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The Everlasting Check: Hume on Miracles by Alexander George (review)

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defended by Kevin Meeker in *Hume's Radical Scepticism and the Fate of Naturalized Epistemology* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013).

De Pierris's book shows that radical skepticism and normative naturalism are fundamental aspects of Hume's position. How these two "conflicting" standpoints are "mutually complementary" is less convincing but will challenge readers (1). *Ideas, Evidence, and Method* is recommended reading for anyone interested in knowledge and causality in Hume and, more generally, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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Alexander George. *The Everlasting Check: Hume on Miracles*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 98. Cloth, \$24.95.

This book provides a concise treatment of David Hume's "Of Miracles," defending both an interpretation of Hume's argument and an evaluation of its philosophical significance. The philosophical argumentation is consistently rigorous, and the interpretation of Hume is interesting and original.

A distinctive aspect of George's approach, which should have been highlighted in the introduction but was not, is his treatment of "Of Miracles" as a standalone essay. This approach serves to illuminate certain aspects of "Of Miracles," especially the relationship between the two parts. However, there are places where the lack of discussion of the essay's position in the larger scheme of Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* weakens the argument.

George argues that part 1 of "Of Miracles" is dedicated to proving, on the basis of a general account of the epistemology of testimony, that no testimony could establish the occurrence of a miracle unless the falsehood of that testimony would be more miraculous, while part 2 is dedicated to establishing that no purported religiously significant miracle passes this test. After a treatment of Hume's definition of 'miracle' in chapter 1 as "a violation of the laws of nature," George explains and defends his interpretation of the argument in chapters 2–4. Chapter 5 considers a variety of objections to Hume; and chapter 6 gives a philosophical evaluation of the argument in light of Wittgensteinian considerations about the nature of religious belief.

The organization of chapter 1 is problematic. George begins by assuming that a law of nature must be "a true description of some natural regularity"; this understanding of law—when combined with Hume's definition of 'miracle'—"rules miracles out of existence by linguistic fiat" (1). Since Hume does not take the non-occurrence of miracles to be trivial, this suggests that Hume did not make this assumption. Nevertheless, in section 1.1, George takes this view about laws as a fixed background against which "Of Miracles" must be interpreted and concludes that Hume must not have meant that a miracle is a violation of a law but only that a miracle "violates a well-confirmed law-like statement" (5–6).

In section 1.2, George argues that Hume did not after all hold the assumption about laws attributed to him in section 1.1. (This should have been indicated at the outset.) George argues that what Hume means by "law of nature" is (roughly) what we mean by "well-confirmed law-like statement," so that Hume's definition of 'miracle' can be taken literally after all.

George's epistemic interpretation of Hume on laws is interesting and is supported by evidence from "Of Miracles." However, this is the place where the broader context of the *Enquiry* and *Treatise* is most conspicuously lacking. In particular, there is no attention to the projectivist aspect of Hume's thought, which would have been illuminating here, and certainly needs to be addressed more explicitly if George's interpretation is to be convincing.

Among the objections to Hume's argument that George considers, the most philosophically interesting is also the most historically problematic. George discusses a

remark attributed to Samuel Johnson by Boswell regarding Hume's claim about belief in miracles: "Hume, taking the proposition simply, is right. But the Christian revelation is not proved by miracles alone, but as connected . . . with the doctrines in confirmation of which the miracle is wrought" (68). Building on this remark, George argues that Hume ought to have recognized a line of response to his argument that would say that just as (on Hume's own view) it is reasonable to continue the practice of induction even though we cannot justify this to anyone not already engaged in the practice, so also it is reasonable to continue in Christian belief (including belief in miracles) although this cannot be justified to an outsider.

This is an interesting philosophical point and leads nicely into the discussion of Wittgenstein in the final chapter, but George's desire to make this philosophical point drives him to distort the history. George attributes this view not only to fideists such as Blaise Pascal and William James, but also to staunch evidentialists such as John Locke and William Paley. Historically speaking, Johnson's remark would be better understood in light of the common view that the purpose of miracles is to justify revealed theology to someone who is already convinced of natural theology. With natural theology already in hand, one can have views about what kinds of doctrines are more or less likely to be revealed by God, and these views can be taken into account in evaluating the evidence for a purported miracle. In both chapters 5 and 6, Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* could have given much-needed historical context to the discussion.

Despite some shortcomings, especially with respect to historical scholarship, this book will certainly be of interest to Hume scholars and to philosophers examining miracles, religious belief, and the epistemology of testimony.

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James Van Cleve. *Problems from Reid*. New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xvi + 550. Cloth, \$74.00.

The arrival of James Van Cleve's *Problems from Reid* is somewhat akin to the experience of waiting ages for a bus only for several to arrive at the same time. It is a gargantuan book, weighing in at over 550 pages covering sixteen chapters and a remarkable twenty-six appendices (labelled from A to Z, of course).

There have been several important single-author books on Reid in the last decade or so, from the likes of Gideon Yaffe (*Manifest Activity: Thomas Reid's Theory of Action*, 2004) and Ryan Nichols (*Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception*, 2007), and some impressive anthologies, such as those edited by Patrick Rysiew (*New Essays on Thomas Reid*, 2014, 2015), and by Todd Buras and Rebecca Copenhaver (*Thomas Reid on Mind, Knowledge, and Value*, 2015); but nothing matches the scale or breadth of Van Cleve's work. *Problems from Reid*, as the name might suggest, is somewhat similar in approach to Van Cleve's 1999 *Problems from Kant*. It is not intended as an introduction or overview of Reid's thought. Nor is it a critical study of any one of Reid's three major works; rather, it addresses, in impressive depth, issues arising from Reid's entire corpus. As might be expected from a scholar of Van Cleve's stature, the quality of insight is first rate: Van Cleve reaches deep into Reid's work and provides sensitive and plausible interpretations of Reid's views that make clear their sophistication and, in many cases, plausibility.

One thing—but by no means the only thing—that Van Cleve's book serves to do is to demonstrate the richness of Reid's thought. For those still unconvinced of Reid's place in the history of philosophy or his importance to the subject today, Van Cleve's sophisticated and insightful study of Reid provides evidence in spades. In particular, the several lengthy chapters on Reid's theory of perception, drawn in large part from some of Van Cleve's well-known papers, demonstrate the relevance Reid has to current work in this lively,