Background on Miracles

1 Why Archbishop Tillotson?

Hume begins with a reference to “an argument against the real presence” that he claims to have found in “Dr. Tillotson’s writings.” The real presence is the idea that the body and blood of Christ are really present in the ceremony of the Eucharist. Dr. Tillotson is John Tillotson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, or, in other words, the head of the Church of England, from 1691-3.

The argument that Hume seems to have had in mind is given in a sermon entitled “The Hazard of Being Saved in the Church of Rome.” I have reproduced the relevant part on the other side of this page. It is taken from The works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson London, 1696, pp. 122-3.

How Hume used his argument

“It may perhaps amuse you to learn the first hint, which suggested to me that argument which you have so strenuously attacked. I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits’ College of La Flèche ... and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent, when I was tempted to dispute against him; and ... this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but at last he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles;— which observation I thought proper to admit as a sufficient answer.”

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Serm. XI. in the Church of Rome.

I shall first the ballad's a little farther. Supposing the Scripture to be a Divine Revelation, and that their words (This is my Body) if they be in Scripture, must necessarily be taken in the first and literal sense; I ask now, what greater evidence any man has that these words (This is my Body) are in the Bible, than every man has that the Bread is not changed in the Sacrament? Nay no man has so much; for we have only the evidence of one sense that these words are in the Bible, but that the Bread is not changed we have the converging testimony of several of our fathers. In a word, if this be once admitted that the Sense of all men are deceived in one of the most plain and sensible matters that can be, there is no certain means left either to convey or prove a Divine Revelation to men; nor is there any way to confute the grosser impurities in the world: For if the clear evidence of all men be not sufficient for this purpose, let any man, if he can, find a better and more convincing argument.

5. I will inculcate, but in one Doctrine more; and that shall be, their Doctrine of depositing Kings in case of Heresy, and abolishing their Subjects from their Allegiance to them. This is not a mere speculative doctrine, but hath been put in practice many a time by the Bishops of Rome, as every one knows that is vers'd in History. For the troubles and confusions which were occasion'd by this very thing make up a good part of the History of several Ages.

I hope no body exppects that I should take the pains to shew that this was not the Doctrine of our Saviour and his Apostles, or of the Primitive Christians. The Papists are many of them so far from pretending this, that in some times and places, where it is not reasonable and for their purpose, we had much ado to persuade them that ever it was their Doctrine. But if Transubstantiation be their Doctrine, this is; for they came both out of the same Source, I mean the Council of Lateran under Pope Innocent the Third. And if, as they tell us, Transubstantiation was then established, so was it. And indeed one would think they were twins and brought forth at the same time, they are so like another, both of them so monstrously unreasonable.

11. I come now in the second place to consider some Prerogatives of the Church of Rome, which I am afraid will prove as bad as her Doctrines. I shall inculcate in this place.

1. The celebrating of their Divine service in an unknown tongue. And that not only contrary to the practice of the Primitive Church, and to the great end and design of Religious Worship, which is the mediation of those who are concerned in it, (and it is hard to imagine how men can be edified by what they do not understand) but likewise in direct contradiction to St. Paul, who hath no less than a whole Chapter wherein he confutes this practice as fully, and condemns it as plainly as anything is condemned in the whole Bible. And they that have the face to maintain that this practice was not condemned by St. Paul, or that it was allowed and upheld in the first Ages of Christianity, need not be ashamed to set up for the defence of any paradox in the world.

2. The Communion in one kind. And that notwithstanding that even by their own acknowledgment our Saviour instituted it in both kinds, and the Primitive Church administered it in both kinds. This I must acknowledge is no addition to Christianity but a justifying taking away of an essential part of the Sacrament. For the Cup is as essential a part of the institution as the Bread; and they might as well, and by the same authority, take away the one as the other, and both as well as either.

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3. Their
Protestants and miracles

The Royal Touch

James [I, King of England] ... had proclaimed the now familiar doctrine: Since the establishment of Christ’s “Church by the Apostles, all miracles, visions, prophecies and appearances of Angels of good Spirits, are ceased: which served only for the first sowing of faith, and planting of the Church”. [Marc] Bloch quotes an anonymous letter, sent by an Italian to Rome in October 1603, which clearly shows the painful conflicts produced by the rite of touching for a monarch who believed firmly both in the divine right of kings ... and in the cessation of miracles. While his scrofulous subjects were waiting in an antechamber, James, before touching them, had a sermon preached by a Calvinist minister.

“Then he himself said that he found himself perplexed about what he had to do, that, on the one hand, he did not see how he could cure the sick without a miracle, and miracles had now ceased and were no longer wrought; and so he was afraid of committing some superstition; on the other hand, since this was an ancient custom and beneficial to his subjects, he was resolved to try it, but only by way of prayer, in which he begged everyone to join him. He then touched the sick. ... It was noticed that while the king was making his speech he often turned his eyes towards the Scots ministers who were standing nearby, as if expecting their approval of what he was saying, having beforehand conferred with them on the subject.”

Reverend John Welch [1590s]

Quite apart from his many prophecies, which ‘made the people begin to think Mr Welch was an oracle’, that he ‘walked with God, and kept close with him’, Welch won renown for raising the dead. He was living in France when a

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young Scottish gentleman fell ill and died in his house, at least ‘to the apprehension and sense of all spectators’. ... [After three days, the man’s friends] called doctors who ‘pinched him with pincers in the fleshy parts of his body and twisted a bow-string about his head with great force’. No signs of life being forthcoming, ‘the physicians pronounced him stark dead’, but Welch ‘fell down before the pallet and cried to the Lord with all his might for the last time ... till at length the dead youth opened his eyes and cried out to Mr Welch ....

To one ‘popish young gentleman’ who made fun of his godly discourse at a dinner party in Edinburgh castle, Welch announced, ‘observe the work of the Lord upon that profane mocker’ and ‘immediately [he] sank down and died beneath the table, but never returned to life again, to the great astonishment of the company’. 3

3 What Hume meant by “proof”


Mr. Locke divides all arguments into demonstrative and probable. In this view, we must say, that it is only probable all men must die, or that the sun will rise to-morrow. But to conform our language more to common use, we ought to divide arguments into demonstrations, proofs, and probabilities. By proofs meaning such arguments from experience as leave no room for doubt or opposition.

Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature Book 1 Pt. 3 Sec. 11 Par. 2.

Those philosophers who have divided human reason into knowledge and probability, and have defined the first to be that evidence which arises from the comparison of ideas, are obliged to comprehend all our arguments from causes or effects under the general term of probability.

But ... in common discourse we readily affirm, that many arguments from causation exceed probability, and may be received as a superior kind of evidence. One would appear ridiculous who would say, that it is only probable the sun will rise to-morrow, or that all men must die; though it is plain we have no further assurance of these facts than what experience affords us. For this reason it would perhaps be more convenient, in order at once to preserve the common signification of words, and mark the several degrees of evidence, to distinguish human reason into three kinds, viz. that from knowledge, from proofs, and from probabilities. By knowledge, I mean the assurance arising from the comparison of ideas. By proofs, those arguments which are derived from the relation of cause and effect, and which are entirely free from doubt and uncertainty. By probability, that evidence which is still attended with uncertainty. It is this last species of reasoning I proceed to examine.

John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Book 4, Ch. 15.

As demonstration is the showing the agreement or disagreement of two ideas, by the intervention of one or more proofs, which have a constant, immutable, and visible connexion one with another; so probability is nothing but the appearance of such an agreement or disagreement, by the intervention of proofs, whose connexion is not constant and immutable, or at least is not perceived to be so, but is, or appears for the most part to be so, and is enough to induce the mind to judge the proposition to be true or false, rather than the contrary. For example: In the demonstration of it a man perceives the certain immutable connexion there is of equality between the three angles of a triangle, and those intermediate ones which are made use of to show their equality to two right ones; ... And thus he has certain knowledge that it is so. But another man, who never took the pains to observe the demonstration, hearing a mathematician, a man of credit, affirm the three angles of a triangle to be equal to two right ones, assents to it, i.e. receives it for true. In which case the foundation of his assent is
the probability of the thing, the proof being such as for the most part
carries truth with it: The man, on whose testimony he receives it, not
being wont to affirm any thing contrary to, or besides his knowledge,
especially in matters of this kind.