

Introduction

Sheer ignorance aside, some people *resist* the idea of the paranormal. There are many interesting reasons why they might. Telepathy, for example, could be seen as implying the loss of one's inner privacy; if we accept telepathy, we would have to admit that other people might be able to “read” our minds, snoop on our inmost secrets. I once recoiled from a chance to speak face to face with Padre Pio for that very reason. People might resist psychokinesis because it suggests that black magic or sorcery might be effective, a frightening thought. Others might flee the afterlife hypothesis because it would force them to revise their assumptions and attitudes toward life. People might just resent having to admit they were wrong about a worldview they were deeply invested in.

David Hume's essay on miracles exhibits a distinctively political form of resistance to the paranormal, an age-old polemic against repressive religion (Hume, 1748/1955). His essay calls attention to a contemporary outbreak of truly strange phenomena, a series of events enmeshed in a bitter controversy between Jansenists and Jesuits. On May 3, 1727, deacon François de Paris, a Jansenist known for his sanctity, died; on that day the first healing miracle ascribed to him was reported. The deacon's gravesite became the scene, lasting for years and spreading to the environs of Paris, of other bizarre, incredible, and "miraculous" phenomena. Supernormal healings were widely reported, perhaps overshadowed by a different class of often grotesque physical phenomena, designed, however, to demonstrate the power of spirit over matter. Innumerable witnesses observed and wrote about these surreal happenings. Pierre Mathieu's valuable study is available in French (Mathieu, 1864/2006), and for a taste of the marvels in English, the report of the arch skeptic Eric Dingwall is entertaining, shocking, and contains a good bibliography (Dingwall, 1962). To see the phenomena of St. Medard in their historical context as driven by people in the grips of apocalyptic passion, read the account of Ronald Knox. Knox is by no means a friendly observer, and describes the holy deacon who was the immediate cause of the outbreak as a man with an "instinct for starvation and squalor and complete self-obliteration" (Knox, 1950: 375). One thing all these writers, including Hume, agree upon: the convulsionaries of St. Medard behaved in astonishing fashion; their performances seemed to defy normal explanation. Even the enemies of Jansenism, the Jesuits, were forced to yield to the facts as attested by innumerable witnesses. Hume's reaction to what were being called "miracles" is what concerns us here.

Miracles and David Hume

It was the age of revolution and the *philosophes*, and the new materialism had political consequences. According to the new view, the frequent enemy of science was organized religion, so one must pay heed to religious superstition, or what was taken to be superstition, and always be ready to extirpate for the sake of truth, progress, and freedom. As John Donne said in a famous poem, all "coherence" was gone with the rise of the new cosmology. A new coherence was rising, and it meant getting rid of the mysterious, the mystical, the supernatural; the specter that haunted Epicurus from classical times still had to be exorcised. Above all, miracles were not "coherent" with materialism. A new form of intolerance sprouted a new set of inquisitorial tentacles: "miracles" became a code word for anathema, and were pegged as the enemies of scientific and political progress.

Miracles were so disturbing to David Hume that he published his essay on the subject in 1748, hoping to devise an argument to "be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures" (Hume, 1748/1955: 118). Our author begins with the reasonable

Humean claim that experience is our only guide to the truth of matters of fact. Facts may be rare, ambiguous, elusive; or obvious, repetitive, and overwhelming. "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence" (Hume, 1748/1955: 118). For witnesses to a phenomenon, "the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual" (Hume, 1748/1955: 120).

Notice that Hume did not say, like some modern anti-psychists, that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," which is nonsense. The claim that Joseph of Copertino levitated is extraordinary; the evidence for his levitations was not extraordinary at all, but consisted of a large number of people who saw with their own eyes the saint rise into the air, in the same way they would have attested to the fact that a bird had entered the church and flown about (Bernini, 1752).

Hume hoped to make an argument that would once and for all silence anyone with a "miracle" claim. "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined" (Hume, 1748/1955: 122). The first dubious assumption here is that all the laws of nature are known; moreover, it is un-Humean and unempirical to assume that any "law" is based on "unalterable experience." With a little sleight of hand, Hume rules out, *a priori*, any event that cannot be comprehended under the known laws of a given epoch. But this is a formula for squelching scientific progress. If we follow Hume, we would have to discard every new phenomenon that was inconsistent with well-established patterns of past experience. We learn what is matter of fact solely *by* experience, and can't be absolutely sure that the sun will rise tomorrow, however well established an induction. It contradicts Hume's premises to claim to know in advance that no new experience might violate a "law" based on customary experience.

Zeal to combat superstition and "enthusiasm" seems to have deformed Hume's reasoning, blinding him to matters of fact that clashed with his beliefs and political passions. However, Hume places before his readers the evidence they need to refute his claim about the phenomena of St. Medard (see also Radner, 2003): "There surely never was a greater number of miracles ascribed to one person, than those, which were lately said to have been wrought in France upon the tomb of Abbe Paris, the famous Jansenist, with whose sanctity the people were so deluded. The curing of the sick, giving hearing to the deaf, and sight to the blind, were everywhere talked of as the usual effects of the holy sepulcher. But what is more extraordinary; many of the miracles were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age, and on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world. Nor is this all: A relation of them was published and dispersed every where; nor were the *Jesuits*, a learned body, supported by the civil magistrate, and determined enemies to those opinions, in

whose favour the miracles were said to have been wrought, *ever able distinctly to refute or detect them*” (Hume, 1748/1955: 132; italics added).

Hume adds a lengthy footnote providing further details in support of the extraordinary claims, including some useful bibliographical references: “Many of the miracles of Abbe Paris were proved immediately by witnesses of the officialty or bishop’s court at Paris, under the eye of cardinal Noailles, whose character for integrity and capacity was never contested even by his enemies.” The new archbishop did not favor the Jansenists, but Hume reports that “22 rectors or *curés*. of Paris, with infinite earnestness, press him to examine those miracles, which they assert to be known to the whole world, and indisputably certain” (Hume, 1748/1955: 132–135).

Hume then criticizes (we are still in his footnote) the Molinist (Jesuit) party for unfairly repudiating the case of Mademoiselle le Franc, but who “soon found themselves overwhelmed by a cloud of new witnesses, one hundred and twenty in number, most of them persons of credit and substance in Paris, who gave oath for the miracle.” Again, to underscore this: one hundred and twenty witnesses, most of whom were creditable persons and all who testified under oath that something inexplicable had occurred.

We are told of a “Mons. Heraut, the *Lieutenant de Police*, whose vigilance, penetration, activity, and extensive intelligence have been much talked of. This magistrate, who by the nature of his office is almost absolute, was invested with full powers, on purpose to suppress or discredit these miracles; and he frequently seized immediately, and examined the witnesses and subjects of them: *But never could reach anything satisfactory against them*” (Hume, 1748/1955: 136; again, italics added).

And neither does David Hume reach anything satisfactory against the reports he has before him about the extraordinary happenings at St. Medard. What then does he conclude from all this? Returning to the main body of his text, we read: “And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate? And this surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation” (Hume, 1748/1955: 137). And so, all the experiences of numerous, highly credible witnesses—placed in the balance with Hume’s *belief* of what is impossible—are reduced to nothing!

How to explain this slippage into self-contradiction, this reversion to pig-headed dogmatism? Hume was bewitched by a word, *miracle*, which he defines as something “absolutely impossible.” Because witnesses and participants of the Medard phenomena used the word *miracle*, which for Hume meant “violation of the laws of nature” and “absolutely impossible,” reports of them became in his eyes automatically incredible, no matter the quantity or the quality of the testimony.

Hume reveals his deepest anxiety when he writes, “. . . we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such religion.” Here it is plain what

Hume's phobic reaction is all about; he is afraid of making a miracle the "foundation for any such religion" (Hume, 1748/1955: 137). Hume fears the possible exploitation of "miracles" by some religion, e.g., Roman Catholic. If Hume had dispensed with the politically charged terminology of "miracle," and if he were less fanatical about his opposition to religion, it might have been easier for him to regard the strange phenomena more objectively.

Rather than make an argument that forever silenced all miracle claims, Hume showed how a person in the grips of a dominant idea, however great a thinker and congenial a human being, may suffer from intellectual blind spots and blatant self-contradiction. Hume had the information before him about what was happening with the so-called "convulsionaries" (in fact, not all the striking phenomena were accompanied by convulsions). Intellectual honesty forced him to present a fair account of events he concluded were based on a delusion. He described the facts and the testimony in support of them accurately, but refused to credit them as true. A common effect, call it *Hume's syndrome*, we may define as a state of involuntary negative hallucination with regard to seeing or acknowledging facts that appear to disrupt one's cherished worldview.

One shouldn't treat Hume's syndrome lightly. Bayle, Voltaire, Paine, Hume, Jefferson, and other Enlightenment stars all associated prodigies, wonders, miracles, and the supernatural with political and intellectual backwardness and oppressiveness (Earman, 2000). It is well known, for example, that Thomas Jefferson produced his own emended version of the New Testament; he accomplished this feat on his own in a few evenings when he had spare time. He deleted all references to miracles; Jefferson did believe Jesus was the greatest social philosopher of the ancient world.

Hume's syndrome continues to animate irrational resistance to the paranormal. No doubt there are some factual reasons lurking behind this resistance, but there is a difference between rational caution and hysterical rejection. Occultists, spiritualists, psychical researchers are traditionally attacked, ostracized, and sometimes demonized by the scientific elite and by organized religion. Irrational resistance appears in many shapes and guises; there is probably more than a touch of it in all of us.

A Confession of Edward Gibbon

Another eighteenth-century writer critical of Christianity was the historian Edward Gibbon. But Gibbon, unlike Hume, had the courage to admit that not all crows are black. He is bound to have read Hume's essay, with whom he enjoyed a warm friendship, and he might not have wanted to appear as stubbornly inflexible as his friend. Gibbon published *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776, a book religionists attacked for its hostile stance toward Christianity. Gibbon lays bare impostures of piety, as he thought, the dream of Constantine and the story in Eusebius about a cross appearing in the sky during battle that led to Roman conversion to Christianity.

Busy lambasting all the “pious frauds,” Gibbon interrupts his narrative and writes: “Yet the historian who views this religious conflict with an impartial eye, may condescend to mention *one* preternatural event, which will edify the devout, and surprise the incredulous” (Gibbon, 1891: 600). Tipasa, a maritime colony of Mauritania, known for the zealous orthodoxy of its people, had fought off the Donatists and the Arians. Most of the Catholic inhabitants had fled by boat to the coast of Spain from the onslaught of a heretical bishop. Hunneric, who was in Carthage, sent a military dispatch to Tipasa, and the rebellious Catholics were arrested. Brought before the inhabitants of the province, their right hands were cut off and their tongues cut out.

The sequel was attested by the African bishop, Victor Vitensis, in a publication two years after the event; apparently, they whose tongues had been excised *continued to speak*. In Tipasa, about seventy individuals who had their tongues ripped out continued to produce articulate speech. Gibbon accepted the historical testimony for these strange events and used the word “miracle” to describe them, quoting Victor: “If anyone should doubt of the truth, let him repair to Constantinople, and listen to the clear and perfect language of Restitutus, the subdeacon, one of these glorious sufferers, who is now lodged in the palace of the emperor Zeno, and is respected by the devout empress.” According to this report, the phenomenon was ongoing, there were multiple witnesses, and the witnesses were credible.

Gibbon states that he was astonished to find “a cool, a learned, and unexceptional witness, without interest, and without passion,” the Platonic philosopher Aeneus of Gaza, who described his observations: “I saw them myself: I heard them speak: I diligently inquired by what means such an articulate voice could be formed without any organ of speech: I used my eyes to examine the reports of my ears: I opened their mouth, and saw that the whole tongue had been completely torn away by the roots; an operation which the physicians generally suppose to be mortal” (Gibbon, 1891: 601).

Gibbon refers to further evidence for this astonishing report in an edict issued by Justinian, an account in Marcellinus’s *Chronicle* of the times, and one of the dialogues of Gregory the Great. The enemies of Catholic orthodoxy, he notes, are prevented by an “incurable suspicion” from accepting the most “plausible evidence” for any Catholic miracle. Why? As Hume observed, to admit such “miracles” would authenticate Catholic orthodoxy and empower the dreaded Papism. Gibbon, who was anything but a Papist, saw this; still, he fought off Hume’s syndrome and chose to include in his history an account of at least one thing as outré as the events at St. Medard.

A Pope Critical of Miracles

Let me round this off with a comment on another eighteenth-century scholar, one who may be said to have consciously, and without condescension, introduced a more rational attitude to the study of “miraculous” phenomena. It

is ironical that this person was Prosper Lambertini, who was not only a Papist but also a Pope. Before becoming Pope Benedict XIV, he served twenty years (1702–1722) as *Promotor Fidei*, otherwise known as the Devil's Advocate. The role of the Devil's Advocate was to cross-examine witnesses and critically examine evidence for miracles and heroic virtue. The legalistic jousting was part of the beatification and canonization process. Admired for his tolerance, humor, and practical scientific rationalism, Lambertini's job was to determine if an alleged miracle (paranormal) withstood critical scrutiny. Based on his experience as Devil's Advocate, he published a four-volume study, *Of the Beatification and Canonization of the Servants of God* (1734–1738).

Unfortunately, an adequate translation into English is lacking; the best summary is available in Renée Haynes's book about this Enlightenment pope (Haynes, 1970). What we find, unlike Hume, is a willingness to confront the entire range of human experience. Lambertini drew on common sense, history, knowledge of human nature, and the widest possible compass of recent scientific knowledge to determine if a claimed phenomenon could be explained in terms of known natural science. So comets and falling stars were treated as intelligible in terms of the new astronomy. There is much discussion of what today we call altered states of consciousness in the production of supernormal cognition. Since witnesses often claim that saintly persons emanate or are surrounded by preternatural light, he provides a detailed discussion of unusual natural luminosities. To determine what counts as normal for a period of time one can go without food or drink, he assigns Dr. Beccari the task of collecting all the known information on the subject, and doubts if preternatural fasting is proof of divine influence. Likewise, he reviews all the available data describing the natural circumstances in which a dead body may remain incorrupt, and here concludes there are cases that defy scientific explanation, but denies they are proof of holiness. Without using contemporary terminology, he clearly understands that some healings are psychogenic or psychosomatic and therefore not miraculous. He fully grasps the role of imagination and its possible pathological or therapeutic effects on the body. Without using current lingo, he grasps the concept of placebo. He sets up almost impossible criteria for "miraculous" healing, demanding that healings be sudden, complete, and lasting before they can begin to qualify as miraculous. Lambertini must be counted, with Robert Boyle and Joseph Glanvill, as an early pioneer in the scientific study of supernormal phenomena.

Conclusion

History is full of surprises and contradictions: a philosopher of genius, and radical exponent of experience, is blinded by his assumptions and cashiers whole dimensions of experience. On the other hand, an embodiment of "Papism" is fair, rational, and objective in his treatment of the same outlaw phenomena. So much for stereotypes. Hume's syndrome pervades all walks of life and all points

of view. Irrational repression of the paranormal—of the different, the unexpected—can become so ingrained as to become a disposition. We tend to see what we expect to see and what confirms or is consistent with our worldview. Regardless of status, education, or accomplishment, an extra effort is necessary to see the gorilla in the room with us.

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