

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

AN ESSAY  
ON MIRACLES.

BY

DAVID HUME.

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION

*Commenting upon the views of Campbell, Paley, Mill,  
Powell, Greg, Mozley, Tyndall, Huxley, etc.,*

BY

JOSEPH MAZZINI WHEELER.

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*"Apologists find it much more convenient to evade the simple but effective arguments of Hume than to answer them."—"Supernatural Religion," vol. i., p. 78.*

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## INTRODUCTION.

WHEN an author has the fortune to be attacked by every succeeding writer upon the same subject for upwards of a century, and when his opinions, so far from being crushed out, become more widely spread by each "refutation," it induces a supicion that "sophisms" so constantly refuted may be truisms after all. This has been notably the case with the essay here reprinted. Since its first publication in 1748 it has been the *bête noire* of Christian controversialists. Campbell, Paley, De Quincey, Chalmers, Whately, Babbage, Mansel, Mozley, and a shoal of ministerial minnows sailing in the wake of these theological Tritons, have felt it incumbent upon them to refute the "sophisms" of the sceptic Hume. Yet no one will say that unbelief in the miraculous is upon the decline. On the contrary, never were Christians less anxious to insist upon the supernatural elements of their religion, and never more willing to seek reconcilements with science; never were there so many trained minds with perfect confidence that the uniformity of nature has never been disturbed by *coups d'état célestes*.

In truth, Hume's argument, though so constantly assailed, has never been refuted at all. It has been misapprehended and evaded, but it remains as unanswerable as that of Archbishop Tillotson against the real presence. And this, because in point of fact—the terms being rightly understood—it is a truism. John Stuart Mill well says: "Hume's celebrated principle that nothing is credible which is contradictory to experience, or at variance with laws of nature, is merely this very plain and harmless proposition, that whatever is contradictory to a complete induction is incredible. That such a maxim as this should either be accounted a dangerous heresy, or mistaken for a great and recondite truth, speaks ill for the state of philosophical speculation on such subjects." ("System of Logic," book 3, chap. xxv., sec. 2.)

Few essays so brief, for it must be borne in mind that the first part contains the argument complete in itself, have been so persistently misunderstood. The whole school of Christian-evidence writers have either argued as it were an *à priori* argument against the possibility of miracles, or as if it were an argument against testimony being received for wonders; whereas it is neither the one nor the other. Principal Campbell, as Mill points out,\* considered it a complete answer to Hume's doctrine (that things are incredible which are *contrary* to the uniform course of experience) that we do not disbelieve,

\* "Logic." See the "Three Essays," p. 217.

merely because the chances were against them, things in strict conformity to the uniform course of experience. Yet no one would call an unusual combination which was found by experience to occur among the whole number of possible cases a *miracle*, save in the popular, indefinite style of speech which is totally unfit for theological, and still more for logical, purposes. And here lies the gist of the whole misunderstanding. Everyone knows that both etymologically and popularly the word *miracle* is equivalent simply to a wonder. But Hume's argument is not directed against the occurrence of wonders, prodigies or unprecedented events; though it offers a criterion by which the value of their evidence can be judged. He was not such a simpleton as to contend, or intend, that no testimony could be sufficient to add to our knowledge of the laws of nature. His argument is based on the theological definition of miracles as infractions of the laws of nature by a supernatural being or beings exterior to those laws.

The essay has done much to modify the views of theologians, and they have since its time done their best to class their miracles under "unknown laws." Yet Canon Mozley, certainly the ablest late defender of miracles, admits that "their evidential value depends entirely upon their deviating from the order of nature." A miracle in the theological sense denotes not simply the counteraction of one natural law by another, which is not opposed to experience, but the suppression of the law of uniformity of cause and effect, which experience shows to be universal, and in which all other laws are included.\* As Hume puts it, unless there were an uniform experience against any miraculous event, "the event would not merit that appellation." If, by some unknown law, persons could, under given conditions, be raised from the dead, such facts, however wonderful, would take their place in the vast scheme of nature, and no more be properly entitled supernatural than any other. But such an event is classed as a miracle, as our essayist says, "*because* it has never been observed in any age or country."

The instance of the King of Siam rejecting accounts of ice has often, foolishly enough, been quoted against Hume by opponents who failed to notice the distinction between a *discovery* of the laws of nature and their *suspension*. If we could be taken to a region where the dead rise at command with the same certainty that water freezes when the temperature is below a certain point the fact would be indubitable, but the miracle would be gone. We cannot admit a proposition as a law of nature and yet believe a fact in contradiction to it. We must disbelieve the alleged fact, or believe that we are

\* See Mill's "Essay on Theism," p. 222.

mistaken in admitting the supposed law. In gaining the fact the miracle is lost; because to this, the supernatural nature of the fact, all testimony is incompetent. Mr. W. R. Greg pointed out that\* the assertion of a miracle being performed involves three elements, a fact and two inferences. It predicates, *first*, that such an event took place; *second*, that it was brought about by the act and will of the individual to whom it is attributed; *third*, that it could not have been produced by natural means. The fact may have been correctly observed, and yet either or both of the inferences be unwarranted; or either inference may be rendered unsound by the slightest deviation from accuracy in the observation or statement of the fact. Nay, any new discovery in science may show that the inference which has hitherto appeared quite irrefragable, was, in fact, wholly unwarranted and incorrect.

But it has been said: Assume a supernatural power and the antecedent improbability of supernatural visitations is removed. Paley says, "In a word, once believe that there is a God, and miracles are not incredible."† To this assertion Mill has been thought to lend his authority. He endorses Hume's argument only as substantiating that "no evidence can prove a miracle to anyone who did not previously believe the existence of a being or beings with supernatural power; or who believes himself to have full proof that the character of the Being whom he recognises, is inconsistent with his having seen fit to interfere on the occasion in question."‡ Now this statement is inadequate. The existence of God, if He be the Supreme Cause of the order of the universe, is rather an additional difficulty to those who think that order was created by Him and subsequently disturbed. The argument against miracles rests on our experience of the order of nature; and is, therefore, equally valid whether a cause of that order be assumed or not. For the only test of the will or way of working of such a cause is to be found within the order itself. Any interference with that order still has to be proved by testimony; and the question remains whether it is more credible that men have been deceived, or that the laws of nature have been disturbed?

This last is the aspect of the argument which comes home to the popular mind. Every individual has experience that men lie and make mistakes; none that miracles occur. Experiment upon experiment; the records of generation after

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\* "Creed of Christendom," vol. ii., p. 136.

† Evidences of Christianity. "Preparatory Considerations."

‡ "System of Logic," Bk. 3, ch. xxv., sec. 2. Dr. Farrar's abuse of Mill's reasoning is well exposed by the author of "Supernatural Religion," Pt. 1, ch. iii.

generation; the very stability of our life depends upon and confirms the belief in the uniformity of law. "In the case of miracles, then," says Professor Tyndall, "it behoves us to understand the weight of the negative before we assign a value to the positive; to comprehend the protest of nature before we attempt to measure with it the assertions of men."\*

Paley's supposition of "twelve men whose probity and good sense I had well known," who should be ready, one after another, to be racked, burnt or strangled, rather than give up the assertion that they had witnessed miracles, does not even meet the case. For how could it be shown that it was impossible for these twelve men to be deceived? Twelve *infallible* men would be as incredible as any miracle they were supposed to assert. Paley's reference is simply a disingenuous attempt to imply that twelve good witnesses testified to the Christian miracles at the time and in the place where they are said to have occurred, and that they suffered on this account. Whereas not one single original witness is known; nor can even any early Christian be proved to have suffered for his belief in miracles.

Professor Huxley, who, in his admirable little book on Hume, very captiously, as it seems to me, takes exception to Hume's defining miracles in their theological sense, agrees that his arguments on the matter of testimony resolve themselves into a simple statement of the dictates of common-sense, which may be expressed in this canon: the more a statement of fact conflicts with previous experience, the more complete must be the evidence which is to justify us in believing it. It is upon this principle that everyone carries on the business of common life. "If," continues the Professor, "a man tells me he saw a piebald horse in Piccadilly, I believe him without hesitation. The thing itself is likely enough, and there is no imaginable motive for his deceiving me. But if the same person tells me he observed a zebra there, I might hesitate a little about accepting his testimony, unless I were well satisfied, not only as to his previous acquaintance with zebras, but as to his powers and opportunities of observation in the present case. If, however, my informant assured me that he beheld a centaur trotting down that famous thoroughfare, I should emphatically decline to credit his statement; and this even if he were the most saintly of men, and ready to suffer martyrdom in support of his belief. In such a case I could, of course, entertain no doubt of the good faith of the witness; it would be only his competency, which, unfortunately,

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\* "Fragments of Science," "On Miracles and Special Providence," vol. ii., p. 33. 1879.

has very little to do with good faith or intensity of conviction, which I should presume to call in question.”\*

The sceptic being securely entrenched in the first part of the essay, the second carries the war into the supernaturalists' camp. With the confidence of a thorough student of human nature and historian, Hume gives his conviction that there is not in all history an wholly trustworthy testimony to miraculous events. Huxley says on this passage (page 10 of this edition):—“These are grave assertions, but they are least likely to be challenged by those who have made it their business to weigh evidence and to give their decision under a due sense of the moral responsibility which they incur in so doing.”

Miracles are only alleged to have happened among people devoid of scientific information and critical spirit. The learned author of “Supernatural Religion,” in his chapter on “The Age of Miracles,” gives abundant proof that the miracles now credited arose in a time of the grossest superstition, among a people believing in the every-day operations of angels and demons, full of religious excitement, and prone to exaggeration. In an age of science, where no one expects miracles, they do not occur, and most are ready to take as evidence of superstition the belief in any others than those in faith of which they have themselves been reared. The same silent process which has destroyed the belief in fairies and witchcraft has undermined all other supernatural beliefs, and they only await the application of criticism to be levelled with the dust. It is true the universe remains a mystery. In one sense every atom is a miracle. It is so because man's faculties are finite and the relations of nature infinite. But the mystery of nature affords no ground for belief in miraculous events, the only testimony for which has been handed down from superstitious and ill-informed ancestors. It is rather a reason for abiding by the only light we have—the light which comes from reason and observation. The part of a wise man is to study and investigate, and “proportion his belief to the evidence.”

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There being slight variations in the various editions of the Essay, the present text has been carefully compared with all those in the library of the British Museum.

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\* “English Men of Letters : Hume,” p. 134.

# ON MIRACLES.

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## PART I.

THERE is in Dr. Tillotson's writings an argument against the *real presence*, which is as concise, and elegant, and strong as any argument can possibly be supposed against a doctrine that is so little worthy of a serious refutation. It is acknowledged on all hands, says that learned prelate, that the authority, either of the scripture or of tradition, is founded merely in the testimony of the apostles, who were eye-witnesses to those miracles of our Savior, by which he proved his divine mission. Our evidence, then, for the truth of the *Christian* religion is less than the evidence for the truth of our senses; because, even in the first authors of our religion, it was no greater; and it is evident it must diminish in passing from them to their disciples; nor can any one be so certain of the truth of their testimony, as of the immediate object of his senses. But a weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger; and therefore, were the doctrine of the real presence ever so clearly revealed in scripture, it were directly contrary to the rules of just reasoning to give our assent to it. It contradicts sense, though both the scripture and tradition, on which it is supposed to be built, carry not such evidence with them as sense, when they are considered merely as external evidences, and are not brought home to every one's breast by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit.

Nothing is so convenient as a decisive argument of this kind, which must at least *silence* the most arrogant bigotry and superstition, and free us from their impertinent solicitations. I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument of a like nature, which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures. For so long, I presume, will the accounts of miracles and prodigies be found in all history, sacred and profane.

Though experience be our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact; it must be acknowledged that this guide is not altogether infallible, but in some cases is apt to lead us into errors and mistakes. One, who, in our climate, should expect better weather in any week of June than in one of December, would reason justly, and conformably to experience; but it is certain that he may happen, in the event, to find himself mistaken. However, we may observe, that, in such a case, he would have no cause to complain of experience;



because it commonly informs us beforehand of the uncertainty, by that contrariety of events, which we may learn from a diligent observation. All effects follow not with like certainty from their supposed causes. Some events are found, in all countries and all ages, to have been constantly conjoined together: Others are found to have been more variable, and sometimes to disappoint our expectations; so that, in our reasonings concerning matter of fact, there are all imaginable degrees of assurance, from the highest certainty to the lowest species of moral evidence.

A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and 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 greatest number of experiments: To that side he inclines with doubt and hesitation; 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; 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 one side, and fifty on another, afford a very 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.

To apply these principles to a particular instance; we may observe that there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. This species of reasoning, perhaps, one may deny to be founded on the relation of cause and effect. I shall not dispute about a word. It will be sufficient to observe, that our assurance in any argument of this kind is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses. It being a general maxim, that no objects have any discoverable connexion together, and that all the inferences which we can draw from one to another are founded merely on our experience of their constant and regular conjunction; it is evident that we ought not to make an exception to this maxim in favor of human testimony, whose connexion with any events seems, in itself, as little

necessary as any other. Were not the memory tenacious to a certain degree; had not men commonly an inclination to truth and a principle of probity; were they not sensible to shame when detected in a falsehood: Were not these, I say, discovered by *experience* to be qualities inherent in human nature, we should never repose the least confidence in human testimony. A man delirious, or noted for falsehood and villainy, has no manner of authority with us.

And as the evidence, derived from witnesses and human testimony, is founded on past experience, so it varies with the experience, and is regarded either as a *proof* or a *probability* according as the conjunction between any particular kind of report and any kind of objects, has been found to be constant or variable. There are a number of circumstances to be taken into consideration in all judgments of this kind; and the ultimate standard, by which we determine all disputes that may arise concerning them, is always derived from experience and observation. Where this experience is not entirely uniform on any side, it is attended with an unavoidable contrariety in our judgments, and with the same opposition and mutual destruction of arguments as in every other kind of evidence. We frequently hesitate concerning the reports of others. We balance the opposite circumstances which cause any doubt or uncertainty; and when we discover a superiority on any side, we incline to it; but still with a diminution of assurance in proportion to the force of its antagonist.

This contrariety of evidence, in the present case, may be derived from several different causes; from the opposition of contrary testimony, from the character or number of the witnesses, from the manner of their delivering their testimony, or from the union of all these circumstances. We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact when the witnesses contradict each other, when they are but few or of a doubtful character, when they have an interest in what they affirm, when they deliver their testimony with doubt and hesitation, or, on the contrary, with too violent asseverations. There are many other particulars of the same kind, which may diminish or destroy the force of any argument derived from human testimony.

Suppose, for instance, that the fact which the testimony endeavors to establish partakes of the extraordinary and the marvellous, in that case, the evidence resulting from the testimony admits of a diminution greater or less in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual. The reason why we place any credit in witnesses and historians is not from any *conclusion*, which we perceive *à priori*, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them. But when the fact attested is such a one as

has seldom fallen under our observation, here is a contest of two opposite experiences; of which the one destroys the other, as far as its force goes, and the superior can only operate on the mind by the force which remains. The very same principle of experience, which gives us a certain degree of assurance in the testimony of witnesses, gives us also, in this case, another degree of assurance against the fact which they endeavor to establish; from which contradiction there necessarily arise a counterpoise, and mutual destruction of belief and authority.

"*I should not believe such a story were it told me by CATO;*" was a proverbial saying in Rome, even during the lifetime of that philosophical patriot (1). The incredibility of a fact, it was allowed, might invalidate so great an authority.

The Indian prince who refused to believe the first relations concerning the effects of frost reasoned justly, and it naturally required very strong testimony to engage his assent to facts which arose from a state of nature with which he was unacquainted, and bore so little analogy to those events of which he had had constant and uniform experience. Though they were not contrary to his experience, they were not conformable to it (2).

But in order to increase the probability against the testimony of witnesses, let us suppose that the fact which they affirm, instead of being only marvellous, is really miraculous, and suppose also, that the testimony, considered apart and in itself, amounts to an entire proof; in that case there is proof against proof, of which the strongest must prevail, but still with a diminution of its force, in proportion to that of its antagonist.

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. Why is it more than probable that all men must die; that lead cannot of itself remain suspended in the air; that fire consumes wood, and is extinguished by water; unless it be that these events are found agreeable to the laws of nature, and there is required a violation of these laws, or, in other words, a miracle to prevent them? Nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happen in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man seemingly in good health should die on a sudden: because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be an uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as an 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 by an opposite proof, which is superior (3).

The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), "That 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 endeavors to establish: And even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force which remains after deducting the inferior." When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact which he relates should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and, according to the superiority which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

## PART II.

In the foregoing reasoning we have supposed that the testimony upon which a miracle is founded may possibly amount to an entire proof, and that the falsehood of that testimony would be a real prodigy: 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 an evidence.

For *first*, there is not to be found in all history any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind as to have a great deal to lose in case of being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time attesting facts, performed in such a public manner and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable: All which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men.

*Secondly*. We may observe in human nature a principle which, if strictly examined, will be found to diminish extremely the assurance which we might have from human testimony in any kind of prodigy. The maxim by which we commonly conduct ourselves in our reasonings, is, that the objects, of which we have no experience, resemble those of

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\* The 1750 edition inserts: "In any history."

which we have; that what we have found to be most usual is always most probable; and that where there is an opposition of arguments, we ought to give the preference to such of them as are founded on the greatest number of past observations. But though, in proceeding by this rule, we readily reject any fact which is unusual and incredible in an ordinary degree; yet in advancing farther, the mind observes not always the same rule, but when anything is affirmed utterly absurd and miraculous, it rather the more readily admits such a fact, upon account of that very circumstance which ought to destroy all its authority. The passion of *surprise* and *wonder*, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events from which it is derived. And this goes so far, that even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others.

With what greediness are the miraculous accounts of travellers received, their descriptions of sea and land monsters, their relations of wonderful adventures, strange men, and uncouth manners! But if the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common-sense, and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority. A religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality: He may know his narration to be false, and yet persevere in it with the best intentions in the world for the sake of promoting so holy a cause: Or even where this delusion has no place, vanity, excited by so strong a temptation, operates on him more powerfully than on the rest of mankind in any other circumstances; and self-interest with equal force. His auditors may not have, and commonly have not, sufficient judgment to canvass his evidence: What judgment they have, they renounce by principle, in these sublime and mysterious subjects: Or if they were ever so willing to employ it, passion and a heated imagination disturb the regularity of its operations. Their credulity increases his impudence; and his impudence overpowers their credulity.

Eloquence, when in its highest pitch, leaves little room for reason or reflection, but addressing itself entirely to the fancy or the affections, captivates the willing hearers, and subdues their understandings. Happily, this pitch it seldom attains. But what a Cicero or a Demosthenes could scarcely operate over a Roman or Athenian audience, every *Capuchin*, every itinerant or stationary teacher, can perform over the generality of mankind, and in a higher degree, by touching such gross and vulgar passions (4).

*Thirdly.* It forms a very strong presumption against all

supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilised people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with that inviolable sanction and authority which always attend received opinions. When we peruse the first histories of all nations we are apt to imagine ourselves transported into some new world, where the whole frame of nature is disjointed and every element performs its operations in a different manner from what it does at present. Battles, revolutions, pestilence, famine, and death, are never the effects of those natural causes which we experience. Prodiges, omens, oracles, judgments, quite obscure the few natural events that are intermingled with them. But as the former grow thinner every page, in proportion as we advance nearer the enlightened ages of science and knowledge, we soon learn that there is nothing mysterious or supernatural in the case, but that all proceeds from the usual propensity of mankind towards the marvellous, and that, though this inclination may at intervals receive a check from sense and learning, it can never thoroughly be extirpated from human nature.

"It is strange," a judicious reader is apt to say upon the perusal of these wonderful historians, "that such prodigious events never happen in our days." But it is nothing strange, I hope, that men should lie in all ages. You must surely have seen instances enow of that frailty. You have yourself heard many such marvellous relations started, which, being treated with scorn by all the wise and judicious, have at last been abandoned even by the vulgar. Be assured, that those renowned lies which have spread and flourished to such a monstrous height, arose from like beginnings, but being sown in a more proper soil, shot up at last into prodigies almost equal to those which they relate.

It was a wise policy in that false prophet, Alexander, who, though now forgotten, was once so famous, to lay the first scene of his impostures in Paphlagonia, where, as Lucian tells us, the people were extremely ignorant and stupid, and ready to swallow even the grossest delusion. People at a distance, who are weak enough to think the matter at all worthy inquiry, have no opportunity of receiving better information. The stories come magnified to them by a hundred circumstances. Fools are industrious in propagating the imposture; while the wise and learned are contented, in general, to deride its absurdity, without informing themselves of the particular facts by which it may be distinctly refuted. And thus the impostor above-mentioned was enabled to proceed from his ignorant Paphlagonians to the enlisting of votaries, even among the

Grecian philosophers and men of the most eminent rank and distinction in Rome: Nay, could engage the attention of that sage emperor, Marcus Aurelius, so far as to make him trust the success of a military expedition to his delusive prophecies.

The advantages are so great, of starting an imposture among an ignorant people, that even though the delusion should be too gross to impose on the generality of them—*which, though seldom, is sometimes the case*—it has a much better chance of succeeding in remote countries, than if the first scene had been laid in a city renowned for arts and knowledge. The most ignorant and barbarous of these barbarians carry the report abroad. None of their countrymen have large correspondence or sufficient credit and authority to contradict and beat down the delusion. Men's inclination to the marvellous has full opportunity to display itself. And thus a story, which is universally exploded in the place where it was first started, shall pass for certain at a thousand miles distance. But had Alexander fixed his residence at Athens, the philosophers of that renowned mart of learning had immediately spread throughout the whole Roman empire, their sense of the matter; which, being supported by so great authority, and displayed by all the force of reason and eloquence, had entirely opened the eyes of mankind. It is true, Lucian, passing by chance through Paphlagonia, had an opportunity of performing this good office. But, though much to be wished, it does not always happen, that every Alexander meets with a Lucian, ready to expose and detect his impostures (5).

I may add as a *fourth* reason which diminishes the authority of prodigies, that there is no testimony for any, even those which have not been expressly detected, that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses; so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of the testimony, but even the testimony destroys itself. To make this the better understood, let us consider, that in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary, and that it is impossible the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China should, all of them, be established on any solid foundation. Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles on which that system was established; so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts, and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite to each other. According to this method of reasoning, when we believe any miracle of Mahomet or any of his successors, we have for our

warrant the testimony of a few barbarous Arabians : And on the other hand, we are to regard the authority of Titus Livius, Plutarch, Tacitus, and, in short, of all the authors and witnesses, Grecian, Chinese, and Roman Catholic, who have related any miracle in their particular religion ; I say, we are to regard their testimony in the same light as if they had mentioned that Mahometan miracle, and had in express terms contradicted it, with the same certainty as they have for the miracles they relate. This argument may appear over subtle and refined, but is not in reality different from the reasoning of a judge who supposes that the credit of two witnesses maintaining a crime against any one is destroyed by the testimony of two others who affirm him to have been two hundred leagues distant, at the same instant when the crime is said to have been committed.

One of the best attested miracles in all profane history is that which Tacitus reports of Vespasian, who cured a blind man in Alexandria by means of his spittle, and a lame man by the mere touch of his foot ; in obedience to a vision of the god Serapis, who had enjoined them to have recourse to the Emperor for these miraculous cures. The story may be seen in that fine historian (6) ; where every circumstance seems to add weight to the testimony, and might be displayed at large with all the force of argument and eloquence if anyone were now concerned to enforce the evidence of that exploded and idolatrous superstition. The gravity, solidity, age, and probity of so great an emperor, who, through the whole course of his life conversed in a familiar manner with his friends and courtiers, and never affected those extraordinary airs of divinity assumed by Alexander and Demetrius : The historian, a cotemporary writer noted for candor and veracity, and withal the greatest and most penetrating genius perhaps of all antiquity ; and so free from any superstition and credulity that he even lies under the contrary imputation of Atheism and profaneness : The persons, from whose testimony he related the miracle, of established character for judgment and veracity, as we may well presume ; eye-witnesses of the fact, and confirming their verdict after the Flavian family were despoiled of the empire, and could no longer give any reward as the price of a lie. *Utrumque, qui interfuere, nunc quoque memorant, postquam nullum mendacio pretium.* To which, if we add the public nature of the facts as related, it will appear that no evidence can well be supposed stronger for so gross and so palpable a falsehood.

There is also a memorable story related by Cardinal de Retz, which may well deserve our consideration. When that intriguing politician fled into Spain to avoid the persecution of his enemies he passed through Saragossa, the capital



of Arragon, where he was shown in the cathedral a man who had served seven years as a door-keeper, and was well known to everybody in the town that had ever paid their devotions at that church. He had been seen for so long a time wanting a leg; but recovered that limb by the rubbing of holy oil upon the stump, and the cardinal assures us that he saw him with two legs. This miracle was vouched by all the canons of the church; and the whole company in town were appealed to for a confirmation of the fact; whom the cardinal found, by their zealous devotion, to be thorough believers of the miracle. Here the relater was also cotemporary to the supposed prodigy, of an incredulous and libertine character, as well as of great genius; the miracle of so singular a nature as could scarce admit of a counterfeit, and the witnesses very numerous, and all of them, in a manner, spectators of the fact to which they gave their testimony. And what adds mightily to the force of the evidence and may double our surprise on this occasion is that the cardinal himself, who relates the story, seems not to give any credit to it, and consequently cannot be suspected of any concurrence in the holy fraud. He considered justly, that it was not requisite, in order to reject a fact of this nature, to be able accurately to disprove the testimony and to trace its falsehood through all the circumstances of knavery and credulity which produced it. He knew that, as this was commonly altogether impossible at any small distance of time and place, so was it extremely difficult, even where one was immediately present, by reason of the bigotry, ignorance, cunning and roguery of a great part of mankind. He therefore concluded, like a just reasoner, that such an evidence carried falsehood upon the very face of it, and that a miracle supported by any human testimony, was more properly a subject of derision than of argument.

There surely never was a greater number of miracles ascribed to one person than those which were lately said to have been wrought in France upon the tomb of Abbé Paris, the famous Jansenist, with whose sanctity the people were so long deluded. The curing of the sick, giving hearing to the deaf and sight to the blind, were everywhere talked of as the usual effects of that holy sepulchre. But what is more extraordinary; many of the miracles were immediately proved upon the spot before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction in a learned age, and on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world. Nor is this all: A relation of them was published and dispersed everywhere; nor were the Jesuits, though a learned body supported by the civil magistrate, and determined enemies to those opinions in whose favor the miracles were said to have been wrought, ever able distinctly to refute or detect them (7). Where shall we

find such a number of circumstances agreeing to the corroboration of one fact? And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events which they relate? And this surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation.

Is the consequence just, because some human testimony has the utmost force and authority in some cases, when it relates the battles of Philippi or Pharsalia for instance; that therefore all kinds of testimony must, in all cases, have equal force and authority? Suppose that the Cæsarean and Pompeian factions had each of them claimed the victory in these battles, and that the historian of each party had uniformly ascribed the advantage to their own side; how could mankind at this distance have been able to determine between them? The contrariety is equally strong between the miracles related by Herodotus or Plutarch and those delivered by Mariana, Bede, or any monkish historian.

The wise lend a very academic faith to every report which favors the passion of the reporter; whether it magnifies his country, his family, or himself, or in any other way strikes in with his natural inclinations and propensities. But what greater temptation than to appear a missionary, a prophet, an ambassador from heaven? Who would not encounter many dangers and difficulties in order to attain so sublime a character? Or if, by the help of vanity and a heated imagination, a man has first made a convert of himself and entered seriously into the delusion; who ever scruples to make use of pious frauds in support of so holy and meritorious a cause?

The smallest spark may here kindle into the greatest flame, because the materials are always prepared for it. The *avidum genus auricularum* (8), the gazing populace, receive greedily, without examination, whatever soothes superstition, and promotes wonder.

How many stories of this nature have in all ages been detected and exploded in their infancy? How many more have been celebrated for a time, and have afterwards sunk into neglect and oblivion? Where such reports, therefore, fly about, the solution of the phenomenon is obvious, and we judge in conformity to regular experience and observation when we account for it by the known and natural principles of credulity and delusion. And shall we, rather than have a resource to so natural a solution, allow of a miraculous violation of the most established laws of nature?

I need not mention the difficulty of detecting a falsehood in any private or even public history, at the time and place where it is said to happen, much more where the scene is removed to ever so small a distance. Even a court of judicature, with all

the authority, accuracy, and judgment, which they can employ, find themselves often at a loss to distinguish between truth and falsehood in most recent actions. But the matter never comes to any issue if trusted to the common method of altercation and debate and flying rumors; especially when men's passions have taken part on either side.

In the infancy of new religions the wise and learned commonly esteem the matter too inconsiderable to deserve their attention or regard. And when afterwards they would willingly detect the cheat in order to undeceive the deluded multitude, the season is now past, and the records and witnesses, which might clear up the matter, have perished beyond recovery.

No means of detection remain but those which must be drawn from the very testimony itself of the reporters: And these, though always sufficient with the judicious and knowing, are commonly too fine to fall under the comprehension of the vulgar.

Upon the whole, then, it appears that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted\* to a probability much less to a proof; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact which it would endeavor to establish. It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other, and embrace an opinion either on one side or the other with that assurance which arises from the remainder. But according to the principle here explained, this subtraction with regard to all popular religions, amounts to an entire annihilation; and therefore we may establish it as a maxim that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion (9).

I am the better pleased with this method of reasoning, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the *Christian religion*, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason. Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason, and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial, as it is by no means fitted to endure. To make this more evident, let us examine those miracles related in scripture, and not to lose ourselves in too wide a field, let us confine ourselves to such as we find in the *Pentateuch*, which we shall examine according to the principles of these pretended Christians, not as the word or testimony of God himself, but as the production of a mere

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\* The first two editions read: "Can ever possibly amount."

human writer and historian. Here, then, we are first to consider a book presented to us by a barbarous and ignorant people, written in an age when they were still more barbarous and in all probability long after the facts which it relates, corroborated by no concurring testimony, and resembling those fabulous accounts which every nation gives of its origin. Upon reading this book, we find it full of prodigies and miracles. It gives an account of a state of the world and of human nature entirely different from the present: Of our fall from that state: Of the age of man extended to near a thousand years: Of the destruction of the world by a deluge: Of the arbitrary choice of one people as the favorites of heaven and that people the countrymen of the author: Of their deliverance from bondage by prodigies the most astonishing imaginable: I desire anyone to lay his hand upon his heart and after serious consideration declare whether he thinks that the falsehood of such a book, supported by such a testimony, would be more extraordinary and miraculous than all the miracles it relates; which is, however, necessary to make it be received according to the measures of probability above established.

What we have said of miracles may be applied without any variation to prophecies; and indeed all prophecies are real miracles, and as such only, can be admitted as proofs of any revelation. If it did not exceed the capacity of human nature to foretel future events, it would be absurd to employ any prophecy as an argument for a divine mission or authority from heaven; so that, upon the whole, we may conclude that the *Christian religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

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## NOTES.

(1) Plutarch, in vita Catonis Min. 19.

\*(2) No Indian, it is evident, could have experience that water did not freeze in cold climates. This is placing nature in a situation quite unknown to him, and it is impossible for him to tell *à priori* what will result from it. It is making a new experiment, the consequence of which is always uncertain. One may sometimes conjecture from analogy what will follow; but still this is but conjecture. And it must be confessed, that in the present case of freezing, the event follows contrary to

the rules of analogy, and is such as a rational Indian would not look for. The operations of cold upon water are not gradual according to the degrees of cold, but whenever it comes to the freezing point the water passes in a moment from the utmost liquidity to perfect hardness. Such an event therefore may be denominated *extraordinary*, and requires a pretty strong testimony to render it credible to people in a warm climate; but still it is not *miraculous*, nor contrary to uniform experience of the course of nature in cases where all the circumstances are the same. The inhabitants of Sumatra have always seen water fluid in their own climate, and the freezing of their rivers ought to be deemed a prodigy: but they never saw water in Muscovy during the winter; and therefore they cannot reasonably be positive what would there be the consequence.

(3) Sometimes an event may not, *in itself*, seem to be contrary to the laws of nature, and yet, if it were real, it might, by reason of some circumstances, be denominated a miracle, because, in *fact*, it is contrary to these laws. Thus if a person, claiming a divine authority, should command a sick person to be well, a healthful man to fall down dead, the clouds to pour rain, the winds to blow—in short, should order many natural events which immediately follow upon his command;—these might justly be esteemed miracles, because they are really, in this case, contrary to the laws of nature. For if any suspicion remain that the event and command concurred by accident there is no miracle and no transgression of the laws of nature. If this suspicion be removed, there is evidently a miracle, and a transgression of these laws; because nothing can be more contrary to nature than that the voice or command of a man should have such an influence. 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. The raising of a house or ship into the air is a visible miracle. The raising of a feather, when the wind wants ever so little of a force requisite for that purpose, is as real a miracle, though not so sensible with regard to us.

(4) The many instances of forged miracles, and prophecies, and supernatural events, which, in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence, or which detect themselves by their absurdity, mark sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvellous, and ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind. This is our natural way of thinking, even with regard to the most common and most credible events. For instance, there is no kind of report which rises so easily and spreads so quickly, especially in country places and provincial towns, as

those concerning marriages; insomuch that two young persons of equal condition never see each other twice, but the whole neighborhood immediately join them together. The pleasure of telling a piece of news so interesting, of propagating it, and of being the first reporters of it, spreads the intelligence. And this is so well known that no man of sense gives attention to these reports till he finds them confirmed by some greater evidence. Do not the same passions, and others still stronger, incline the generality of mankind to the believing and reporting with the greatest vehemence and assurance all religious miracles?

(5) It may here perhaps be objected that I proceed rashly, and form my notions of Alexander merely from the account given of him by Lucian, a professed enemy. It were indeed to be wished that some of the accounts published by his followers and accomplices had remained. The opposition and contrast between the character and conduct of the same man as drawn by a friend or an enemy is as strong, even in common life, much more in these religious matters, as that betwixt any two men in the world—betwixt Alexander and St. Paul, for instance. See a letter to Gilbert West, Esq., on the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul.

(6) Hist., lib. 5, cap. viii. Suetonius gives nearly the same account *in vita* Vesp.

(7) This book was written by Mons. de Montgeron, counsellor or judge of the Parliament of Paris, a man of figure and character, who was also a martyr to the cause, and is now said to be somewhere in a dungeon on account of his book.

There is another book, in three volumes (called "Recueil des Miracles de l'Abbé Paris"), giving an account of many of these miracles and accompanied with prefatory discourses, which are very well written. There runs, however, through the whole of these a ridiculous comparison between the miracles of our Savior and those of the Abbé, wherein it is asserted that the evidence for the latter is equal to that for the former: As if the testimony of men could ever be put in the balance with that of God himself, who conducted the pen of the inspired writers. If these writers, indeed, were to be considered merely as human testimony, the French author is very moderate in his comparison, since he might, with some appearance of reason, pretend that the Jansenist miracles much surpass the others in evidence and authority. The following circumstances are drawn from authentic papers inserted in the above-mentioned book.

Many of the miracles of Abbé Paris were proved immediately by witnesses before the officiality or bishop's court at Paris, under the eyes of Cardinal Noailles, whose character for integrity and capacity was never contested even by his enemies.

His successor in the archbishopric was an enemy to the Jansenists, and for that reason promoted to the see by the Court. Yet twenty-two rectors or *curés* of Paris, with infinite earnestness, press him to examine those miracles, which they assert to be known to the whole world, and indisputably certain: But he wisely forbore.

The Molinist party had tried to discredit these miracles in one instance, that of Mademoiselle le Franc. But besides that, their proceedings in many respects are the most irregular in the world, particularly in citing only a few of the Jansenist's witnesses, whom they tampered with: Besides this, I say they soon found themselves overwhelmed by a cloud of new witnesses one hundred and twenty in number, most of them persons of credit and substance in Paris, who gave oath for the miracle. This was accompanied with a solemn and earnest appeal to the Parliament. But the Parliament were forbidden by authority to meddle in the affair. It was at last observed that where men are heated by zeal and enthusiasm there is no degree of human testimony so strong as may not be procured for the greatest absurdity: And those who will be so silly as to examine the affair by that medium, and seek particular flaws in the testimony, are almost sure to be confounded. It must be a miserable imposture indeed that does not prevail in that contest.

All who have been in France about that time have heard of the great reputation of Mons. Heraut, the *Lieutenant de Police*, whose vigilance, penetration, activity and extensive intelligence have been much talked of. This magistrate, who by the nature of his office is almost absolute, was invested with full powers on purpose to suppress or discredit these miracles; and he frequently seized immediately and examined the witnesses and subjects of them; but never could reach anything satisfactory against them.

In the case of Mademoiselle Thibaut he sent the famous de Sylvia to examine her, whose evidence is very curious. The physician declares that it was impossible she could have been so ill as was proved by witnesses, because it was impossible she could in so short a time have recovered so perfectly as he found her. He reasoned like a man of sense from natural causes; but the opposite party told him that the whole was a miracle, and that his evidence was the very best proof of it.

The Molinists were in a sad dilemma. They dared not assert the absolute insufficiency of human evidence to prove a miracle. They were obliged to say that these miracles were wrought by witchcraft and the devil. But they were told that this was the resource of the Jews of old.

No Jansenist was ever embarrassed to account for the cessation of the miracles, when the churchyard was shut up by the king's edict. It was the touch of the tomb which

produced these extraordinary effects; and when no one could approach the tomb, no effects could be expected. God indeed could have thrown down the walls in a moment; but he is master of his own graces and works, and it belongs not to us to account for them. He did not throw down the walls of every city like those of Jericho on the sounding of the rams' horns, nor break up the prison of every apostle like that of St. Paul.

No less a man than the Duc de Chatillon, a duke and peer of France of the highest rank and family, gives evidence of a miraculous cure performed upon a servant of his, who had lived several years in his house with a visible and palpable infirmity.

I shall conclude with observing that no clergy are more celebrated for strictness of life and manners than the secular clergy of France, particularly the rectors or curés of Paris who bear testimony to these impostures.

The learning, genius, and probity of the gentlemen, and the austerity of the nuns of Port Royal, have been much celebrated all over Europe. Yet they all give evidence for a miracle wrought on the niece of the famous Pascal, whose sanctity of life, as well as extraordinary capacity, is well known. The famous Racine gives an account of this miracle in his famous history of Port-Royal, and fortifies it with all the proofs which a multitude of nuns, priests, physicians and men of the world, all of them of undoubted credit, could bestow upon it. Several men of letters, particularly the Bishop of Tournay, thought this miracle so certain, as to employ it in the refutation of Atheists and Freethinkers. The Queen-Regent of France, who was extremely prejudiced against the Port-Royal, sent her own physician to examine the miracle, who returned an absolute convert. In short, the supernatural cure was so uncontestable that it saved for a time that famous monastery from the ruin with which it was threatened by the Jesuits. Had it been a cheat, it had certainly been detected by such sagacious and powerful antagonists and must have hastened the ruin of the contrivers. Our divines who can build up a formidable castle from such despicable materials, what a prodigious fabric could they have reared from these and many other circumstances which I have not mentioned!—How oft would the great names of Pascal, Racine, Arnaud, Nicole, have resounded in our ears? But if they be wise, they had better adopt the miracle as being more worth a thousand times than all the rest of their collection. Besides, it may serve very much to their purpose. For that miracle was really performed by the touch of an authentic holy prickle of the holy thorn, which composed the holy crown, which, etc.

(8) Lucret, iv., 594.



(9) I beg the limitations here made may be remarked when I say that a miracle can never be proved so as to be the foundation of a system of religion. For I own, that otherwise there may possibly be miracles or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony, though perhaps it will be impossible to find any such in all the records of history. Thus, suppose all authors in all languages agree that from the 1st of January 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days: Suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people, that all travellers who return from foreign countries bring us accounts of the same tradition without the least variation or contradiction: It is evident that our present philosophers, instead of doubting that fact, ought to receive it for certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived. The decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature, is an event rendered probable by so many analogies, that any phenomenon which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform.

But suppose that all the historians who treat of England should agree, that, on the 1st of January 1600, Queen Elizabeth died; that both before and after her death she was seen by her physicians and the whole court, as is usual with persons of her rank; that her successor was acknowledged and proclaimed by the Parliament; and that, after being interred a month, she again appeared, took possession of the throne, and governed England for three years: I must confess I should be surprised at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances, but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. I should not doubt of her pretended death and of those other public circumstances that followed it: I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was nor possibly could be real. You would in vain object to me the difficulty and almost impossibility of deceiving the world in an affair of such consequence; the wisdom and integrity of that renowned queen; with the little or no advantage which she could reap from so poor an artifice: All this might astonish me; but I would still reply that the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence than admit so signal a violation of the laws of nature.

But should this miracle be ascribed to any new system of religion, men in all ages have been so much imposed on by ridiculous stories of that kind, that this very circumstance would be a full proof of a cheat, and sufficient with all men of

sense not only to make them reject the fact, but reject it without farther examination. Though the being to whom the miracle is ascribed be in this case Almighty, it does not, upon that account, become a whit more probable; since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being, otherwise than from the experience which we have of his productions in the usual course of nature. This still reduces us to past observation, and obliges us to compare the instance of the violations of truth in the testimony of men with those of the violation of the laws of nature by miracles, in order to judge which of them is most likely and probable. As the violations of truth are more common in the testimony concerning religious miracles than in that concerning any other matter of fact; this must diminish very much the authority of the former testimony, and make us form a general resolution never to lend any attention to it, with whatever specious pretext it may be covered.

Lord Bacon seems to have embraced the same principles of reasoning:—"We ought," says he, "to make a collection or particular history of all monsters and prodigious births or productions, and in a word of everything new, rare, and extraordinary in nature. But this must be done with the most severe scrutiny, lest we depart from truth. Above all, every relation must be considered as suspicious which depends in any degree upon religion, as the prodigies of Livy: And no less so, everything that is to be found in the writers of natural magic or alchemy, or such authors, who seem, all of them, to have an uncontrollable appetite for falsehood and fable." "*Facienda enim est congeries sive historia naturalis particularis omnium monstrorum et partuum naturæ prodigiosorum; omnis denique novitatis et raritatis et inconsueti in natura. Hoc vero faciendum est cum severissimo deductu, ut constet fides. Maxime autem habenda sunt pro suspectis quæ pendent quomodocunque ex religione, ut prodigia Livii: Nec minus quæ inveniuntur in scriptoribus magiæ naturalis, aut etiam alchymicæ, et hujusmodi hominibus; qui tanquam proci sunt et amatores fabularum.*"—"Nov. Organ.," lib. 2., Aph. 29.

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