
Introduction

On my return from Italy, I had the mortification to find all England in a ferment, on account of Dr. Middleton's Free Enquiry, while my performance was entirely overlooked and neglected.

—David Hume, *My Own Life*

THE FULL TITLE OF Thomas Middleton's *Free Inquiry* is *A Free Inquiry into Miraculous Powers, Which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian Church, From the Earliest Ages through several successive Centuries*. It is an anti-Papist tract intended to show that Christian miracles did not continue into post-Apostolic times and that, for this reason, none of the later miracles claimed in support of the Roman Catholic Church should be acknowledged. When it appeared in 1749, Middleton's work caused a sensation, whereas David Hume's recently published *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), including its own examination of miracles, was, as he ruefully reports, entirely overlooked and neglected. With time, the roles have reversed. Middleton's work (somewhat sadly) has fallen into ob-

scurity, while Hume's discussion of miracles continues to attract serious attention.

Hume's essay "Of Miracles" appears as section 10 of his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Hume had originally planned to include a discussion on this topic in his *Treatise of Human Nature* but, for reasons of prudence, decided not to do so.¹ It appears in the *Enquiry* as one of two sections on religious matters. The second, which follows it, is titled "Of a particular Providence and of a future State." Neither essay is friendly to the cause of religion. Both seem intended to be provocative. If so, at least the essay on miracles has succeeded admirably. For more than two centuries it has been an object of vigorous defense and equally vigorous (often abusive) attack.

Hume, whose confessed ruling passion was a love of literary fame, would surely be pleased by this continuing attention, but I think he would also be perplexed by the wide range of competing interpretations of his position concerning miracles. Without making claims for originality on any particular point, I will attempt to provide a coherent reading—something like a narrative—of the way the text unfolds. This is the first and primary task of this work.

My exposition of Hume's position concerning miracles turns crucially on rejecting what I take to be two common misreadings of the text—misreadings that, in various ways, feed on each other. The first misreading is that, in part 1 of his essay on miracles, Hume maintains that no testimony could ever be sufficient to establish the occurrence of a miracle. Hume does not say this in part 1. Indeed, Hume *nowhere* asserts this, though in part 2 he does say, "Upon the whole . . . it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle *has* ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof" (*EHU*, 10.35, emphasis added). The second common misreading of the text is that in part 1 Hume presents what he takes to be an a priori argument sufficient by itself to establish his fundamental theses concerning the status of testimony in behalf of miracles. This, I will argue, is false.

Nor is part 2 simply an add-on containing supplementary a posteriori considerations that also bear on the topic of miracles. Part 2 is essential for the completion of the argument begun in part 1. The second task of this work is to make good these interpretive claims.

The third task is to respond specifically to attacks that Hume's treatment of miracles has encountered in recent literature. This work was provoked in part by these misguided, often ill-tempered, bashings. Its overarching goal is not, however, to engage in counterpolemics, but rather to show that Hume's treatment of miracles, when properly understood, exhibits a level of richness, subtlety, coherence, and force not generally appreciated.