

# Lonergan and Hume IV

## Critique of Religion (2)

J Fitzpatrick

### I

The argument adduced for the existence of God arrives by a chain of reasoning at the affirmation of a being that is self-explanatory, an uncaused cause, at what is sometimes also called a 'necessary being'. The notion of a necessary being is one that Hume, in arguments not so far outlined, finds incoherent, and he has been followed in this by a good many other philosophers. The argument for a necessary being is presented by Demea:

Whatever exists must have a cause or reason for its existence, it being absolutely impossible for anything to produce itself or to be the cause of its own existence.

He then proceeds to deny that an infinite succession of causes can provide a reason why the whole chain of causes is what it is or is at all, and concludes,

We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessary existent Being who carries the *reason* for his existence in himself, and who cannot be supposed not to exist, without an express contradiction. There is, consequently, such a Being – that is, there is a Deity (*Dialogues*, Aiken edition, p 58).

This argument is put forward as an *a priori* demonstration of God's existence with the deliberate intention of avoiding the difficulties, stemming from the Argument for Proportion, he considers to attend the *a posteriori* argument. The refutation of any *a priori* demonstration of factual existence is succinctly delivered by Cleanthes:

I shall begin with observing that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by argument *a priori*. Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being whose existence is demonstrable. I propose this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it. (*Dialogues*, p 58)

The basis of this argument lies in the distinction drawn by Hume in Section 4 of the *Enquiry* between 'relations of ideas' or 'demonstrations' and 'matters of fact', a distinction Flew has termed 'Hume's Fork'. Hume says that propositions which merely assert relations of ideas, such as the mathematical proposition that 'three times five is equal to half of thirty', 'are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe' (*Enquiry*, p 25). With matters of fact, however, it is different. 'The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality. *That the sun will not rise tomorrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, *that it will rise*. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood' (ibid.) As is clear from Hume's use of the term, 'demonstration' is an *a priori* form of argument that is valid only in regard to relations between ideas. We cannot demonstrate the existence of any thing and from this it seems to follow that we can negate the existence of any matter of fact without contradiction. To speak, therefore, as Demea does, of a 'necessary existent Being', to deny whose existence is contradictory, must appear absurd. The notion of a being whose existence is logically necessary is incoherent.

The notion of 'Hume's Fork' indicates an area of fundamental agreement between Lonergan and Hume. Like Hume, Lonergan considers that the truth of mathematical or purely logical propositions, unlike factual propositions, cannot be confirmed or refuted by experience. The reason for Lonergan's distinction lies in the difference in the fulfilling conditions required in the two sets of propositions. The fulfilling conditions required for affirming an ontological or factual truth are the data of sense or consciousness. So it is that in science, for instance, verification takes the form of testing how far the data of sense are explained by a particular hypothesis, and experience will be an essential part of this process of verification. The mathematician or logician, however, are not attempting to explain or interpret the universe, but to draw conclusions from freely chosen sets of suitable postulates. The fulfilling conditions of logical or mathematical truths, accordingly, are not the data of sense or consciousness but the criteria of clarity, coherence and rigour which apply at the level of understanding. It is for this reason that, given understanding, the conclusions of logic and mathematics cannot be intellectually resisted, and cannot be denied without contradiction. The intelligibles grasped in scientific investigation, by contrast, can be disputed – and frequently are – since alternative explanations of the data are always available. The

proponents of the 'flat earth' hypothesis, for example, may be exceedingly stubborn in their resistance to the contrary evidence, but they are not involved in any contradiction.

In so far as Demea's argument for the existence of God is presented as an *a priori* demonstration (as of a logical or mathematical truth), Lonergan would be at one with Hume in denying its validity. No *a priori* reasoning can prove the existence of a matter of fact. The mere conception of a being, no matter how 'perfect', does not provide sufficient grounds for judgment as to its existence. It is because the ontological argument constitutes an illegitimate transition from the conceptual to the ontological level that it is rejected. Lonergan's argument for the existence of God is presented as an *a posteriori* argument. It is from the *fact* that the real is intelligible that we move to the affirmation of God's existence; what is sought, under the impetus of the demand for sufficient reason, is an adequate explanation of this fact. The necessity of the truths of mathematics and logic is the necessity of logical entailment. But there is no such necessity of logical entailment in the move from the intelligibility of the real to the existence of God. That move is justified by the notion of causality understood as a relation of intelligible (not logical) dependence. To deny the existence of God would be, on Lonergan's terms, simply to leave the intelligibility of the real unexplained.

The uncaused cause, the self-explanatory being, affirmed at the end of the argument for God's existence is sometimes also referred to as a 'necessary being', a being which must and cannot not exist. That is, in fact, how Copleston refers to God in his debate with Russell. Russell gives the Humean reply when he says, 'The difficulty of this argument is that I don't admit the idea of a necessary being and I don't admit that there is any particular meaning in calling other beings 'contingent' . . . I don't find anything that they could mean. The word 'necessary', it seems to me, is a useless word, except as applied to analytic propositions, not to things'.<sup>1</sup> One is, of course, free to employ whatever terminology one favours. In so far as Hume and Russell are denying that God's existence can be affirmed with the necessity of logical entailment, the present position is in agreement. For if the necessity of God's existence is not the necessity of logical entailment but rather a manner of conceiving God's existence once that existence has been argued for *a posteriori* by means of a relation of intelligible dependence, the objection to the term 'necessary being' loses its force. It is, after all, against any supposed parity in the relations between ideas and the relations between matters of fact that Hume's arguments in Section 4 of the *Enquiry* are directed, and, since the present position is in agreement with Hume's reasoning on this point, its

use of the term 'necessary being' falls outside the range of his objection.

It might nevertheless be asked whether the denial of God's existence is tantamount, as Demea urges, to a contradiction. In answer I would say that since no factual existent can be established by *a priori* reasoning, and since a) the intelligibility of the real, b) the existence of God, c) the dependence of the intelligibility of the real on God's existence are each asserted as fact, it follows that a) there is no contradiction in denying the intelligibility of the real, b) there is no contradiction in denying the existence of God, and c) there is no contradiction in affirming the intelligibility of the real while denying the existence of God. By contradiction here is meant the kind of contradiction one incurs in denying that  $2 + 2 = 4$  or that the whole is greater than one of its parts. In these cases one has no need to check any facts to recognize that an error has been made; a simple knowledge of the terms is all that is needed. Now, if God's existence is defined as necessary it would appear to be contradictory to deny his existence. But such a contradiction simply follows from the definition. In so far as one denies the actual concrete judgment of fact one is not thereby involved in a contradiction. In the same way, if a bachelor is defined as an unmarried man, it is clearly contradictory to deny that a bachelor is an unmarried man. But a denial of the concrete judgment that bachelors do in fact exist entails no contradiction. And this is so whether the denial is right or wrong. For the meaning of the denial is *not* 'bachelors are not unmarried men', which would be contradictory, but 'there is no actually existent class of unmarried men'. Likewise, the meaning of the denial of God's existence is not 'a being who is necessarily existent is not existent', which would be contradictory, but 'there is no actually existent being who is necessarily existent'. Lonergan does not attempt to prove God's existence by means of the logical entailment of the notion of existence in the notion of God and from this it follows that a denial of God's existence, from within this position, is not contradictory. It also follows that his argument for God's existence is not subject to empiricist strictures on the notion of a 'necessary being'.

## II

### Hume on Miracles

Chapter X of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, entitled 'of Miracles', is not generally regarded as being among Hume's best philosophical writing.<sup>2</sup> At times he comes close to offering as argument bald assertions of the type, 'Miracles do not

happen because they are impossible'. For example, when he discusses the miracles performed at the tomb of the Abbé Paris, he concludes, 'And what have we to oppose such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate?'<sup>3</sup> And of the invented report of the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth I, he says, 'I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was, nor possibly could be real'<sup>4</sup> Here Hume simply asserts the impossibility of miracles, though it is not clear whether the impossibility is intended to mean logical impossibility or physical impossibility. Logical impossibility would be a contradiction of Hume's stated position on matters of fact:

The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality.<sup>5</sup>

To Hume events are simply conjoined in space and time and while this might give rise to a strong expectation that similar events in the future will be similarly conjoined, there can be no logical guarantee that these expectations will be met. As Taylor puts it, in a purely non-rational world, such as Hume's, any one occurrence is logically just as much a matter of 'wonder' as any other.<sup>6</sup> Flew, a most sympathetic commentator, suggests that impossibility be taken as meaning physical impossibility.<sup>7</sup> But this does not solve the problem, since, within the Humean scheme, the uniformity of the individual's experience always extends to the past and can provide no assurance that it will never be interrupted or violated in the future. Since Hume defines a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature, it follows that, on his terms, miracles cannot be considered physically impossible.

Gaskin, who shares Flew's sympathy with Hume, accepts that Hume's talk of the impossibility of miracles is unwarranted, but considers that, while such talk certainly betrays Hume's passionate disbelief in miracles, it should be understood as simply incautious overstatement of his official position.<sup>8</sup> Hume's 'official' position does not rule out *a priori* the possibility of miracles, as Ninian Smart appears to believe, but amounts to a negative verdict on the power of *testimony* to establish that a miracle has occurred. But I am not at all sure that the charge against Hume of *a priori* exclusion of the possibility of miracles can be surmounted.

The following is a summary of Hume's argument:

- 1 He has discovered a 'decisive' argument, 'which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion . . .' (p 110)
- 2 A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence' (p 110).

3 'All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments and observations, where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence, proportioned to the superiority. A hundred instances or experiments on the one side, and fifty on another, afford a doubtful expectation of any event; though a hundred uniform experiments, with only one that is contradictory, reasonably beget a pretty strong degree of assurance. In all cases, we must balance the opposite experiments, where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater, in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence' (p 111).

4 Where there is no uniformity of experience, there results an attendant 'contrariety in our judgment' (p 112).

When the 'fact which the testimony endeavours to establish, partakes of the extraordinary and the marvellous . . . the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual' (p 113).

5 '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 . . . There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior' (pp 114 and 115).

6 The only circumstances in which such a reported miracle could be accepted would be 'if the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; and then, and not till then, can he pretend to commend my belief or opinion' (p 116).

7 'But it is easy to show that we have been a great deal too liberal in our concession, and that there never was a miraculous event established on so full evidence' (p 116).

Hume next refers to certain features of human testimony that show it never to have the power to outweigh the probabilities ranked against miracles. Very briefly, these are as follows: a) Men cannot be secure against delusion; b) the mind can be excited by eloquence, and by the passion of surprise and wonder, and so inclined to belief; c) stories of miracles and wonder abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; d) (called by Gaskin the 'Contrary Miracles Argument') miracles used to establish any one religion have

the same force to destroy rival religions, also founded on miracles; the miracles act like contrary facts, opposing each other.

Hume's argument would appear to be based on the empirical finding that human testimony can never be of sufficient weight or trustworthiness to stand against the improbability of miracles. It would appear, therefore, to be an *a posteriori* argument governed by the logical principle that beliefs should be proportioned to the evidence.

The nub of the argument, however, does not lie in Hume's reflections on the fallibility of human testimony. What renders the power of human testimony to establish that a miracle has occurred so puny is not its fallibility or the bad company it habitually keeps, but the inherent improbability of miracles that has been established in moves (3), (4) and (5). And there the argument is of an *a priori* order. For there Hume makes no appeal to facts and deals entirely in logical principles and definitions. In (3) he sets out the manner in which we should establish our expectations of future happenings. Although he does not give us precise odds for or against something happening in the future, his calculations of the probable occurrence of an event on the basis of the number of occurrences of the same event in one's past experience, makes it clear that what he has in mind is mathematical probability. In (4) he establishes that the evidence is stronger or weaker in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual; and in (5) he proceeds to define a miracle as 'a violation of the laws of nature' and as an 'unalterable' experience has established these, 'there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle'.

The fallacy Hume is guilty of can be detected in the move from (3) to (4). In (3) he is speaking of expectations of the *future* and uses the language of mathematical probability. Now mathematical probability arises only when there is a distinct and known *series* of events, such as occurs when throwing a dice, from which conclusions can be drawn about the probability of future occurrences (for example, of throwing a double six in two consecutive throws). But mathematical probability does not tell us whether a past event occurred or not. In dealing with a reported miracle we are not dealing with a series but with one event; nor are we looking to the future but to the past. In moving from (3) to (4) Hume transforms the criteria by which mathematical predictions of probable future occurrences should be made into the criteria governing the credence to be given to reports of particular past events. This is a fallacious move and particularly piquant in a philosopher like Hume who, as chapter four of the *Enquiry* testifies, has a very clear notion of the difference between mathematical reasoning and reas-

oning in relation to matters of fact. When he proceeds to (5), Hume, having suggested the logic of his reasoning, simply tightens his position by force of definition, making any exceptions to the laws of nature impossible.

The body of chapter ten may be given over to empirical reflection on the nature of human testimony, but the argument is really over, since no empirical finding could possibly dent the *a priori* exclusion of the possibility of miracles. Hume might have turned his reflections on the nature of testimony round the other way, pointing out that our entire legal system depends on the value of testimony and on well-trying methods of discriminating between testimony that is dishonest or stupid and testimony that is honest and intelligent; he might have put forward the consideration that in any field of inquiry, including science, unless men placed reliance on the evidence provided by others, advancement in human learning would not be possible.

But even the most trenchant empirical argument in favour of the value of human testimony would have been unable to alter the logical odds against the occurrence of miracles established in moves (3), (4) and (5). I would agree with Ninian Smart,<sup>9</sup> against Flew and Gaskin, that Hume does rule out *a priori* the possibility of miracles occurring. This interpretation has the virtue of doing justice to the language used by Hume in stating his case, where we find words like 'unalterable', 'impossible' and 'proof', words which his more sympathetic commentators are at pains to explain away. Moreover, Hume's conviction that his argument is 'decisive' should be compared with his similar use of 'decisive' when demolishing the notion of a 'necessary being', where the point of his reasoning is that such a notion is *logically incoherent*. But even the most sympathetic commentators are aware of the weakness of Hume's case against miracles.<sup>10</sup>

The notoriety surrounding 'Of Miracles' is due to the fact that it is Hume's only attack upon the reasonableness of revealed religion. In the eighteenth century in particular he must have been conscious that he was striking at what most Christians believed to be the chief support and proof of the truth of Christian revelation. While any adequate treatment of miracles is beyond the scope of this article, I would add that contemporary Christians would set miracles more firmly than certain eighteenth century preachers in the context of faith, and would emphasize their role as *signs* more than their role as *wonders* (which is all that Hume is concerned with). For example, many of the miracles recounted in the gospels are miracles of healing, of making men whole, and this has significance, it acts as a sign, in relation to the part played by forgiveness, salvation and redemption in the Christian faith. Moreover, be-



lief in miracles does not entail disbelief in the laws of physics or the regularities of nature, since these are presupposed in the ascription to any event of the term miracle. Nor, within the present position, could the interruption by the Deity of the normal operations of the laws of nature be regarded as an *unintelligible* phenomenon, since God is regarded as the source of the universe's intelligibility and the real has been identified with the intelligible. A real miracle would be intelligible in principle, though beyond the normal experience of men. Finally, the Christian belief in miracles need not be a sign of credulity. The actual belief, as I have explained, has its place within the commitment of faith and this framework may be, by any standard, very sophisticated indeed. Newman was representative of a common Christian view when he wrote, agreeing this far with Hume, 'A priori, of course, the acts of men are not so trustworthy as the order of nature, and the presence of miracles is in fact more common than the occurrence'.<sup>11</sup>

- 1 See Hick, *op. cit.* p 170
- 2 T. Penelhum, *op. cit.* p 170
- 3 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Selby-Bigge, Oxford, 1902, p 125
- 4 *Ibid.* p 128
- 5 *Ibid.* p 25
- 6 *David Hume and the Miraculous*, A. E. Taylor, Cambridge, 1927, p 44
- 7 *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, Antony Flew, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961, p 186
- 8 *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, J. C. A. Gaskin, Macmillan, 1978, p 114
- 9 In *Philosophers and Religious Truth*, London, 1964, p 35
- 10 See Penelhum, *op. cit.* p 177, Gaskin, *op. cit.* pp 122 & 123, Flew, *op. cit.* p 204
- 11 *Grammar of Assent*, J. H. Newman, Image Books, Doubleday & Co, New York, 1955, p 243.