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# Hume, Skepticism, and Early American Deism

PETER S. FOSL

“Madam, I am no Deist. I do not style myself so, neither do I desire to be known by that Appellation.”

—Hume to Mrs. Mallet

The precise extent to which David Hume influenced early American thought is exceedingly difficult to determine, and among the most difficult regions of his likely influence is that of American deism. In this essay, I will undertake to refine our understanding of Hume’s relationship with early American thought in general and to that of the American deists in particular. My principal concerns are, first, to articulate the general nature and extent of Hume’s reception among the literate of the British colonies that would become the United States as well as in the newly founded republic; and second to argue that, in comparison, Hume provides stronger arguments against belief in miracles than do deistic criticisms.

At the outset, one may note that similarities can be discerned between the general features of Hume’s thought and that of many early Americans, deistic and otherwise. Prominent people in the North American colonies and the new United States, for example, frequently appealed to the importance of “experience” in assessing intellectual matters, while experience—especially common, ordinary experience—figures centrally in the vision Hume develops in his philosophical treatises, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739 and 1740), *An Enquiry into the Human Understanding* (1748), *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of*

*Morals* (1751), and *Dissertation on the Passions* (1757).<sup>1</sup> But, of course, such a similarity probably means very little, since “experience” also figures centrally in the visions of many other thinkers of the time. Moreover, systematic philosophical inquiry of the sort Hume engaged was little known in the colonies outside of a few private collections and important centers of learning such as Harvard College and the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), where the Scottish John Witherspoon was president and where Hume’s thought probably would have been addressed.<sup>2</sup> While Hume may have contributed to it, therefore, the empirical thrust of much early American thought is almost certainly more accurately attributed to the general intellectual spirit of the times.

It is in Hume’s *History and Essays* that we are more likely to find sources of his influence.<sup>3</sup> Hume’s *Essays* were well read, and copies of *The History of England* were common in North America, though even this enormously popular text had a difficult time of it on the American scene.<sup>4</sup> A number of Hume’s essays were also published in the periodical literature. The *History* had acquired a reputation for being pro-Tory and was therefore widely condemned, often by prominent figures such as Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). Writing to John Adams (1735–1826) in 1816, Jefferson remarked that the *History* “has done more to sap the free principles of the English Constitution than the largest standing army.”<sup>5</sup> The severity of early American disapprobation for Hume’s text was in 1771 so severe that the colonial reprinter Robert Bell was unable to interest booksellers in an American edition of the *History*.<sup>6</sup>

Among the most interesting aspects of Hume and his life to the authors of early American periodical literature in the British colonies and the United States were (a) Hume’s infamous argument against miracles, (b) his deathbed refusal of Christianity, and (c) his supposed general skepticism, atheism, and immorality.<sup>7</sup> Attention to all three topics was considerable. An article possibly written by Benjamin Rush, entitled, “Contrast between the Death of a Deist and a Christian, David Hume and Samuel Finley,” published in *The United States Magazine* (February 1779), was quite influential in promoting a negative image of Hume.<sup>8</sup> Periodicals also occasionally culled from Hume support for the revolutionary cause, publishing various among his essays—as *The South Carolina Gazette* (January 1765) did with Hume’s “On the Liberty of the Press,” for example.<sup>9</sup>

The frequency, therefore, of reference to Hume’s thought indicates that his work managed to become widely read among important, literate Americans. Even where people were critical of his work, its presence was clearly felt.

## I. Hume and Early American Thinkers

Among those of whom we have a more detailed understanding of Hume's influence is Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790). The two men became acquainted with one another in 1757 when Franklin was in London. In 1760 and 1771, Franklin traveled to Edinburgh to visit Hume, and a letter of 1760 from Franklin to Hume suggests that Franklin had for some time been a consistent reader of Hume's work, at least his essays.<sup>10</sup> Franklin sent Hume his paper on the lightning rod to be read before the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh. Interestingly enough, it seems that Franklin made use of a rather Humean argument before the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 in maintaining that no high officers in any branch of government should receive a salary.<sup>11</sup>

Alexander Hamilton (1755–1804), too, was acquainted with Hume's work. Indeed, Vernon L. Parrington goes so far as to write that Hume was one of the most important influences upon Hamilton's thought.<sup>12</sup> The 1780 Committee on Finance in the Continental Congress studied Hume's economic essays, and in the 1787 Philadelphia Congress, Hamilton appealed to Hume, perhaps erroneously, in arguing against legally penalizing corrupt office holders. Hume also apparently taught Hamilton that an expanding commercial order is consistent, even complementary, with a stable republic.<sup>13</sup> In "Federalist No. 85," the last of the *Federalist* papers, Publius (there Hamilton) quotes directly from Hume's important essay, "Of The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences."<sup>14</sup>

James Madison's (1751–1836) *Federalist* articles, especially numbers 10, 47, and 51, appear to bear a Humean mark. "Federalist No. 10," in particular, has drawn significant attention from scholars and has recently again become the subject of focused scrutiny. Challenging Charles A. Beard's influential economic interpretation of "Federalist No. 10," Douglass Adair maintains that it is in fact Hume's 1752 essay, the "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," that provides the intellectual source and underpinning for Madison's vision. Revising James Harrington's position in his *Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), Hume advances the startling idea—contrary to then prevailing notions maintained by Montesquieu and most other current political theorists—that a large, properly constituted republic could be established and made stable. Indeed, the very size of it, Hume asserts, will contribute to its stability by inhibiting the development of faction. Madison's defense of the new, comparatively enormous American republic in "Federalist No. 10" is astonishingly similar to Hume's account; therefore, concludes Adair, we ought best understand Madison as having drawn from Hume rather than as having anticipated Marx.<sup>15</sup>

Other important colonial figures also apparently drew upon Hume's work. Among the most prominent of these may be counted Samuel Adams, John Dickinson, Charles Lee, George Washington, John Randolph of Roanoke, Benjamin Rush, and Robert Carter of Nomini Hall.<sup>16</sup> Those Hume inspired, however, were not always members of the group of colonial figures who have retained widespread esteem. In producing pamphlets and apologetic literature, a number of pro-slavery authors also drew upon Hume's work, specifically

upon the claims he presents in a note appended to his essay, "Of National Characters," about the inferiority of darker-skinned peoples.<sup>17</sup>

But what of the deists?<sup>18</sup> In the first place, it is important to see that Hume himself was not a deist. Indeed, many of the most basic philosophical themes and positions he develops directly militate against deism. Hume's skepticism with regard to reason and the senses, for example, undermines the crucial deist contention that reason possesses sufficient and irreproachable power both to disclose and to establish truths about God, humanity, and nature.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Hume's theory of causation stands in contrariety to the deists' rigorous view of the operation of nature and of nature's laws.<sup>20</sup> Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1778) comprise a devastating series of assaults upon a number of the principal claims and instruments deism frequently deploys, perhaps most prominently the argument from design.<sup>21</sup> In advancing a naturalistic account of the genesis and development of religious belief, Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) may be interpreted as subverting not only Christianity, Judaism, and Islam but also deism as well.<sup>22</sup> In addition, if we are to grant the veracity of Lord Charlemont's report, Hume himself denied being a deist.<sup>23</sup>

This is not to say, of course, that Hume had no influence upon deism or that comparing Hume's thought with that of American deists is a fruitless venture; nor is it to say that Hume's thought is in no way similar to that of the deists. Hume and the deists share, among other things, a commitment to what might be called, in their view, a reasonable secularism as well as a deep suspicion and critical posture toward orthodox religious belief. Although Hume's support is significantly qualified in a number of ways, he, like the deists, maintains a positive regard for the capacities of human rationality and the new science.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the conjunction and disjunction of Humean thought and deism, however, a comparison of the two, even where no direct influence is evident, serves to expand our understanding of both.

Many early American political figures, including Washington and Jefferson, were, of course, deists. Hume's influence upon Washington remains indeterminate, and, of course, we know that Jefferson was hostile.<sup>25</sup> Franklin was also a deist, having authored at the age of twenty, *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion* (1728), as well as a number of later deistic works. Since Franklin was a reader and friend of Hume, it may well be the case that at least his later thoughts on religion were developed in the light of Hume's work.<sup>26</sup> There are good reasons, however, to remain suspicious of such a claim. Throughout his adult life, Franklin maintained a number of positions on religion deeply contrary to those developed by Hume, including belief in providence and the efficacy of prayer. On the other hand, both men shared a skeptical disposition toward Calvinist and Roman Catholic claims to the infallibility of their doctrines. More pronounced similarities may be found between Franklin and Hume along the lines of their political and ethical postures. Both thinkers, for

example, criticized the Christian propensity to generate immoderate "enthusiasms" and thereby "factions"; both men supported American independence;<sup>27</sup> and both advocated the establishment of democratic, representative, middle-class government.<sup>28</sup>

While, however, it is important to assess Hume's influence upon important deist political figures such as Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin, we must keep in mind that the deist movement in early America was largely driven by others. It is possible to construct an understanding of the extent to which the work of these activists, evangelists, journalists, and theorists was influenced by Hume's, as well as of the extent to which their work may be said (whether knowingly or not) to share a common vision with his. Because of their systematic and pointed prose, and because of the prominent position deism occupied in their work, the efforts of these authors placed them at the center of the American deist movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hume scholarship has been woefully silent on this topic, and we are therefore indebted to James Dye, who has not only broached the issue but offered an expansive comparison of the thought of Ethan Allen (1737–1789), Thomas Paine (1737–1809), and Elihu Palmer (1764–1806) with that of Hume.<sup>29</sup> Dye has persuasively argued that, while there is much to be gained from a philosophical comparison of these thinkers, there is little to support the claim of much direct inspiration or borrowing on their part from Hume's texts.

My own analysis will focus on the same texts and figures, and like Dye, I will be principally concerned with examining the issue of miracles.<sup>30</sup> I wish, however, to take exception to Dye's conclusions, as well as those of other critics, and do so in a number of ways. Dye is critical of Hume's exposition in two respects. First, Dye maintains that, in a variety of ways, the arguments against miracles developed by the American deists are superior to those that Hume deploys. For example, Ethan Allen's proof is, Dye maintains, "more powerful and far more concise than Hume's."<sup>31</sup> By contrast, I wish to defend the superiority of Hume's argument in "Of Miracles" (EHU Sect. X ).<sup>32</sup>

Secondly, according to Dye, the deists "have a better understanding of the concept of natural law in the new physics than does Hume."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in general, Dye writes, the work of the deists "comes off rather well when compared with Hume's."<sup>34</sup> In reply, I hope to show that: (a) while Hume's conception of laws of nature may not be entirely well formed (EHU Sect. X), because Hume's conception does not require a divine foundation it is superior to those of the deists; and, moreover, (b) the limitations of Hume's conception do not hobble his argument against the reasonableness of belief in miracles. Indeed, the manner in which Hume's conception departs from those developed by many Newtonians both shields his thought against many of the philosophical problems characteristic of deistic work and anticipates more recent conceptions of natural laws.

In order to better appreciate the strengths of Hume's position, his argument of Section X must be situated within the larger context of his skeptical vision. My exposition, therefore, will not only address Section X but also the Humean philosophical vision as a whole. Doing so will not only provide us a better understanding of the point and structure of his arguments; it will also allow us to understand the manner in which Hume's thought differs from that of the decidedly nonskeptical deists.

Let us begin with Ethan Allen.

## II. Understanding Phenomena as Miraculous

Ethan Allen's principal work of religious criticism, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (1784), became what Kerry Walters calls "the young Republic's first sustained defense of deism," having "exerted an immense influence on American free thought."<sup>35</sup> The text was issued in 1784, long enough after Hume had published his works on religion for Allen to have found inspiration or provocation in them.<sup>36</sup> Remarks in the preface of Allen's text, however, suggest that he was familiar neither with Hume nor indeed with any of the other deistic writers of the time.<sup>37</sup> In chapter VII of the work, Allen advances a number of arguments against miracles. Like other deists, Allen claims to have achieved knowledge of the nature and attributes of God (namely, that God is perfect) and metaphysical knowledge about the character of the natural world (namely, that [1] the natural world was created by God and [2] that the laws governing the natural order are also perfect). By implication, Allen also holds fast to the deists' confidence in the powers of reason to disclose these metaphysical truths.

Such contentions provide Allen with what he believes to be powerful instruments for destabilizing the beliefs of the Christian faithful and the theologically inclined. They are contentions, however, that are profoundly contrary to the skepticism advanced by Hume. Hume's skepticism calls for a humble restraining of philosophical reflection to the ordinary and shared domain Hume collects under the rubric of "common life."<sup>38</sup> There is, by contrast, a kind of privilege claimed by rationalistic Newtonian deists who would arrogate to themselves and to their methods knowledge of the world and of God. Hume, for all the apparently undemocratic features of his work, resists such privilege.

Within the metaphysics of Allen's work is an argument, epistemological in its cast, that achieves remarkable elegance and power; it is an argument aimed to show not that there are no miracles but, rather, that we have no good reason for believing in them. "Those things in nature which we do understand," Allen writes, "are not miraculous to us, and those things which we do not understand, we cannot with any propriety adjudge to be miraculous" (254). This argument may be recast in the form of a constructive dilemma, arguing the alternative:

1. If an event is understood by us, then that event is not regarded by us as a miracle. ( $U \rightarrow Q$ )
2. If an event is not understood by us, then that event cannot properly (i.e., ought not) be regarded by us as a miracle. ( $\sim U \rightarrow S$ )
3. Every event either is understood or is not understood by us. ( $U \vee \sim U$ )

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$\therefore$  Every event either is not or cannot properly (i.e., ought not) be regarded by us as a miracle. ( $Q \vee S$ )

Allen's is indeed a concise and exceedingly provocative argument, one whose power is to a large extent derived from that of Newtonian science.<sup>49</sup> It is, however, from a Humean position, flawed.

Hume, like Allen and many others of the time, regards miracles as events contrary to the laws of nature. He writes, "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature" (EHU 90 [114]). Allen follows: Miracles are events that are "opposed to and counteract the laws of nature" (233). For Hume, however, that an event is miraculous entails more than that it "violate," or contradict, some established law of nature; inexplicable and anomalous events might conceivably accomplish as much.<sup>40</sup> Miracles are not, for Hume, mere violations of the laws of nature; they are violations *produced by the intercession of some divine cause*. That Hume regards miracles in this way is evident in his distinguishing miraculous events from those that are "only marvellous" (EHU 90 [114]). Inasmuch as it is possible that such intercession should go undetected, this rendering is consistent with Hume's distinguishing "visible" from "invisible" miracles (EHU 90n 1 [115n 1]). Hence, when in that important footnote Hume offers an expanded definition, he writes: "A miracle may be accurately defined, *a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent*. A miracle may either be discoverable by men or not. This alters not its nature and essence" (EHU 90n 1 [115n 1]).

Clearly, Allen would wish to deny that understanding an event as having been caused by some supernatural entity is, properly speaking, to understand the event at all. But can such a denial be regarded as anything other than arbitrary and question-begging? In other words, Allen purports to prove that conceiving of an event as miraculous is a misunderstanding by first stipulating that what is conceived as miraculous is misunderstood.

In order to clarify matters here, consider the distinction between the unreasonableness of some understanding and the fact of some event simply being "understood." For Allen, phenomena are, by definition, understood only when they are explained by reference to established laws of nature. His restricted usage of "understanding" is, however, not only contrary to his own contemporary as well as present usage; it is also contrary to Hume's use of the concept. For Hume, "understanding" an event entails relating that event to



others through the “natural” and “philosophical” relations of ideas constitutive of reasoning, especially the relation of “cause and effect” (T 10–15). Again, miracles, for Hume, are not events without causes; their causes, rather, are supernatural. One might be inclined to infer from this that for Hume, no event could *possibly* be understood to be miraculous, since Hume’s theory of perception calls into question the possibility of directly experiencing at least the Christian-Judaic-Islamic God and therefore the cause of any supposedly miraculous event.<sup>41</sup> Yielding to such an inclination would, however, be a mistake, for Hume maintains that it is meaningful to make causal claims about events whose causes we can never experience.

Hume argues that it is legitimate to reason from observed effects to unobserved causes just in those cases where the observed effects in question sufficiently resemble other observed effects that have followed from observed causes. Moreover, Hume regards as legitimate positing unobservable entities through what he calls “relative ideas”—so long as our understanding of those entities is properly disciplined by phenomena open to common, public observation.<sup>42</sup> In cases where the effects are similar, then, we may intelligibly conclude that the causes are also, in some relevant way, similar—whether or not we are able to observe those causes. This sort of inference appeals for its justification to an argument from analogy, and doing so may seem to restrict the possibilities of such arguments rather severely.

From a Humean point of view, however, this would not be the case. Hume unambiguously maintains in the first *Enquiry* that, actually, “All our reasonings concerning matters of fact are founded on a species of Analogy” (EHU 82 [104]). Whenever we make causal inferences from present impressions to non-present causes or effects, we are, for Hume, appealing to analogous past experiences of similar events. What must be determined, then, from a Humean point of view, is not whether or not we are justified in making use of analogical reasoning in inferring a divine cause for some apparently miraculous event but, rather, whether or not the analogy in question is in fact a *strong* analogy. On this matter, too, Hume is clear. Both in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (D II 178) and in the first *Enquiry* (though perhaps not without some measure of irony), Hume suggests that analogies involving claims of supernatural (unobservable) causation *cannot* be regarded as strong analogies.<sup>43</sup> It is upon this point—the disanalogy of causes—that the Humean criticism turns.

Interestingly enough, Hume only briefly addresses what is perhaps a more salient characteristic of miracles—namely, that they, as *effects*, are thought to be almost entirely disanalogous with other experienced effects. Certain events are taken to be miracles because they appear to be so very different from what we find in the common course of the world. Because in such cases the effect appears to be so very different, the cause must, according to miracles’ defenders, be similarly different. In fact, so they conclude, only a supernatural cause can account for an event so extraordinary. Hume’s rejoinder to this sort of rea-

soning is to claim that it "is only when two *species* of objects are found to be constantly conjoined, that we can infer the one from the other; and were an effect presented, which was entirely singular, and could not be comprehended under any known *species*, I do not see, that we could form any conjecture or inference at all concerning its cause" (EHU 115 [148]). In other words, the more unique the event, the less able we are, according to Hume, to determine the nature of its cause. If we may extend this principle to cover classes of events as well as singular events, then because miraculous events (either singly or as a class) are held to be essentially different from events we experience in the ordinary course of nature (either singly or as a class), it follows that we are not warranted in inferring anything at all about their causes (even whether or not they have causes).

Whether or to what extent, however, putatively miraculous events may be regarded as analogous with natural events, it is important to see, regarding the case of Ethan Allen, that to claim that an analogy is not strong is not to claim that it is unintelligible or not understood. Hume's relatively more extensive rendering of the sufficient conditions for understanding an event makes it possible for him to distinguish between two very different questions that Allen unfortunately confounds—namely, (1) the question of what it means for us to understand an event called miraculous, and (2) the question of what is required for us to be justified in that understanding. As we have seen, while Hume acknowledges that in specific circumstances it is certainly intelligible to regard as miraculous an event that is understood, Hume also maintains that such a way of understanding cannot be rationally well-grounded. Since for Hume the notion of "understanding" has a larger extension, all events understood as miraculous are, contrary to Allen, events that are understood; though among all instances of understanding an event, some are rationally well-grounded and some are not. By contrast, for Allen (since his usage is restricted to something like scientific understanding), no events regarded as miraculous are truly understood; and all instances of truly understanding events are well-grounded.

It follows that, from a Humean point of view, premise 1 of Allen's argument is false, for the contradictory of the premise is true: some events that are understood are events that are meaningfully regarded as miraculous. (Even if we accept Allen's rendering of "understanding," the argument, from a Humean point of view, remains unsound. In that case, it is premise 2 that becomes false, since according to Hume it would be in some cases proper to call events "miraculous" that in Allen's sense are not understood.) Moreover, as I have shown, the Humean point of view on calling putatively miraculous events "understood" events is, unlike Allen's, both non-question-begging and consistent with ordinary practice. Among the virtues of Hume's argument, then, we must count its acknowledging, as people ordinarily do, the human capacity

(even proclivity) to *understand* specific events as miraculous while not attempting to dismiss that capacity in any question-begging way.

### III. Deism and Skepticism on Laws of Nature

The difference between Hume's rendering of laws of nature and that of the deists also reveals the strength of his position. Hume's account and use of laws of nature in his arguments against miracles have been the subject of considerable scholarly attention and criticism. Dye concludes that "Hume is more than a little vague about what he understands by 'laws of nature'," <sup>44</sup> and others have concluded that Hume's appeal to "uniform" as well as to "firm and unalterable" experience in support of natural laws finds him begging the question in his own fashion. <sup>45</sup> In short, his critics charge, Hume attempts to undermine testimony in miracles by simply assuming that no one has ever observed a miracle. For my own part, Hume's usage of the notion of "laws of nature" in his various texts seems rather loose and ill-defined, and to the extent that Hume's appeal to the "uniform experience" of humankind may be read as his assumption that no one has in fact ever experienced just what testimonials about miracles claim to have experienced, his argument is flawed. I wish to maintain, however, in contradistinction to Hume's critics, that even if his argument is flawed, it is not so in any fundamental way—that is, in any way that irretrievably undermines its power or soundness. I present three rejoinders.

1. *The Lawfulness of Hume's Claims.* Although Hume appears to confound various empirical generalizations (e.g., "that all men must die; that lead cannot, of itself, remain suspended in the air" [EHU 90 (114)]) with laws established through recognized scientific institutions and procedures, Hume does not actually call these generalizations laws. Rather, he says that they are "*agreeable* to the laws of nature, and there is *required* a violation of these laws . . . in order to prevent them" (EHU 90 [115], emphasis mine). In other words, the generalizations that Hume cites may be understood to be not themselves laws of nature but rather to be factual claims *entailed* by certain laws of nature. Counterexamples to any such generalizations would, therefore, entail the violation (or falsification) of the laws from which they have been derived. This I take to be Hume's point, and the manner in which those generalizations make the violation (or falsification) of natural laws possible is all his argument requires.

Moreover, it is important to see that from a logical, if not a procedural, point of view, the statements Hume employs are themselves sufficiently law-like to function as laws of nature in his argument. The claims Hume uses are true, nonanalytic, universal generalizations, whose subject terms are unrestricted, that sustain counterfactual conditionals, and that may be used to for-

multate explanations and predictions of events in nature. Hume's formulæ, therefore, conform to the principal features of laws of nature developed by more recent philosophers of science.<sup>46</sup> Criticism of the clarity of his position on natural law, or of his difficulties in understanding the implications of specific natural laws established by science,<sup>47</sup> fails, therefore, to undermine the soundness of Hume's argument.

2. *A More Comprehensive View of Hume's Claims.* Although Hume seems to be caught in a circle of his own making in *Enquiry X*, his remarks there must be qualified by reference to the epistemological theories and theories of causation he had already developed in his texts. Moreover, as we will see, by recasting a number of his premises in a manner which honors his positions elsewhere, Hume's circle may easily be broken without vitiating his argument.

In both the *Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume undertakes to subvert the rationalist doctrine that there is a necessary, internal relation between causes and effects such that effects can be deduced from the very ideas of their causes. For Hume, by contrast, all relations, including those of causation, are external relations. Moreover, Hume's exposition also subverts any demonstrable foundation for what may be called the principle of the uniformity of nature, the notion that nature is uniform in its operations across both space and time. This being the case, Humean epistemology and philosophy of science must be seen as inconsistent with the assumption of "firm and unalterable experience."<sup>48</sup>

3. *The Superfluity of Hume's Difficult Remark.* It is also important to see that Hume's argument in "Of Miracles" does not depend upon assuming the firm, unalterable, and uniform experience of humankind. Hume only requires (as do those who would claim to have observed a miracle) that human experience has established beliefs in relevant lawlike regularities in nature. Understandings of this sort may be established without assuming human experience to be unalterable or to be uniform. Hume's statements in *Enquiry X* regarding the firm, unalterable, and uniform experience of humankind—whether downright mistaken or unintentionally misleading—may appear to weaken his case, but in fact his argument works just as well with weaker, more guarded claims. Indeed, an argument which relies only upon weaker (that is, more limited) premises is a stronger argument.

In light of these three considerations, therefore, Hume's first principal argument in *Enquiry X* may be recast as follows: The very *idea* of a miracle depends upon there already having been established exceedingly firm (indeed, paradigmatically firm) regularities of nature, call them laws of nature.<sup>49</sup> A miracle can only be, by its very essence, a divinely caused event that is contrary to such regularities. Indeed, in order to be recognized (though it may not be), a mira-

cle must be contrary to established understandings of those regularities.<sup>50</sup> Miracles, by their very essence, cannot be conceived as merely unusual, rare, or simply special events. They must be conceived as events that are quite literally anomalous—that is, not bound by and not explicable by the laws of nature. Insofar, then, as testimony that a miracle has occurred requires as its prior condition a paradigmatically firm understanding of the regularities of nature (what Hume calls a “full proof”), and since such an understanding is the strongest possible sort of understanding for humans about experienced events, at its very *best*, testimony that a miracle has occurred can only, according to Hume, *equal* and never surpass the strength of such an understanding (EHU 90 [115]).<sup>51</sup> Therefore—because in such a case evidence for the occurrence of a miracle could only at best *balance out* evidence for the established regularities of nature that appear to have been violated—the very most compelling evidence for the occurrence of a miracle must properly only lead us to the *suspension* of judgment on the issue.<sup>52</sup>

The probability that the relevant testimony about the miracle is false can at best only be greater than or equal to the probability that the law of nature has been violated; and because of the character of human passion and practice, the probability that the testimony is false is, in fact, *always* greater than the probability that the natural law has been violated. In Hume’s own words, “no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments” (EHU 91 [115–116]).<sup>53</sup> This rendering of Hume’s argument resolves the apparent difficulties in Hume’s assertion of “firm unalterable experience,” and it is consistent with the general argument of *Enquiry* X as well as Hume’s definition of “miracle.” More importantly, however, the account fits well with Hume’s view of natural law and of skeptical philosophy more generally.

The concept of natural law deployed by the deists is very different from that developed by Hume. While, for Hume, certainty about the necessity of the relations described by natural laws depends only upon the human mind and its engagement with the natural world, for the deists, the necessity (indeed, even the discovery) of natural laws is rooted in the nature and power of God, and our certainty in that necessity is established by reason. For Hume, the theories and laws of natural science (and philosophy) are the products of human custom, habit, invention, and imagination, productions “which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination” (T 272). For the deists, by contrast, natural laws are divine commands. Discovery of those laws amounts, therefore, to the acquisition of metaphysical knowledge, and the order and harmony of those laws is grounded in the order, harmony, and rectitude of God. Natural science is, therefore, for the deists a

species of natural religion; indeed, Thomas Paine refers to the discovery of the principles of natural philosophy as "the true theology."<sup>54</sup>

Deistic arguments against miracles, accordingly, generally depend upon a view of laws of nature as being divinely grounded. Ethan Allen, for example, must in his metaphysical argument against miracles make claim to knowledge of God's perfection as well as to knowledge of the manner in which that perfection is expressed in the establishment of eternal and perfect laws of nature.<sup>55</sup> As Dye concedes, Allen's argument can be sound "only for persons who affirm that God exists, is perfect, and is the author of natural law."<sup>56</sup> Other arguments Allen musters similarly depend upon theological claims about the meaning and nature of Scripture, revelation, and prayer.

Correspondingly, arguments deployed by Thomas Paine in his then-sandalous *Age of Reason* (1794 and 1796) depend upon analogous metaphysical commitments. For Paine, too, natural laws are fixed, eternal, authored by God, and knowable through human reason. Indeed, for Paine, the only true Scripture is the "Bible of Creation": "THE WORD OF GOD IS THE CREATION WE BEHOLD."<sup>57</sup> Unless, therefore, one is to accept such metaphysical and epistemological claims—and Hume provides good reason why one should not—the skeptical, Humean position on natural laws and miracles must be judged superior.

A comparison of Hume's texts with those of Elihu Palmer yields similar results. As Kerry Walters writes, Elihu Palmer "is unquestionably the chief of American deists."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, this Dartmouth educated, ordained Presbyterian brought tremendous power, popularity, and stature to the deist movement. In 1795, Palmer founded the Deistical Society of New York as well as the important deist journals, *The Temple of Reason* and the *Prospect*, which he edited and to which he contributed volumes of material. Palmer's *Principles of Nature; or, A Development of the Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery among the Human Species* (1801) was one of the most widely read philosophical treatises of the early republic. It is significant, then, that there are a number of similarities between Hume's arguments impugning testimony about miracles and those developed by Palmer. Indeed, Palmer even mentions Hume as one who has contributed to human improvement.<sup>59</sup>

Like Hume, Palmer launched a series of assaults upon testimony to the occurrence of miracles: (1) he questions the integrity and education of those offering such testimony; (2) he observes that as cultures "progress" in learning they produce increasingly fewer reports of miraculous events; and (3) he points out that if miracles are meant to support specific religious dogma, as many among the religious maintain, our willingness to believe in them (and the religion they are said to support) must be canceled out by the miracles professed by the followers of contrary religions (EHU 92–95 [116–22]; PN 139–41).<sup>60</sup>

If, however, this moment of Palmer's text is to be attributed to Hume, it is but a brief moment. Nearly all of the remainder of Palmer's work is theologi-

cal rather than epistemological in cast. He too, like other deists, appeals principally to the perfection and immutability of God and God's laws in order to discount the possibility of miracles. For him, too, the universe is governed by "immutable laws" (PN 133). In addition, Palmer claims to have knowledge of the "essential properties" of matter (specifically, that matter cannot be created *ex nihilo*: PN 122–23). These and other propositions may be consistently embraced by Newtonians and deists alike, but they remain unavailable to Humean skeptics.

Hume's skepticism discloses philosophy's vanity in claiming to have achieved a priori, ahistorical or metaphysical knowledge. Instead, for Hume human thought must find its place within the "gross earthy mixture" (T 272) of common life. Hume's argument against belief in miracles as well as his conception of natural law achieves just that. Unlike Ethan Allen's epistemological argument, Hume's argument is not question-begging. Unlike the other arguments of the deists directed against miracles and human belief in them, Hume's argument does not pretend to metaphysical grounds. But perhaps the work of the deists is still to be preferred, since it appears to be animated by a more democratic spirit than that of Humean philosophy.<sup>61</sup> We have seen that many in Britain's American colonies, many in the newly founded United States, and indeed many among the United States' founders, were hostile to Hume's work. We have also seen that many also found much of it useful, important, and persuasive. Contemporary determinations of the political value of Humean or deistic views cannot, however, be settled simply on the basis of historical investigation. Philosophical judgment is necessary as well, and part of that judgment must include an assessment of whether we are to prefer a mode of thought rooted in natural theology and an assertion of the metaphysical abilities of reason or, rather, a philosophy of common life. If an assessment of Hume's and the deists' positions on natural law and miracles can provide us with any guidance, our judgment must incline towards Hume.

## NOTES

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (London: John Noon, 1739, 1740); citations in this text will be taken from the edition of the *Treatise* ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), hereafter "T." *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), hereafter "EHU" and "EPM," respectively.

2. A conservative Presbyterian, Witherspoon attacked the secular and heterodox tendencies of the moderate natural theologians of Scotland in his enormously pop-

ular satire, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics: Or, The Arcana of Church Policy: being an Humble Attempt to open up the Mystery of Moderation. Wherein is shewn a plain and easy way of attaining to the Character of a Moderate Man, as at present repute in the Church of Scotland* (the work ran through five editions between 1753 and 1763). Interestingly enough, Witherspoon was the only clerical signatory of the American Declaration of Independence. Witherspoon, while still in Edinburgh, was among the principal figures in the attacks upon Hume and his cousin Henry Home, Lord Kames, by the Scottish Kirk in 1755 and 1756. Witherspoon became president of the College of New Jersey in 1768, finding at the time that "the Berklean system of Metaphysics was in repute in the college." Witherspoon subsequently undertook to establish the Common Sense philosophy of his fellow Scots—Thomas Reid and James Beattie—both at the college and in America generally. Indeed, Witherspoon claimed to have anticipated many of the Common Sense philosophers' criticisms of the skepticism they found in Berkeley and Hume. See Peter J. Diamond, "Witherspoon, William Smith and the Scottish Philosophy in Revolutionary America," in eds., Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten, *Scotland and America in the Age of Enlightenment*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 115–32.

3. David Hume, *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (London: the initial volume appearing in 1754, the final and collected volumes in 1762). David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987); first published as *Essays: Moral and Political* (Edinburgh: Alexander Kincaid, 1741; 3rd ed. 1748), and subsequently under the titles *Political Discourses* (1752, 3rd ed. 1754) and *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (1753–1777).

4. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967). 26–28; David Hume, *David Hume's Political Essays*, ed. Charles Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), xlv, xlvii, lviii. See also Bailyn's *The Origins of American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1968); Bernard Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). The content and import of the *History* and other texts are discussed at great length in John M. Werner's important essay, "David Hume and America," *Journal of Philosophy* 33 (1972): 439–456. See also Donald W. Livingston, "Hume, English Barbarism, and the American Crisis," in Sher and Smitten, eds., *Scotland and America in the Age of Enlightenment*, 133–47.

5. Quoted by Craig Walton, "Hume and Jefferson on the Uses of History," in Donald Livingston and James King, eds., *Hume A Re-Evaluation*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 393. During the 1750s, pamphlet literature against Hume's work on religion reached a fever pitch, especially in Britain. Among the most widely read of such attacks was the Reverend John Leland's *View of the Principal Deistical Writers* (2nd ed., 1755). The *Bibliothèque raisonnée* called Hume one of "the most subtle advocates of unbelief." By 1761 Hume's work had been placed on the Roman Catholic Index. See Jim Herrick, *Against the Faith: Essays on Deists, Skeptics and Atheists* (Buffalo, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1985), ch. six, "David Hume: The Saintly Infidel," 96–105.

6. Charles Evans, *American Bibliography: A Chronological Dictionary of All Books, Pamphlets, and Periodical Publications Printed in the United States of America From the Genesis of Printing in 1693 Down To and Including the Year 1820* (New York: P. Smith, 1941); Werner, "David Hume and America," 443.



7. The earliest discovered journal reference to Hume in the colonies is William Smith's *The American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle for the British Colonies* (January 1758), an article addressing the story of the Edinburgh production of a play by John Home, Hume's cousin, *Douglas*. For a comprehensive account of Hume as he appeared in periodical literature of the time see Mark G. Spencer, "From 'The Ingenious Mr. Hume' to 'That Celebrated Infidel': David Hume in American Journals, 1741–1830" (unpublished paper delivered at The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va., as part of the conference on "Hume and Eighteenth-Century America," 7 April 1995).
8. Spencer, "From 'The Ingenious Mr. Hume'," 11.
9. *Ibid.*, 4.
10. Franklin wrote on 27 September 1760: "I have lately read with great Pleasure, as I do every thing of yours, the excellent Essay on the *Jealousy of Commerce*" *Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. L. Jesse Lemisch (New York: New American Library, 1961), 154.
11. Other colonial figures made use of Hume in advancing arguments on political issues, including the issues of whether to have a militia system or a standing army and whether governors or assemblies ought to be invested with the right to set crown officers' fees. See Werner, 449.
12. Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: The Colonial Mind, Vol. I, 1620–1800* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1954), 301, 303. For examples of Hume's influence on Hamilton, see *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* ed., Harold C. Syrett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), I 94–95, 100; II 595, 600; III 77, 705; VI 53; X 8, 241–242, 255–257, 267, 280, 313. Werner, "David Hume and America," 450–451.
13. Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970). Gary Wills, *Explaining America: The Federalists* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).
14. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. and introduced by Clinton Rossiter (New York: Penguin, 1961), 526–527. Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, 111–137.
15. Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 15. Douglass G. Adair, "The Tenth Federalist Revisited," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 8 (1951); "'That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science': David Hume, James Madison, and the Tenth Federalist," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 20 (1957): 343–360; "The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy: Republicanism, the Class Struggle and the Virtuous Farmer" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1943). There is, however, considerable contention about whether or not Madison actually drew his ideas from Hume: cf. E. S. Morgan, "Safety in Numbers: Madison, Hume and the Tenth Federalist," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 49 (1986): 95–112; M. Meyers, "Beyond the Sum of the Differences: An Introduction," in *The Mind of a Founder* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), xxix. Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, 512–529.
16. For more details on the influence of Hume on these men, consult Werner, "David Hume and America," 453, especially the citations of n 40 which include: *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry A. Cushing, 4 vols. (New York: G. P.

Putnam, 1906), II 189, 325; John Randolph to Dr. John Brockenbrough, 25 September 1818, in Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics* (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), 233; *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805–1813*, eds. John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1966), 12, 67, 169; Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents*, I 288, 242; Edward Robins, "Charles Lee—Stormy Petrel of the Revolution," *Pennsylvania Magazine and Biography* 45 (1921): 71–73.

17. Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, 208n 10. See Werner, "Hume and America," 451; Winthrop K. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 304–307, 450; Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Essays*, ed. Ernest Campbell Mossner (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 222.

18. While deism may be said to have originated with Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), it was later advanced and brought to a position of prominence by British thinkers such as John Toland (1670–1722), Anthony Collins (1676–1729), Thomas Woolson (1670–1733), and Matthew Tindal (1653–1733), whose *Christianity As Old As the Creation, or the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730) was called by many "the Deist's Bible." Among other natural theologians in Britain we may count Latitudinarians and Cambridge Platonists such as Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688) and Henry More (1614–1687), as well as thinkers such as John Locke (1632–1704) and Samuel Clarke (1675–1729).

19. Hume first developed these skeptical themes in Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

20. A point not lost on Kerry S. Walters, "Hume's Challenge to Mechanism," in *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 35–36.

21. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935; 2nd ed., New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962); hereafter "D." On the matter of Newtonianism and the design argument, consult Robert H. Hurlbutt III, *Hume, Newton, and the Design Argument* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965); R. M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1981); and James Dye, "Superhuman Voices and Biological Books," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 5 (1988): 257–72. See also my "Doubt and Divinity: Cicero's Influence on Hume's Religious Skepticism," *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 103–20. On Hume and Newtonianism, see Nicolas Capaldi, *David Hume: The Newtonian Philosopher* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne, 1975).

22. Provocatively, William H. Marnell writes: "In a curious way Hume's *The Natural History of Religion*, which undermines by its fundamental thesis the cornerstone of deism, is the logical, culminating document in the deist movement. In *The Natural History of Religion* Hume treats religion as a historical phenomenon. His approach would be acceptable to deists, but his conclusions appalling." *Man-Made Morals: Four Philosophies That Shaped America* (New York: Doubleday, Inc., 1966), 68.

23. Charlemont writes: "I never saw him [Hume] so much displeased, or so much disconcerted as by the Petulance of Mrs. Mallet, the pert and conceited Wife of Bolingbroke's Editor. This lady, who was not acquainted with Hume, meeting with him one night at an Assembly, boldly accosted him in these Words—'Mr. Hume,

Give me leave to introduce myself to you. We Deists ought to know each other.'—'Madam,' replied He, 'I am no Deist. I do no style myself so, neither do I desire to be known by that Appellation'; "Anecdote of Hume," Royal Irish Academy (MS-12/R/7, f. 523); Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1954), 395.

24. See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948), ch. VI, "The Parallel of Deism and Classicism," 78–98.

25. Walters writes, "Although not a systematic philosopher, Jefferson was the most sophisticated American proponent of the deistic worldview" (*The American Deists*, 110). Among the deistic writings of Jefferson, see: "On Freedom of Conscience" (from *Notes on Virginia*, 1785); "An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, Passed in the Assembly of Virginia in the Beginning of the Year 1786"; "Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth"; as well as his "Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, compared with those of others," which related to a study of the Christian religion Jefferson planned but never wrote (see his letter to Benjamin Rush, 21 April 1803; Walters, ch. 2, 106–40). The "Syllabus" was also sent to Joseph Priestly, as well as others, and was anonymously published in the English periodical, *The Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature* 11 (October 1816): 573–76. Jefferson's library catalogue indicates that he owned a number of Hume's essays; it does not specify which ones. Indeed, it may well have been the case that prior to the 1800s Jefferson admired Hume's work, or at least Jefferson's appreciation of Hume may be more complicated than it first appears to be. In a letter to Thomas Mann Randolph (30 May 1790), for example, Jefferson mentions his remarkably favorable opinion of several of Hume's political essays; see *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert E. Bergh, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), VIII 32. There appears to be no evidence that Hume had any direct influence on Jefferson's ideas on religion.

26. The second edition of William Wollaston's *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (1722) appears to have been among those books for which Franklin set the type as a young printer. Franklin's *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* (1725) was meant to be a response to Wollaston's book. I. Woodridge Riley maintains that Franklin's summary of the main points of religion coincides precisely with the earlier five-point analysis made in Herbert of Cherbury's seminal text, *De Veritate* . . . (1624); I. Woodridge Riley, *American Philosophy: The Early Schools* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1907). See also H. B. Van Wesep, *Seven Sages: The Story of American Philosophy* (New York: David McKay, 1960), 42. Franklin also seems to have been influenced by the everyday virtue stressed by Cotton Mather's *Bonifacius* (1710); see ch. 1, "Benjamin Franklin: I Believe in One God, Creator of the Universe," of Walters, *The American Deists*, 51–106; see also ch. 2, "The Ambivalent Deist: Benjamin Franklin," of Walters's *Rational Infidels: The American Deists* (Durango, Colo.: Longwood Academic, 1992), 44–83. Other deistic writings by Franklin include: *Doctrine To Be Preached* (1731); *On the Providence of God in the Government of the World* (1732); "Self-Denial Not the Essence of Virtue" (in Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1735); "Dialogue between Two Presbyterians" (in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 10 April 1735); *The Lord's Prayer* (1768?); and his "Motion for Prayers in the Convention," offered 28 June 1787 to the Constitutional Convention—it was almost unanimously defeated.

27. Hume's support for American independence seems to have originated as a rather timid thing but grew in intensity over the course of his adult life. On 27

February 1766, Hume wrote to the Earl of Hertford describing, among other things, his agreement with the repeal of the Stamp Act; on 8 May 1766, however, writing to the same correspondent, Hume expressed his concerns that the colonists might push their demands too far. Later, writing to Sir Gilbert Elliott of Minto (22 July 1768), Hume remarked that he longed to see the colonies totally in revolt, a sentiment he repeated later to William Strahan (25 October 1769). See J. Y. T. Grieg, ed., *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), II 22, 42–43; II 184; II 209 (Werner, “David Hume and America,” 445).

28. In these ways, of course, despite the Virginian’s antipathy, Hume’s thought also resembles Jefferson’s.

29. James Dye, “Hume and the American Deists on Miracles,” presented at the conference on “Hume and Eighteenth-Century America,” Williamsburg, Va.; 6–8 April 1995. Dye focuses upon the most systematic of American deist thinkers—and therefore those upon whom Hume is most likely to have had an impact. One might, however, also examine the work of other important deist writers such as de Volney and Freneau as well as articles appearing in the important deist periodical, *The Temple of Reason*. Important commentators on American deism, such as Kerry S. Walter and Herbert Morais, mention Hume only in passing. Herbert M. Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960). As an aside, it is interesting to note that a *Time* poll conducted in April 1995 indicates that 69 percent of those questioned believe in miracles; *Time Magazine* 145 (April 1995), 64.

30. This is a proper approach, since much of the attention given to Hume’s thoughts on religion, early and recent, has shared in this focus. Indeed, a rather large proportion of the early assessments of Hume’s work centered on Sect. X of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), “Of Miracles.” Perhaps the most prominent is that of the Right Reverend William Warburton, bishop of Gloucester, “Hume on Miracles” (1749); Warburton also attacked British deism in his *Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated . . .* (1737–1741) and, later, Hume’s *Natural History of Religion* in his “Remarks on . . . the Natural History of Religion” (1757). See also: Thomas Rutherforth, “The Credibility of Miracles Defended” (1751); Anthony Ellys, “An Examination of Mr. Hume’s Arguments in his Essay on Miracles” (1752); W. S. Powell, “The Insufficiency of Mr. Hume’s Objection to . . . Miracles” (1776); and William Paley, “Hume on Miracles” (1794); James Fieser, *Hume Archives* (1995) (<http://www.utm.edu:80/research/hume/hume.html>).

31. “Hume and the American Deists,” 11.

32. A text partially inspired by Tillotson’s writing’s on the Catholic doctrine of the “real presence.”

33. “Hume and the American Deists,” 24.

34. Ibid.

35. *The American Deists*, 142.

36. In some editions, Allen’s work was entitled simply, *Oracles of Reason*. The English deist, Charles Blount (1654–1693), had published a treatise also entitled *Oracles of Reason* in 1693. Allen’s text remained in print until 1854; many pirated editions circulated as well. A facsimile edition with bibliography was published by the U.S. Library of Congress (New York: Burt Franklin, 1972).

37. There is some dispute about this: Dye finds Allen's remarks credible ("Hume and the American Deists," 9); Walters suspects that he is disingenuous (Walters, *The American Deists*, 142).

38. On Hume's usage of the term "common life," see T 181, 213, 268, 270–72; EHU 81 [103], 130 [162]; D I 166, 170.

39. Dye writes of this argument that "it is more powerful and far more concise than Hume's"; indeed, Dye finds "it hard to object to this reasoning" ("Hume and the American Deists," 11).

40. Certainly inexplicable events may always be open to later explanation, and anomalous events might later be subsumed under covering laws. However, it is no contradiction to suppose there being events that are never explained or covered.

41. Indeed, Robert Fogelin concludes as much, "What Hume Actually Said About Miracles," *Hume Studies* 16 (1990): 81–86.

42. Accordingly, Hume would not deny the legitimacy of positing such unobservables as subatomic particles or the force of gravity; nor does he deny the intelligibility of notions of substance or external objects specifically different from perceptions. See Daniel Flage, "Hume's Relative Ideas," *Hume Studies* 7 (1981): 55–71: "So long as the relational term in a definite description that corresponds to a relative idea denotes a genuine relation, and the entity or class of entities that is singled out by the relative idea complies with one's linguistic conventions, one can quite properly claim to have a relative idea of a thing or type of thing" (67).

43. Hume writes: "If experience and observation and analogy be, indeed, the only guides which we can reasonably follow in inferences of this nature; both the effect and the cause must bear a similarity and resemblance to other effects and causes, which we know, and which we have found, in many instances, to be conjoined with each other" (EHU 115 [148]). Hume's implication in what follows is that his requirement of a similarity among the causes militates against the putatively unique cause pointed to by theists.

44. "Hume and the American Deists," 4.

45. In the Abstract to the *Treatise*, Hume maintains that "Our past experience is not always uniform" (T 655). See Benjamin Armstrong, Jr., "Hume on Miracles: Begging-the-Question Against Believers," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9 (1992): 319–328; Robert Fogelin, "What Hume Actually Said About Miracles," 81–86; C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 123; George N. Schlesinger, "Miracles and Probabilities," *Nous* 21 (1987): 219–229. Indeed, as Armstrong points out (319), Hume had been charged with begging the question as early as 1763 by George Campbell in his *Dissertation on Miracles*.

46. These features of Hume's claims are standard characteristics of natural laws that have been developed by regularist philosophers of science. See: A. J. Ayer, "What is a Law of Nature?" *Revue internationale de philosophie* 36 (1956); Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), ch. 3. Other supporters of this view include Carl Hempel, J. L. Mackie, Ernest Nagel, Arthur Pap, and Bertrand Russell. Interestingly enough, Mary Hesse has argued that the notion of "law of nature" has no standard usage within the modern scientific community; see her "Theories, Dictionaries and Observation," *British Journal For the Philosophy of Science* 9 (1958): 12–28, 128–129. One may wish to add "expressing a necessary relation"

to the list of features characteristic of law-like statements. Hume would, no doubt, assent; but note that the claim that law-like statements in natural science express necessary connections does not entail that the experience of humankind on the subject has been unalterable or uniform.

47. Dye criticizes Hume on just these grounds by maintaining that, in fact, it would be more likely that laws of nature have been violated if the heavens should go dark for some extended period than if a person should rise from the dead ("Hume and the American Deists," 9). Whether or not Dye is right in this, and I am not convinced he is, the criticism seems to have little philosophical import, at least none that has bearing on assessing the strength of Hume's argument.

48. Keep in mind that in appealing to firm, unalterable, and uniform experience, Hume may simply be appealing to premises already accepted by his audience and, indeed, even his opponents.

49. My account here is similar to that developed by J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 118. See also Antony Flew, "The Impossibility of the Miraculous," *Hume's Philosophy of Religion: The Sixth James Montgomery Hester Seminar* (Winston-Salem, N. C.: Wake Forest University Press, 1986), 9–32.

50. Note that it does not follow from this that a miracle *must* be identified, and, therefore, my rendering is not inconsistent with Hume's claim that some miracles may conceivably remain "invisible" or undetectable. In cases of miracle reports, however, it is clear that it is implied that a miracle has been identified as such.

51. On Hume's distinction between "proofs" and "probabilities" consult T I iii, "Of knowledge and probability," 103, 124, 135; EHU 46 n [56 n]. At EHU 87 [110–11], Hume writes: "In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he . . . regards his past experience as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event. In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: He weighs the opposite experiments: He considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments . . . and when at last he fixes his judgment, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call *probability*. All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments and observations."

52. The balancing (ισοσθένεια / *isosthenia*) of arguments and counter-arguments in order to produce a suspension of judgment (ἐποχή / *epoche*) is a gambit developed by the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptics. See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I 7–10.

53. Although neither Hume's account of natural law nor his reference to the uniform, firm, and unalterable experience of humankind undermine the strength of his argument, his reasoning may be criticized on other grounds. Humean epistemology rejects various versions of the ancient Stoics' claim that there are "cataleptic impressions," i.e., experiences that are self-verifying, or whose truth is immediate. Even personal experience of a deity or a deity's works could not, therefore, for Hume be regarded as irrefutable. Whether or not Hume is right in this, however, he may still be regarded as presumptuous in maintaining that the standard of evidence grounding belief in the regularities of nature cannot be exceeded. This is an empirical claim, the truth of which is indeed plausible but goes unsupported in Hume's texts. Exploring the way in which Hume may wish to defend the truth of this claim would be a valuable endeavor, but is the subject of another essay.

54. Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), I 487–488.
55. Allen, *Oracles*, 235–236. On the deists' conception of God, consult Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1941), 104 ff, especially ch. III, "God and Modern Philosophy," 74–108.
56. "Hume and the American Deists," 12.
57. *The Age of Reason*, 482
58. *The American Deists*, 240
59. Elihu Palmer, *Principles of Nature; or, A Development of the Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery among the Human Species*, ed. Kerry Walters (Wolfeboro, N.H.: Longwood Academic, 1990); hereafter, "PN."
60. Hume also advances a fourth criticism that does not appear in Palmer, namely, Hume's suspicion that people's willingness to believe certain events to be miraculous is in part motivated by that "agreeable emotion" to which humans are inclined when confronted by the rare, novel, and unusual (EHU 93 [117]).
61. Many authors have remarked upon the nondemocratic or indeed antidemocratic features of Hume's thought. Caroline Robbins, for example, judges Hume's work to be too "Tory"; cf. Robbins's *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development, and Circumstances of English Liberal Thought From the Restoration of Charles II Until the War With the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959). Sir Leslie Stephen goes so far as to call Hume's political philosophy a form of "cynical conservatism": cf. Leslie Stephen, *Selected Writings on British Intellectual History*, ed. Noel Gilroy Annan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); and Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1881). For other views, see also Donald W. Livingston, ed., *Liberty in Hume's History of England* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990); and Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).