

DISSERTATION IV.

ON

The Importance of Christianity,
the Nature of Historical Evi-
dence, and Miracles.

SECTION I.

*Introductory Observations, relating to the
Importance of Christianity, its Evidences,
and the Objections which have been made
to it.*

IT is not possible, that any informa-
tion should be so important, as that
which we have in the sacred writings.
The discoveries lately made in the system
of the material world are justly thought
of with admiration. They bestow, in-
deed,

deed, new lustre and dignity on human nature. But they are of no consequence and deserve no regard, compared with the discoveries contained in the Bible, supposing it intitled to our faith. We are here made acquainted with several facts in the scheme of the moral world, and the history of Providence, which are not only *wonderful*, but *interesting* in the highest degree.

There is nothing in all nature, about which we have so much reason to wish for information, as *death*, the relentless destroyer which reduces to the dust every human being, and which, in all ages, has held the world in bondage, and given birth to numberless woes and sorrows. Concerning this, the scriptures reveal to us many particulars of the utmost importance, which we could not otherwise have known. They acquaint us, that it was not an *original part* of the divine scheme, but a *calamity* in which our race has been involved, in consequence of cer-
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tain connections which took place under the divine government. They inform us of the causes which introduced it, and of a stupendous dispensation of providence which it has occasioned. They discover to us that great *Messiah*, by whom God made this world, and who came down from heaven to deliver it from distress; who is now the Lord of men and angels, and who, hereafter, will appear in glory to abolish death, to judge mankind in righteousness, to execute justice on the wicked, and to establish an *everlasting kingdom*, in which all the virtuous and worthy shall meet, and be completely and unchangeably happy.

I make these observations in order to shew how much it concerns us to study the sacred records, and to inquire into the evidences of their divine original. It is not easy to conceive of a higher obligation, that such creatures as we are can be under. There is scarcely a principle in our natures which does not induce us
to

to this powerfully. In particular; as the scriptures inform us of the chief revolutions through which this world *has* past, and *will* pass, the principle of *curiosity* leads us to it. As they profess to teach us God's will, and to give an account of a revelation from heaven, all the principles of *piety* lead us to it. But, more especially, we are led to it by the whole force of the principle of *self-love*: For, if the Bible is true, it settles the terms of salvation, and contains the *words of eternal life*; and, consequently, the folly of carelessly rejecting it will be infinitely worse, than the folly would be of carelessly throwing aside a deed, which, if valid, proved our title to a large estate.

I think, with great pleasure, that the subject to which I refer has lately engaged much attention, and undergone a strict scrutiny. It is to be wished, that the attention to it may continue, and that all the learned and inquisitive would unite their efforts towards giving it the

most thorough discussion, allowing every objection its full weight and a fair hearing, and never concealing any thing that may have a tendency to throw light on a controversy of such moment.—The opposition hitherto made to christianity, has, I think, done it the greatest service. It has been the means of causing it to be better understood, of shewing, in a clearer light, on what foundation of evidence it stands, and of removing from it many incumbrances and adulterations, which, for many ages, had miserably disguised and debased it. We may reasonably hope for more and more of these good effects, the more unbelievers go on to exert their strength *. Let no one then put himself to the least pain on account of any of their writings. Much less, let any one think of calling in the aid of civil power to answer them †.

Detested

* This is well represented in the second of Dr. Gerard's *Dissertations on Subjects relating to the Genius and Evidences of Christianity*.

† We have lately seen a cruel instance of this in the prosecution, pillorying and confinement to
Bridewell

Detested be the principles which have occasioned this. Let rather unbelievers be encouraged to produce their strongest objections. If christianity is of God, we may be sure that it will bear any trial, and in the end prevail.—The civil magistrate ought not to interpose in the defence of truth, till it has appeared that he is a competent judge of truth. This, certainly, he is not. On the contrary; universal experience has, hitherto, proved him one of its worst

Bridewell of a poor puny infidel, worn out with age, who was utterly incapable of doing any cause the least good or harm.—It is a bad excuse to say, that it was not *infidelity*, but *indecentcy and scurrility* that were punished in this instance. For, this is to punish for the circumstances in a publication, which render it so much the less likely to produce any effect. Besides, who shall have the power of determining whether a book against an established opinion is writ *decently*, in order to give a right of punishing? There are no hands in which such a power can be lodged, without the utmost danger to what, as reasonable beings, we ought most to value. A zealot in a *papist* country, cannot well wish for any greater power. God grant it may never be again allowed to any zealots in our own.

worst enemies. Nothing can be more disgraceful to the christian religion than to suppose, that it needs *such* assistance. Were this true, it would, by no means, be worth defending.

Among the objections which have been made to christianity, there are some that contain real difficulties ; and which a candid defender of christianity, instead of pretending intirely to remove, should allow to weigh as far as they can go against the evidence. The proof of christianity does not consist of a clear sum of arguments, without any thing to be opposed to them. But it is the *overbalance* of evidence that remains after every reasonable deduction is made on account of difficulties. This is the case with respect to almost every point that can employ our thoughts ; and those who believe, that there is any question which they can clear of every difficulty, may be sure, that they are either very unfair or very superficial in their inquiries.—But, at the same time that I acknowledge this, I must say, with respect

respect to christianity, that many of the chief objections to it have received a full answer, and are indeed the effects of partial views and very wrong notions.——I will beg leave just to mention a few instances of this.

It has been said, that if christianity came from God, it would have been taught the world with such clearness and precision, as not to leave room for doubts and disputes.—It is wonderful to me, that any person can mention this who believes the doctrines of natural religion, or who has read the defences of christianity. Has the author of nature given us *reason* in this manner, or even the information we derive from our senses? Is it possible, while we continue such creatures as we are, that any instruction should be so clear as to preclude disputes? Supposing the Deity to grant us supernatural light, are we judges what degree of it he ought to give, or in what particular manner it ought to be communicated?

Again :

Again : The animosities, persecutions and bloodshed which the christian religion has occasioned, have been urged as objections to it.—This, likewise, certainly should not be mentioned, till it can be shewn, that there is one benefit or blessing enjoyed by mankind, which has not been the occasion of evils. How easy would it be to reckon up many dreadful calamities, which owe their existence to knowledge, to liberty, to natural religion, and to civil government? How obvious is it, that what is in its nature most useful and excellent, will, for this very reason, become most hurtful and pernicious when misapplied or abused? Christianity forbids every evil work. Its spirit is the spirit of forbearance, meekness, and benevolence. Were it to prevail in its genuine purity, and to be universally practised, peace and joy would reign every where. Uncharitableness, priest-craft, contention and persecution, are evils which have taken place among its professors, in direct opposition to its scope and design. Is it not

then hard that it should be made responsible for these? Has it not a right to be judged of by its genius and tendencies, rather than by any mischief which blindness and bigotry and the love of domination have done in the christian church?—For my own part, when I contemplate the horrid scenes which ecclesiastical history presents our view, instead of feeling disgust with christianity, I am struck with the divine foresight discovered by its founder, when he said, *I am not come to send peace on earth, but a sword*; and led to a firmer faith, arising from a reflexion on the warning given in the scriptures, that an apostacy would come, and a savage power appear which should defile God's sanctuary, trample on truth and liberty, and make itself drunk with the blood of saints and martyrs.

Further: The offence which has been given to unbelievers, by the positive institutions of christianity, is in my opinion manifestly groundless. There is not a
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more striking recommendation of christianity than its *simplicity*, or, its freeing religion, so much as it does, from the incumbrance of rites and ceremonies. Other religions are loaded with these, and have a tendency to hurt the interest of morality, by turning the attention of men from it, and leading them to seek the favour of God more by an exactness in outward forms, than by a virtuous temper and practice. Christianity condemns, in the strongest language, this dangerous superstition, assuring us, that those who fall into it shall *receive the greater damnation*; that *God desires mercy and not sacrifice*; and, that true religion consists, not in any ritual services, but in *righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost*. To censure it, therefore, notwithstanding this, merely because it enjoins two such easy and simple rites as *Baptism* and the *Lord's Supper*, is doing it great injustice, and overlooking one of its most peculiar and distinguishing excellencies.

But, there is no objection about which more has been said, than that taken from the want of universality in the christian revelation.—This also is an objection which there is great reason to expect, that unbelievers should drop. Such effectual answers have been given to it, that, indeed, it is some trial of patience to sensible christians, to hear it still so much insisted on, and so often repeated. Those who are influenced by it go upon a notion that they could not entertain, were they not too partial and careless in their inquiries. They suppose, that if the christian revelation is true, there must have been a *necessity* of it, in order to supply mankind with *sufficient means* for securing God's favour, and attaining to future happiness. But such a notion is intirely groundless. Acting up faithfully to the light we enjoy, is the only condition of our happiness. *Glory, honour, and peace, shall be upon every one that worketh good, be he Jew or Gentile* *. *God is no respecter of persons,*
(St. Peter

* Rom. ii. 10.——Acts x. 34, 35.

(*St. Peter* tells us) *but in every nation, he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him.*—There are two points of view in which christianity may be considered. It may be considered either as an *instruction* communicated to mankind; or, as an extraordinary dispensation of providence, the end of which is the *redemption* of mankind. If we consider it in the former of these lights, it was a favour or blessing which, however desirable, could not be claimed, and might not have been given to any part of mankind. Were there reason for concluding, that it cannot be of divine original merely because the benefits of it are not extended equally to all, we should be obliged to conclude the same of almost every advantage we enjoy; and the whole course of nature.—If, on the other hand, we consider christianity in the latter of these lights, its end might have been answered, by Christ's passing through human life in the manner he did, though no history of him had been written, or

knowledge of him preserved in the world,
——In other words. There were two
purposes of Christ's coming. He came
to *teach* and to *reform* the world; but,
this being an end that might have been
accomplished by much lower means, we
ought to remember, that he came princi-
pally to *save* the world. That is; He
descended from heaven and appeared in
our natures, partly, indeed, to be the
founder of a visible church enjoying par-
ticular light and advantages, and which,
after going through several revolutions,
should, at last, triumph over every false
religion and take in all nations; but,
primarily, to be the *deliverer* of a distressed
race, to acquire the power of forgiving sin
and of raising us from the dead, to rein-
state virtuous men, wherever or whenever
they have lived, in the prospect of a
glorious immortality; and thus to perform
a service under the divine government of
infinite importance, and to which, pro-
bably, no agent of inferior dignity was
equal.—Christianity, therefore, is so far
from

from implying an obligation on the Deity to make the knowledge of it universal, that, on the contrary, in the benefit of what is most essential to it, all virtuous men, whether they have ever heard of it or not, will be alike sharers.

Another very considerable cause of offence to the opposers of christianity is, the account given in the gospel history of the *Demoniacs*.—It should, I think, go a great way here towards satisfying a fair inquirer, that the writers of the gospel history speak of the cases of the *Demoniacs* in no other way than was usual at the time they wrote, and in which we find them spoken of by other contemporary historians. They talk the language of their age and country, and in conformity to prevailing opinions. Nor is it of any consequence to the credit of their history, whether these opinions were right or wrong, or even what they themselves thought. To expect, that they should be better informed than others about the causes of distempers; or, that such instruction should be communicated to them as would have led them, in the present case, to form a new language and to speak with perfect accuracy,

seems as unreasonable as it would be to entertain the same expectation with respect to the motion of the sun, or the secondary qualities of bodies. The one has as little to do with the main end of their office as the other. Such instruction, had it been given them, would have thrown needless difficulties in the way of the propagation of christianity; and it must have lessened its evidence to subsequent ages, by making the apostles appear, not in the character of plain unlettered men, but of able philosophers, and thus raising a suspicion, that it prevailed in the world more by the wisdom of men, than by the power of God and *the demonstration of the Spirit*. Our Saviour, no doubt, might have taught the truth on this subject, and rectified the common apprehensions as far as they were erroneous. But it is impossible to shew, that there was sufficient reason for expecting this, or that it came properly within the purpose of his mission. It would, perhaps, have only given him the appearance of being a friend to the *doctrine of the Sadducees*, and embarrassed the minds of his followers, without doing any great good *.

* There is, perhaps, no part of the New Testament from
which

The prejudices I have now in view, are derived, chiefly, from the strict notions which have prevailed of the universal and infallible inspiration of the writers of the New Testament. And there is not, perhaps, any thing which the friends of christianity have more reason to complain of, than that unbelievers should suffer themselves to be influenced by these notions.—The gospel is not a speculative science, or an abstruse and complicated theory. Whatever jargon may have been fathered upon it in systems and creeds, it is in itself plain and simple. It is a set of facts exhibiting and demonstrating this one truth; ETERNAL LIFE, THE GIFT

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OF

which unbelievers receive more unfavourable impressions than the account of our Saviour's temptation in the wilderness by the devil. This fact has, I think, been very much misinterpreted. The explanation given of it in a piece entitled, *An Enquiry into the Nature and Design of Christ's Temptation in the Wilderness*, by Mr. Farmer; is, in my opinion, so rational and judicious, as to have no small tendency to remove the prejudices against it, and to convert this difficulty into a beauty.

I cannot help adding, that the same learned writer's Dissertation on *Miracles* lately published, well deserves to be studied by all who would be assisted in judging of some other parts of the Scripture History, as well as of the nature of Miracles in general, and the connection between them and the truth of the doctrines of Christianity.

OF GOD, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. The New Testament contains a narrative of these facts. The business of the apostles was to attest and publish them to the world ; and no enquiries, relating to their qualifications and authority, are of great importance in any other view, than as *witnesses* to these facts. I think, indeed, that they have an authority as *teachers*, as well as *witnesses* : But what they insist themselves most upon, is their office as witnesses, and the regard they claim is founded principally on their having heard, and seen *, and handled the *word of life*. It does not appear, that in all matters of reasoning and speculation, the first christians entertained the same sentiments of their authority, that many do now. Be this, however, as it will ; the only question, certainly, that affects the truth of christianity is, “ Whether they were honest men, “ who did not mean to deceive, and “ who were competently informed with “ respect to the facts they attest.” —————
 I wish the attention of unbelievers could
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* 1 John 1, 1, 2.

be held to this, setting aside whatever is commonly believed, or, that there may be reason to believe, on the subject of *inspiration*. If this appears, (as, I think, it does abundantly) christianity is proved; nor need any person be anxious about more in it than necessarily follows from hence.—But, it is time to come to the main design of this dissertation.

One of the objections that deserves most to be attended to, is that taken from the nature of the principal facts recorded in the scriptures. These are *miraculous*, and, as such, (it has been said) “ have a *particular incredibility* in them, which does “ not belong to *common* events. When we “ look into the Bible, we find ourselves “ transported, as it were, into a new world, “ where the course of nature is altered, and “ every thing is different from what we “ have been used to observe. Could we, “ in any other case, receive a book filled “ with visions and prodigies, and containing so much of the *marvellous*? Ought “ not

“ not such a book to startle our minds ?
 “ Or can there be any evidence sufficient
 “ to establish its authority ? ” — Some have gone so far in this way of objecting, as to assert in general, that all relations of facts which contradict experience, or imply a deviation from the usual course of nature, are their own confutation, and should be at once rejected as incapable of proof, and impossible to be true. — One cannot be better employed than in inquiring how far such sentiments are right, and what regard is really due to *testimony*, when its reports do not agree with *experience*. I shall endeavour to state this matter as accurately as possible, by entering into a critical examination of the grounds of belief in this case, and of the nature and force of historical evidence.

In answer to the questions just proposed it might be said, that, supposing the state and connections of this world to be such as the Bible represents, the history it contains could not but be a history of extraordinary

ordinary events; that it has many internal marks of truth and authority which no other book has; and that, particularly, we are witnesses to the accomplishment of predictions delivered in it thousands of years ago, and therefore, do ourselves see facts as wonderful as any of those it relates, and are sure that the writers of it were supernaturally instructed, and might also, very probably, work miracles.—What has been last intimated is of the greatest importance. Christians insist, and they think they have proved, that there are very remarkable appearances of the completion of several scripture prophecies. The patrons of infidelity ought to shew, if they can, that there are not indeed any such appearances which deserve regard. Nothing can be more incumbent upon them than this: For, as far as there seems reason to believe, that, in any instance, a scripture prophecy is fulfilled, an unprejudiced person must be impressed. It affords, not only a demonstration of the credibility of miracles, but, in some degree, an *actual exhibition* of them.

But,

But, it is not my present design to dwell on any arguments of this kind. In what follows, I shall confine myself to the examination of the *principles* on which the objection I have mentioned is founded. When these are proved to be fallacious, the way will be open to an easier admission of the *direct evidences* of christianity, and they will operate with greater force.— It is well known, that this objection has lately been urged in all its strength by Mr. *Hume*, a writer whose genius and abilities are so distinguished, as to be above any of *my* commendations. Several excellent answers have been published *; and

* By Dr. *Adams* in his *Essay on Miracles*, in answer to Mr. *Hume's Essay*; and by the author of the *Criterion*, or, *Miracles Examined*, &c.—And also by Dr. *Campbell*, principal of the *Marishal college at Aberdeen*, in a Treatise, entitled, *A Dissertation on Miracles, containing an Examination of the Principles advanced by David Hume, Esq; in an Essay on Miracles*.—The last of these answers was published several years after the others. I mention this because, from Dr. *Campbell's* never referring to any other answers, as well as from his manner of expressing

and it is not without some pain, after what has been so well and so effectually said by others, that I determine to take up this subject. I imagine, however, that it admits of further discussion, and that there remain still some observations to be made, which have not been enough attended to.—Before I proceed, it will be proper to give a more distinct and full account of the objection to be considered.

expressing himself sometimes, an inattentive reader might be led to conclude that at the time he wrote the subject was quite open to him. His book, however, has uncommon merit, and the public is much indebted to him for it.

S E C T. II.

*The Nature and Grounds of the Regard due
to Experience and to the Evidence of
Testimony, stated and compared.*

“ **E**XPERIENCE, we have been told,
 “ is the ground of the credit we give
 “ to *human testimony*. We have found,
 “ in past instances, that men have informed
 “ us right, and therefore are disposed to
 “ believe them in future instances. But
 “ this experience is by no means constant;
 “ for we often find that men prevaricate
 “ and deceive.—On the other hand :
 “ What assures us of those laws of nature,
 “ in the violation of which the notion of
 “ a miracle consists, is, in like manner,
 “ experience. But, this is an experience
 “ that has never been interrupted. We have
 “ never been deceived in our expectations,
 “ that the dead will not come to life, or
 “ that

“ that the command of a man will not
 “ immediately cure a disease. There arises,
 “ therefore, from hence, a proof against
 “ accounts of miracles which is the
 “ strongest of the kind possible, and to
 “ believe such accounts on the authority
 “ of human testimony, is to prefer a
 “ weaker proof to a stronger; to leave a
 “ guide that *never* has deceived us, in order
 “ to follow one that has *often* deceived us;
 “ or to receive, upon the credit of an
 “ experience that is *weak* and *variable*,
 “ what is contrary to *invariable* expe-
 “ rience.”

In other words: “ A miracle is an
 “ event, from the nature of it, inconsistent
 “ with all the experience we ever had, and
 “ in the highest degree incredible and ex-
 “ traordinary. In the falshood of testi-
 “ mony, on the contrary, there is no such
 “ inconsistency, nor any such incredibility,
 “ scarcely any thing being more common.
 “ No regard, therefore, can be due to the
 “ latter, when it is applied as a proof of
 “ the former.—According to this reason-

“ ing, we are always to compare the im-
 “ probability of a fact, with the improba-
 “ bility of the falshood of the testimony
 “ which asserts it, and to determine our
 “ assent to that side on which the least
 “ improbability lies. Or, in the case of
 “ miracles, we are to consider which is
 “ most likely, that such events should
 “ happen, or that men should either de-
 “ ceive or be deceived. And, as there
 “ is nothing more unlikely than the for-
 “ mer, or much more common than the
 “ latter, particularly where religion is
 “ concerned; it will be right to form a
 “ *general resolution, never to lend any at-*
 “ *tention to accounts of miracles, with what-*
 “ *ever specious pretexts they may be covered*.*

“ *It is, says Mr. Hume, a maxim worthy*
 “ *of our attention, that no testimony is*
 “ *sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the*
 “ *testimony be of such a kind, that its*
 “ *false-*

* See the *Essay on Miracles*, in *Mr. Hume's Philo-*
sophical Essays concerning human Understanding,
 p. 205, 2d edition, in the Note.

“ falsehood would be more miraculous than
 “ the fact which it endeavours 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 de-
 “ ducting the inferior. When any one tells
 “ me that he saw a dead man restored to life,
 “ I immediately consider with myself, whe-
 “ ther it be more probable that the person
 “ should either deceive or be deceived, or
 “ that the fact 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 *.”—For such reasons as these,
 Mr.

* Ib. P. 182.—P. 206. I desire any one to lay
 his hand on his heart, and after serious consideration
 declare, whether he thinks that the falsehood of such a

Mr. Hume asserts, “ *That the evidence*
 “ *of testimony, when applied to a miracle,*
 “ *carries falsehood upon the very face of it,*
 “ *and is more properly a subject of derision*
 “ *than of argument* †; and that whoever
 “ believes the truth of the christian reli-
 “ gion, is conscious of a continued mira-
 “ cle 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 ‡.”

This is the objection in its complete force. It has, we see, a plausible appearance, and is urged with much confidence. But I cannot hesitate in asserting that it is founded on false principles; and, I think, this must appear to be true, to any one who will bestow attention on the following observations.

The

book, (the Pentateuch) supported by such 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.

† Page 195.

‡ Page 207.

The principles on which this objection is built are chiefly, “ That the credit we
 “ give to testimony, is derived *solely* from
 “ experience;” “ That a miracle is a fact
 “ *contrary* to experience;” “ That the
 “ previous improbability of a fact is a proof
 “ against it, diminishing, in proportion to the
 “ degree of it, the proof from testimony for
 “ it;” and “ That no testimony should
 “ ever gain credit to an event, unless it is
 “ more extraordinary that it should be false,
 “ than that the event should have happen-
 “ ed.” I will, as briefly as possible, ex-
 amine each of these assertions in the order
 in which they have been now mentioned.

With this view it is necessary first to consider the nature and the foundation of that assurance which experience gives us of the laws of nature. This assurance is nothing but the conviction we have, that future events will be agreeable to what we have hitherto found to be the course of nature, or the *expectation* arising in us, upon having observed that an event has

happened in former experiments, that it will happen again in *future* experiments. This expectation has been represented as one of the greatest mysteries, and the result of an ingenious and elaborate disquisition about it is, that it cannot be founded on any reason, and consists only in an association of ideas derived from habit, or a disposition in our imaginations to pass from the idea of one object to the idea of another which we have found to be its usual attendant*. But surely, never before were such difficulties raised on a point so plain.—If I was to draw a slip of paper out of a wheel, where I knew there were more white than black papers, I should intuitively see, that there was a probability of drawing a white paper, and therefore should *expect* this; and he who should make a mystery of such an expectation, or apprehend any difficulty in accounting for it, would not deserve to be seriously argued with.—In like manner; if, out of a wheel,

the

* See Mr. Hume's Philosophical Essays, Essay 4th and 5th.

the particular contents of which I am ignorant of, I should draw a white paper a hundred times together, I should see that it was probable, that it had in it more white papers than black, and therefore should expect to draw a white paper the next trial. There is no more difficulty in this case than in the former; and it is equally absurd in both cases to ascribe the *expectation*, not to *knowledge*, but to *instinct*. — The case of our assurance of the laws of nature, as far as we are ignorant of the causes that operate in nature, is exactly the same with this. An experiment which has often succeeded, we expect to succeed again, because we perceive intuitively, that such a constancy of event must proceed from something in the constitution of natural causes, disposing them to produce it; nor will it be possible to deny this, till it can be proved, that it is not a first principle of reason, that of every thing that comes to pass there must be some account or cause; or, that a constant re-currency of the same event is not

a fact which requires any cause.—In a word: We trust experience, and expect that the future should resemble the past in the course of nature, for the very same reason that, supposing ourselves otherwise in the dark, we should conclude that a dye which has turned an ace ofteneft in *past* trials is mostly marked with aces, and consequently should expect, that it will go on to turn the same number ofteneft in *future* trials.—The ground of the expectation produced by experience being this, it is obvious that it will always be weaker or stronger, in proportion to the greater or less constancy and uniformity of our experience. Thus from the happening of an event in every trial a million of times, we should conclude more confidently, that it will happen again the next trial, than if it had happened less frequently, or if in some of these instances it had failed. The plain reason is, that in the former case it would appear that the causes producing the event are probably of a more fixed nature, and less liable to be counter-acted

acted by opposite causes.—It must, however, be remembered, that the greatest uniformity and frequency of experience will not afford a proper *proof*, that an event will happen in a future trial, or even render it so much as probable, that it will *always* happen in all future trials. —In order to explain this, let us suppose a solid which, for ought we know, may be constituted in any one of an infinity of different ways, and that we can judge of it only from experiments made in throwing it. The oftener we suppose ourselves to have seen it turn the same face, the more we should reckon upon its turning the same face, when thrown next. But though we knew, that it had turned the same face in every trial a million of times, there would be no *certainty*, that it would turn this face again in any particular future trial, nor even the least *probability*, that it would *never* turn any other face. What would appear would be only, that it was *likely*, that it had about a million and a half more

more of these sides than of all others * ;
or, that its nature was such as disposed
it to turn this side oftener, in this pro-
portion,

* If any one wants a further explication of what is here said, let him consider, that as there is only a *high probability*, not a *certainly*, that the supposed solid, after turning the same side a million of times without once failing, would turn again this side in the next trial, the probability must be less, that it would turn this side in *two* future trials, and still less, that it would do it in *three* future trials; and thus, the probability will decrease continually as the number of the supposed trials is increased, till, at last, it will become an equal chance, and from thence pass into an improbability.—This may be a little differently represented thus. Let a solid be supposed that has 1,600,000 sides of the same sort, to one of any other sort. There is a probability, that in a million of trials, such a solid would turn constantly the same side. Such a supposition, therefore, would completely account for this event, supposing it to happen; *and nothing further could, with reason, be concluded from it.* But, there is an *infinity* of other suppositions that will also account for it, of which the particular supposition that it has no sides of any other sort, and that, therefore, it will never turn any other, is *only one*. Against the truth, therefore, of this particular supposition, there must be, in the circumstances of ignorance above supposed, the greatest probability.

portion, than any other; not that it had no other sides, or that it would never turn any others. In reality, there would be the greatest probability against this.—These observations are applicable, in the exactest manner, to what passes in the course of nature, as far as *experience* is our guide. Upon observing, that any natural event has happened often or invariably, we have only reason to expect that it will happen again, with an assurance proportioned to the frequency of our observations. But, we have no *absolute proof* that it will happen again in any particular future trial; nor the least reason to believe that it will always happen *. For ought we

* In an essay published in vol. 53d of the *Philosophical Transactions*, what is said here and in the last note, is proved by mathematical demonstration, and a method shewn of determining the exact probability of all conclusions founded on induction.—This is plainly a curious and important problem, and it has so near a relation to the subject of this dissertation, that it will be proper just to mention the results of the solution of it in a few particular cases.

Suppose, 1st, all we know of an event to be, that it has happened ten times without failing, and that
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we know, there may be occasions on which it will fail, and secret causes in the frame of

it is inquired, what reason we shall have for thinking ourselves right, if we judge, that the probability of its happening in a single trial, lies somewhere between sixteen to one and two to one.—The answer is, that the chance for being right, would be .5013, or very nearly an equal chance.—Take next, the particular case mentioned above, and suppose, that a solid or dye, of whose number of sides and constitution we know nothing, except from experiments made in throwing it, has turned constantly the same face in a million of trials.—In these circumstances, it would be *improbable*, that it had *less* than 1,400,000 more of these sides or faces than of all others; and it would be also *improbable*, that it had *above* 1,600,000 more. The chance for the latter is .4647, and for the former .4895. There would, therefore, be no reason for thinking, that it would never turn any other side. On the contrary, it would be likely that this would happen in 1,600,000 trials.—In like manner, with respect to any event in nature, suppose the flowing of the tide, if it has flowed at the end of a certain interval a million of times, there would be the probability expressed by .5105, that the odds for its flowing again at the usual period was *greater* than 1,400,000 to 1, and the probability expressed by .5352, that the odds was *less* than 1,600,000 to one.

Such are the conclusions which *uniform* experience warrants.—What follows is a *specimen* of the expectations,

of things which *sometimes* may counteract those by which it is produced.

But

pectations, which it is reasonable to entertain in the case of *interrupted* or *variable* experience.—If we know no more of an event than that it has happened ten times in eleven trials, and failed once, and we should conclude from hence, that the probability of its happening in a single trial lies between the odds of nine to one, and eleven to one, there would be twelve to one *against* being right.—If it has happened a hundred times, and failed ten times, there would also be the odds of near three to one *against* being right in such a conclusion.—If it has happened a thousand times and failed a hundred, there would be an odds *for* being right of a little more than two to one. And, supposing the same *ratio* preserved of the number of happenings to the number of failures, and the same guesses made, this odds will go on increasing for ever, as the number of trials is increased.—He who would see this explained and proved at large may consult the essay in the Philosophical Transactions, to which I have referred; and also the supplement to it in the 54th volume.—The specimen now given is enough to shew how very inaccurately we are apt to speak and judge on this subject, previously to calculation. See Mr. Hume's Essay on Miracles, p. 175, 176, &c. and Dr. Campbell's Essay, Sect. 2d, p. 35.—It also demonstrates, that the order of events in nature is derived from permanent causes established by an in-

But to say no more at present of this. Let us, in the next place, consider what is the ground of the regard we pay to *human testimony*.——We may, I think, see plainly, that it is not experience only; meaning, all along, that kind of experience to which we owe our expectation of natural events, the causes of which are unknown to us. Were this the case, the regard we ought to pay to testimony, would be in proportion to the number of instances, in which we have found, that it has given us right information, compared with those in which it has deceived us ; and it might be calculated in the same manner with the regard due to any conclusions derived from induction. But this is by no means the truth. One
action,

telligent Being in the constitution of nature, and not from any of the powers of chance. And it further proves, that so far is it from being true, that the understanding is not the faculty which teaches us to rely on experience, that it is capable of determining, *in all cases*, what conclusions ought to be drawn from it, and what *precise degree* of confidence should be placed in it.

action, or one conversation with a man, may convince us of his integrity and induce us to believe his testimony, though we had never, in a single instance, experienced his veracity. His manner of telling his story, its being corroborated by other testimony, and various particulars in the nature and circumstances of it, may satisfy us that it must be true. We feel in ourselves that a regard to truth is one principle in human nature; and we know, that there must be such a principle in every reasonable being, and that there is a necessary repugnancy between the perception of moral distinctions and deliberate falsehood. To this, chiefly, is owing the credit we give to human testimony. And from hence in particular, must be derived our belief of veracity in the Deity.—It might be shewn here in many ways, that there is a great difference between the conviction produced by testimony, and the conviction produced by experience. But I will content myself with just taking notice, that the one is capable of being carried

much higher than the other. When any events, in the course of nature, have often happened, we are sure, properly, of nothing but the past fact. Nor, I think, is there in general, antecedently to their happening, any comparison between the assurance we have that they will happen, and that which we have of many facts the knowledge of which we derive from testimony. For example; we are not so certain that the tide will go on to ebb and flow, and the sun to rise and set in the manner they have hitherto done, a year longer, as we are that there has been such a man as *Alexander*, or such an empire as the *Roman* *.

From

* It might have been added here, as another observation of considerable importance, that the greatest part of what is commonly called experience is merely the report of testimony. “Our own experience (says an excellent writer) reaches around; and goes back but a little way; but the experience of others, on which we chiefly depend, is derived to us wholly from testimony.” *Dr. Adams’s Essay on Miracles*, page 5th.—In proportion, therefore,

From these observations it follows, that to use *testimony* to prove a *miracle* implies no absurdity. It is not using a *feebler* experience to overthrow another of the same kind, which is *stronger*: But, using an argument to establish an event, which yields a direct and positive proof, and is capable of producing the strongest conviction to overthrow another founded on different principles, and which, at best, can prove no more than that, previously to the event, there would have appeared to us a presumption against its happening.

What I now mean will be greatly confirmed by observing, that a miracle cannot, with strict propriety, be styled an event *contrary* to experience. This is the second of the assertions in Mr. *Hume's* argument, which I have before mentioned, and to

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as we weaken the evidence of testimony, we weaken also that of experience; and in comparing them we ought in reason to oppose to the former, only what remains of the latter after that part of it which is derived from the former, that is, after much the greatest part of it is deducted.

which there is, I think, reason to object. A miracle is more properly an event *different* from experience than *contrary* to it. Were I to see a tempest calmed instantaneously by the word of a man, all my past experience would remain the same; and were I to affirm that I saw what was contrary to it, I could only mean, that I saw what I never before had any experience of. In like manner; was I to be assured by eye witnesses that, on a particular occasion, some event, different from the usual course of things, had happened, testimony, in this case, would afford direct and peremptory evidence for the fact. But what information would experience give?——It would only tell me what happened on other occasions, and in other instances. Its evidence, therefore, would be entirely negative *. It would afford no proper proof that the event did not happen, for it can be no part of any one's experience, that the course of nature will continue always
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* See Dr. *Adams's Essay*, p. 9—24. 2d Edit.
p. 10—31. 3d Edit.

the same.—It cannot then be proper to assert (as Mr. *Hume*† does) that, in every case of a miracle supported by testimony, there is a contest of two opposite experiences, the strongest of which ought always to determine our judgments.

But this leads me to take notice of the fundamental error in this argument: an error which, I fancy, every person must be sensible of when it is mentioned, and for the sake of pointing out which chiefly this dissertation is written.—

The error I mean is contained in the assertion, that “if, previously to an event,
 “there was a greater probability *against*
 “its happening, than there is *for* the
 “truth of the testimony endeavouring
 “to establish it, the former destroys the
 “latter, and renders the event unlikely
 “to have happened in proportion to its
 “superiority.” That this is a fundamental point in Mr. *Hume*’s objection must be apparent to those who have

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† *Essay on Miracles*, Page 179.

considered it. By the contest between two opposite experiences in miraculous facts supported by testimony, the greatest of which always destroys the other as far as its force goes ; he cannot consistently mean any thing but this. One of the opposite experiences must be that which acquaints us with the course of nature, and by which, as before explained, it is rendered probable in proportion to the number of instances in which an event has happened, that it will happen in future trials. The other must be that from whence the credit we give to testimony is derived, which, according to *Mr. Hume*, being our observation of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses, makes it probable that any event reported by witnesses has happened, in proportion to what we have experienced of this conformity. Now, as in the case of miraculous facts these probabilities oppose one another, and the greatest, according to *Mr. Hume*, must be the first, because the experience which produces it

is constant and invariable; it follows, that there must be always a great overbalance of evidence against their reality. He seems to lay it down as a general maxim, that if it is more improbable that any fact should have really happened, than that men should either deceive or be deceived, it should be rejected by us.—But, it must be needless to take any pains to shew, that the turning point in Mr. Hume's argument is that which I have mentioned; or, in other words, the principle, that no testimony should engage our belief, except the improbability in the falsehood of it is greater than that in the event which it attests *.

In order to make it appear that this is an error, what I desire may be considered

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* Let it be remembered, that the improbability of event here mentioned, must mean the improbability which we should have seen there was of its happening independently of any evidence for it, or, previously to the evidence of testimony informing us that it *has* happened. No other improbability can be meant, because the whole dispute is about the improbability that remains after the evidence of testimony given for the event.

is, the degree of improbability which there is against almost all the most common facts, independently of the evidence of testimony for them. In many cases of particular histories which are immediately believed upon the slightest testimony, there would have appeared to us, previously to this testimony, an improbability of almost infinity to one against their reality, as any one must perceive, who will think how sure he is of the falsehood of all facts that have *no* evidence to support them, or which he has only *imagined* to himself. It is then very common for the slightest testimony to overcome an almost infinite improbability.

To make this more evident: Let us suppose, that testimony informed us rightly ten times to one in which it deceived us; and that there was nothing to direct our judgments concerning the regard due to witnesses, besides the degree of conformity which we have experienced in past events to their reports. In this case, there
would

would be the probability of ten to one for the reality of every fact supported by testimony. Suppose then that it informs me of the success of a person in an affair, against the success of which there was the probability of a hundred to one, or of any other event previously improbable in this proportion. I ask, What, on this supposition, would be, on the whole, the probability that the event really happened? Would the right way of computing be, to compare the probability of the truth of the testimony with the probability that the event would not happen, and to reject the event with a confidence proportioned to the superiority of the latter above the former? This Mr. *Hume* directs; but certainly contrary to all reason.—The truth is, that the testimony would give the probability of ten to one to the event, unabated by the supposed probability against it. And one reason of this is, that the very experience which teaches us to give credit to testimony, is an experience by which we have

found, that it has informed us rightly concerning facts, in which there would have appeared to us, previously, a great improbability.

But to be yet more explicit ; Let us suppose the event reported by testimony to be, that a particular side of a die was thrown twice in two trials, and that the testimony is of such a nature that it has as often informed us wrong as right. In this case there would plainly be an equal chance for the reality of the event, though, previously, there was the probability of thirty-five to one against it : And every one would see, that it would be absurd to say, that there being so considerable a probability against the event, and no probability at all for the truth of the testimony ; or, that having had much more frequent experience that two trials have not turned up the same face of a die, than of the conformity of facts to the supposed testimony, therefore, no regard is due to the testimony.—An
evidence

evidence that is *often* connected with truth, though not *oftner* than with falsehood, is real evidence, and deserves regard. To reject such evidence would be to fall *often* into error, whatever improbabilities may attend the events to which it is applied; and to assert the contrary, would be to assert a manifest contradiction.

The end of a news-paper confines it, in a great measure, to the relation of such facts as are uncommon. Suppose that it reports truth only twice in three times, and that there are *nine* such uncommon facts reported by it as, that a certain person is alive in his hundredth year, that another was struck dead by lightning, or that a woman has been delivered of three children at a birth; Would it be right to reject *all* these facts, because more extraordinary than the report of falsehood by the newspaper? To say this, would be to say, that what, by supposition, reports truth *six* times in *nine*, does not report truth *once* in nine times.

But

But let us take a higher case of this kind. The improbability of drawing a lottery in any particular assigned manner, independently of the evidence of testimony, or of our own senses, acquainting us that it *has* been drawn in that manner, is such as exceeds all conception *. And yet the most common testimony is sufficient

* This improbability is as the number of different ways which there are of drawing the lottery ; or, as the number of permutations which a number of things, equal to that of the tickets in the lottery, admits of. In a lottery, therefore, of 50,000 tickets, this improbability is expressed by the proportion of $1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5 \times 6, \&c.$ continued to 50,000. to one. Or, it is the same with that of drawing such a lottery exactly in the order of the numbers, first 1, then 2, and so on to the last. Most persons will scarcely be able to persuade themselves, that this is not an absolute impossibility ; and yet in truth, it is equally possible, and was beforehand equally probable with that very way in which, after drawing the lottery, we believe it has been drawn : And what is similar to this is true of almost every thing that can be offered to our assent, independently of any evidence for it ; and particularly, of numberless facts which are the objects of testimony, and which are continually believed, without the least hesitation, upon its authority.

cient to put us out of doubt about it. Suppose here a person was to reject the evidence offered him on the pretence, that the improbability of the falsehood of it is almost infinitely less than that of the event* ; or, suppose, that universally a person was to reject all accounts which he reads

* The false principle, which is the foundation of this method of reasoning, has been too easily received. Several considerable writers, as well as Mr. Hume, seem to have been deceived by it. Had not this been, in some degree, true of even Dr. Campbell, he would perhaps have expressed himself differently in some parts of the first and sixth sections of the first part of his very judicious dissertation before mentioned.—In the case he supposes, of the loss of a passage boat which had crossed a river two thousand times safely; it is plain, that an evidence of much less weight than the probability, that an experiment which had succeeded two thousand times will succeed the next time, would be sufficient to convince us of the reality of the event. Any report that has been oftener found to be true than false would engage belief, tho' the conviction we should have had, supposing no such report, that the event did not happen, would have been much stronger than any that the report itself is capable of producing. The reason of this has been assigned above.

reads or hears of facts which are more uncommon, than it is that he should read or hear what is false: What would be thought of such a person? How soon would he be made to see and acknowledge his mistake?

In the case I have mentioned of a newspaper supposed to report truth twice in three times, the odds of *two* to *one*, would overcome the odds of *thousands* to *one*. This is no more than saying, that an evidence which, in cases where there were great odds against an event, has been found true twice in three times, *is* true in such cases twice in three times, and communicates the probability of 2 to 1 to the event to which it is applied. Every one will see that this is an assertion so plainly true as to be trifling; and yet the principal part of what I am here asserting may be reduced to it.—The previous improbability of most common facts, that is, the improbability we should see to be in them were they unconnected with all evidence for them, is,

is, I have observed, very great. We have, generally, found testimony right, when applied to such facts. It is therefore reasonable to give credit to it when so applied, tho' not so likely to be true as it was that the facts should not happen: And saying this, is only saying, that an evidence *generally* right ought to be received as being so, notwithstanding improbabilities by which we have found it not to be affected; I will add, and by which too we know that it is *its nature* not to be affected.

What has been last said requires explanation; and it will be proper to dwell a little upon it, in order more fully to shew the nature of historical evidence, and the reason and truth of all I have said concerning it.—What I desire may be here attended to is chiefly the following assertion, “that improbabilities *as such* do not
“ lessen the capacity of testimony to report
“ truth.”—The only causes of falsehood in testimony are the intention to deceive, and the danger of being deceived. Setting aside
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the former, let us, for the sake of greater precision, confine our views at present to the latter, or suppose a case where there are no motives to deceive, and where therefore the only source of mis-information from testimony is the danger of being deceived. Let us likewise suppose that this danger is such as makes testimony liable to be wrong once in ten times. Now, I say, that such testimony would communicate its own probability to *every* event reported by it of which sense is *equally* a judge, whether the odds against that event, or the previous improbability in it is more or less.—For instance. A person, who in the dark should take a black-ball out of a heap of 67 white-balls, and 33 black, would do what there were the odds of two to one against his doing. He, therefore, who should report this, would report an event which was improbable as two to one; and a person who should affirm that there was no improbability to be removed by the report, would affirm a palpable falsehood. Now, to this fact,

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the testimony I have supposed, would give the probability of *nine* to one, notwithstanding its previous improbability. Such a testimony would do the same if its report was, that a black-ball had been in the same manner taken out of a heap containing 90 white-balls and ten black, or 99 white and one black. That is; it would afford equal evidence whether the improbability of the event was 2 to 1, 10 to 1, or 99 to 1.—The like will appear, if we suppose the reports of such a testimony applied to the particular faces thrown with a set of dies. It would make no difference, whether its reports were applied to the faces thrown with a set of dies of 6 sides or a thousand sides, or to any *different* faces thrown with them, or any *coincidence* of faces. Supposing any considerable number of such reports, the nature of the thing implies, that an equal proportion of them would be found to be true in either case; because, by supposition, however different the improbabilities are, the only cause of mis-information, namely the danger of a deception

deception of the senses, does not operate more in one case than in the other.—In other words. The improbabilities I mean, being no hindrance to the perceptions of sense, make no opposition to the testimony of a witness who reports honestly from sense; and, therefore, saying that such a testimony, though the probability of its own truth is but 9 to 1, will overcome equally an improbability of 2 to 1, 10 to 1, or 99 to 1, is no more than saying, that it is equally an over-match for any one of a number of things, by which it is not opposed.—In short. TESTIMONY is truly no more than SENSE at second-hand: and improbabilities, in the circumstances now supposed, can have no more effect on the evidence of the one, than on the evidence of the other.

It is obvious that similar observations might be made on the other cause which I have mentioned of falsehood in testimony. If in any case it cannot be supposed that a witness is deceived, his report will give an
event

event that precise degree of probability which there is of his not intending to deceive, be the event what it will.

A due attention to these observations will, I think, shew the reason of the little effect which, in numberless instances, very great previous improbabilities have, when set against the weakest direct testimony. No one can be at a loss to account for this where he has the evidence of *sense*. It appears that there is no greater difficulty in accounting for it, where we have the evidence of *testimony*.

It should be remembered, that nothing I have said implies, that improbabilities ought never to have any influence on our opinion of testimony. Improbabilities, I have observed, *as such*, do not affect the *capacity* of testimony to report truth. They have no *direct* and necessary operation upon it, and should not be considered as a *counter-evidence* invalidating, in proportion to their degree, its reports. —But tho' this is true, it by no means

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follows,

follows, that they may not in many circumstances affect the *credit* of testimony, or cause us to question its veracity. They have sometimes this effect on even the * reports of sense, and, therefore, may also on the reports of testimony. This will happen, first, when they are of such a nature as to carry the appearance of *impossibilities*. Every such appearance is indeed properly a counter-evidence; and testimony, when applied in such circumstances, cannot gain credit any further than there is a greater probability of its truth, than there is of the impossibility of the
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* Were we to *see* any thing very strange and incredible, it would be natural at first to doubt whether our eyes did not deceive us. But if it appeared to us repeatedly, and for a length of time, and others saw the same, we should soon be as well convinced of its reality, as of any other object of sense.—The like is true in the case of *testimony*. If any thing reported to us is so strange that we cannot trust any single witness so far as to believe it, the agreement of a number of independent witnesses may produce such an increase of evidence, as shall leave no more possibility of doubting about it than if we had been ourselves witnesses of it.

the fact. Thus; if I was to hear a report, that a person was in *one* place at a time when I apprehended him to be in *another*, I could not give my assent till it appeared, that I had less reason for thinking myself right in this apprehension, than for believing the report. The same is true in all cases where seeming impossibilities or inconsistencies are reported. But, between *impossibilities* and *improbabilities*, however apt we may be to confound them, there is an infinite difference; and no conclusion can be drawn from the one to the other. There are few of the most *incredible* facts that can, with any reason, be called *impossible*. With respect to *miracles*, particularly, there are no arguments which have a tendency to prove this concerning them; or were it even true, that there are such arguments, their utmost effect, agreeably to the observation just made, would be, not to *destroy* the evidence of christianity, but to *counter-balance* it; and there might be still reason to believe christianity,

unless it appeared that their force was such as to *outweigh* the force of the evidence for it. Testimony sometimes has convinced men of facts which they judged to be impossible; that is, it has convinced them that they were wrong in this opinion. Kindling spirits by a touch from ice would appear, to a common person, impossible. The evidence of sense, however, would immediately convince him of the contrary; and from the preceding reasoning, I think, it appears, that there is nothing which sense is capable of proving that testimony may not also prove.

But, *Secondly*, The chief reason of the effect of improbabilities on our regard to testimony is, their tendency to influence the principles of deceit in the human mind. They have *of themselves*, I have said, no effect on the perceptions of sense, and therefore none on any faithful reports from sense. They may, however, *when perceived*, lead us to question the faithfulness

fulness of a report, and give just ground to suspect a design to misrepresent or exaggerate. *A given probability* of testimony communicates itself always entire to an event; but an event may be of such a nature as to lead us to doubt, whether there is that probability or not. —My meaning here will be explained by the following considerations.

Whenever any particular improbabilities appear, or a fact has any thing of the air of the marvellous, the passions are necessarily engaged, and we know that a temptation to deceive takes place in order to draw attention and excite wonder. On the contrary; when a fact is such as not at all to *interest*, or to give any room for imagining that men can intend deceit, we immediately believe it, without minding any previous improbabilities. It is for this reason, that we easily believe any story of a common nature, however complicated, tho' improbable, when the support of testimony is taken from it, almost as infinity to one.

But when a story is told us, which is attended with any circumstances not common, or in any way calculated to produce surprize, we place ourselves on our guard, and very reasonably give our assent with caution, because we see that in this case there is room for fearing the operation of the principles of deceit.—Thus; were we to receive an account that number 1500 was the *first* drawn in a lottery, we should immediately believe it; but were we to hear that number 1 was the *first* drawn, we should hesitate and doubt, though the improbability of the event gives no more reason for hesitation in the one case than the other; it being certainly no more unlikely, that number 1 should be *first* drawn, than number 1500.

Were we sure in instances of this kind, that the story which surprizes, and the story which does not surprize, came to us from persons who had no more thought of deceiving in one case than in the other, we should in both cases give our assent with
equal

equal readiness ; and it would be unreasonable to do otherwise. For instance ; were a person to tell us that, in passing thro' Guildhall at the time of drawing a lottery, he happened to hear his age, the day of the month, and the date of the year drawn together, we should scarcely believe him, tho' we know that he was not more unlikely to hear these numbers drawn, than any other particular numbers. But if the same person was only to tell us the numbers themselves, and the co-incidence which strikes us was entirely our own discovery, we should have just the same reason for believing his account, as if there had been no such co-incidence. In like manner ; if before the beginning of drawing a lottery, we suppose a wager laid in a company, that a particular number shall be first drawn, and if afterwards one who only knows of the wager, without being any way interested in it, should come and report to the company that he had heard that very number first drawn, he would not easily gain credit. But if a stranger,

ignorant of the wager, was to come accidentally, and to make the same report, he would be believed. The reason is obvious. It would appear that probably the last of these reporters had nothing but the reality of the fact to lead him to report this number rather than any other; whereas the contrary would appear to be true of the other.

These observations may be applied to every case in which historical evidence is concerned. A *given* force of testimony never wants ability to produce belief proportioned to its degree; but the situation of reporters and the circumstances of facts may be such as may render us doubtful whether that *given force* is *really* applied. As far as it appears that there is no ground for any doubts of this kind, we are equally forced to believe in all cases. Were we even to receive an account that a lottery had been drawn in the very order of the numbers, in a manner which gave us as little reason to suspect

suspect the danger of mistake and deceit, as there is when we are informed that it has been drawn in any other order, we should be obliged to give our assent.

All that has been here asserted may be justly applied to the case of miracles reported by testimony.—Uncommon facts, *as such*, are not less subject to the cognizance of *sense* than the most ordinary. It is as competent a judge, for instance, of a man eight feet high, as of a man five or six feet high, and of the restoration of a withered limb, or the instantaneous cure of a disease, by speaking a word, as of the amputation of a limb, or the gradual cure of a disease by the use of medicines : And were a set of such facts to be related to us by eye and ear-witnesses, who appeared no more to mean deceit than persons in general do when they relate any thing of a common nature, we should be under a necessity of believing them.—In particular; were there no more reason to question the sincerity

rity of the Apostles when they tell us, that they saw Jesus perform his wonderful works, that they conversed with him familiarly for many days after his resurrection, that he ascended to heaven before their eyes, and that afterwards, in consequence of being endued *with power from on high* agreeably to his promise, they went about through all the world preaching the doctrine of *eternal life through him*, and converting men from idolatry and vice, God himself bearing witness with them *by divers miracles, and wonders, and gifts of the Holy Ghost* *: Were there, I say, no more reason to question the honesty of the Apostles when they deliver this part of their history, than when they give an account of the affairs of the Jews and Romans, of the ignominious sufferings and crucifixion of Christ under Pilate, of Peter's denial, Judas's treachery, and other events of a similar nature, we should be obliged alike to receive both.

This,

* Heb. ii. 4. — Rom. xv. 18, 19.

This, indeed, seems to me to be nearly the truth †. The *extraordinary* facts they relate are so blended with the *common*, and told with so much of the appearance of a like artless simplicity in both cases, as has, I think, a strong tendency to impress an attentive and impartial mind.

† “ The Gospels and the Acts afford us the same
“ historical evidence of the miracles of Christ and the
“ Apostles, as of the common matters related in
“ them. This indeed could not have been affirmed
“ by any reasonable man, if the authors of these
“ books like many other historians had appeared to
“ aim at an entertaining manner of writing, tho’
“ they had in their works interspersed miracles at pro-
“ per distances and on proper occasions. These might
“ have animated a dull relation, amused the reader,
“ and engaged his attention. — But the facts,
“ both miraculous and natural in scripture, are re-
“ lated in plain unadorned narratives ; and both of
“ them appear in all respects to stand upon the same
“ foot of historical evidence.” *Butler’s Analogy*,
Part II. Chap. 7.

S E C T. III.

Of the Credibility of Miracles, and the Force of Testimony when employed to prove them.

IT has, I hope, been sufficiently proved in the last section, that the influence of improbabilities on historical evidence is by no means such as Mr. Hume asserts, and that there cannot be any such incredibility in miracles as renders them incapable of being proved by testimony. We have seen that testimony is continually overcoming greater improbabilities than those of its own falsehood, and that, like the evidence of *sense*, the capacity of doing this is implied in its very nature.—The objection therefore, grounded on the supposed absurdity of trusting a feebler experience in opposition to a stronger, or of believ-
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ing testimony, when it reports facts more improbable and extraordinary than falsehood and deception, is fallacious.

I must add what deserves particular notice, that what has been said shews us that Mr. Hume's argument would prove nothing even tho' one of the principles before opposed were granted, namely, that we derive our regard to testimony from experience in the same manner with our assurance of the laws and course of nature.

It is not necessary to the purpose of this Dissertation that I should proceed any further. The improbability, however, attending miracles being a point that strongly affects the minds of many persons, I cannot help entering a little further into the consideration of it, in order to shew more fully how much it has been magnified, and with what propriety and effect testimony may be employed to gain credit to the supernatural facts of christianity.—This shall be my business

business in the greatest part of what remains of this Dissertation.

There are many events, not miraculous, which yet have a previous incredibility in them similar to that of miracles, and by no means inferior to it. The events I mean, are all such *phænomena* in nature as are quite new and strange to us. No one can doubt whether these are capable of full proof by testimony.—I could, for instance, engage by my own single testimony to convince any reasonable person, that I have known one of the human species, neither deformed nor an idiot, and only thirty inches high, who arrived at his most mature state at seven years of age, and weighed then eighteen pounds; but from that time gradually declined, and died at seventeen, weighing only twelve pounds, and with almost every mark of old age upon him.—— Now, according to Mr. Hume's argument, no testimony can prove such a fact; for it might be said, that nothing being more

common than the falsehood of testimony, nor more *uncommon* than such a fact, it must be contrary to all reason to believe it on the evidence of testimony.

It deserves particular notice here, that in judging from experience concerning the probability of events, we should always take care to satisfy ourselves, that there is nothing wanting to render the cases, from which we argue, perfectly alike. Our knowledge that an event has always or generally happened in certain circumstances, gives no reason for believing that the same event will happen, when these circumstances are altered: And, in truth, we are so ignorant of the constitution of the world and of the springs of events, that it is seldom possible for us to know what different *phænomena* may take place, on any the least change in the situation of nature, or the circumstances of objects. It was inattention to this that occasioned the mistake of that king of *Siam*, mentioned by Mr. *Locke*, who rejected, as utterly incredible,

incredible, the account which was given him of the effects of cold upon water in Europe. His unbelief was plainly the effect of ignorance. And this indeed is almost as often the case with unbelief, as with its contrary. Give to a common man an account of the most remarkable experiments in natural philosophy : Tell him that you can *freeze* him to death by blowing warm air upon him before a good *fire* ; or that you often divert yourself with bottling up lightning and discharging it thro' the bodies of your acquaintance ; and he will perhaps look upon you as crazy, or, at least, he will think himself sure that you mean to deceive him. Could we suppose him to have adopted Mr. Hume's method of reasoning, he might say, " That
 " what you acquaint him with is contrary
 " to uniform experience ; that he cannot be-
 " lieve you without quitting a guide that
 " has never deceived him, to follow one
 " which is continually deceiving him ;
 " and that, therefore, such facts, when
 " reported by testimony, are more pro-
 " perly

“perly subjects of *derision* than *argument*.”

———But, how obvious would be the weakness of his reasoning?—A person in such circumstances, who thought justly, would consider how complicated and extensive the frame of nature is, and how little a way his observations have reached. This would shew him that he can be no competent judge of the powers of nature, and lead him to expect to find in it things strange and wonderful, and consequently to enquire what regard is due to the testimony which informs him of such facts, rather than hastily to reject them.—One cannot help being greatly disgusted with the inclination which shews itself in many persons, to treat with contempt whatever they hear, be it ever so well attested, if it happens that they are not able to account for it, or that it does not coincide with their experience, just as if they knew all that can take place in nature, or as if their experience was the standard of truth and the measure of possibility. This is to give themselves up to the influence of a

principle which has a tendency to unfit them for society, and, in effect, barring their minds against light and improvement. If we would be truly wise, we ought, at the same time that we are upon our guard against deception, to avoid carefully a vain scepticism, preserving openness with respect to *any* evidence that can be offered to us on every subject, from a sense of our own ignorance and narrow views.—But to come more directly to the subject under consideration.

There is, I have said, no greater incredibility in a miracle, than in such facts as those I have mentioned. It has been already shewn, p. 393, &c. that the most uniform experience affords no reason for concluding, that the course of nature will *never* be interrupted, or that any natural event which has hitherto happened, will *always* happen. It has appeared, on the contrary, that there must be always reason *against* this conclusion. There may, I have said, be secret causes which
will

will sometimes counteract those by which the course of nature is carried on. We are under no more necessity of thinking that it must be the same in all *ages* than in all *climates*. During the continuance of a world, there may be periods and emergencies in which its affairs may take a new turn, and very extraordinary events happen.——In particular, there are, for ought we know, superior beings who may sometimes interpose in our affairs; and over-rule the usual operations of natural causes *. We are so far from having any reason to deny this, that if any end worthy of such an interposition appears, nothing is more credible.——There was, undoubtedly, a time when this earth was reduced into its present habitable state and form. This must

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have

* Sure it is, that Mr. Hume, at least, cannot dispute the credibility of this, who has said of the system of pagan *mythology*, that it seems *more than probable* that somewhere or other in the universe, it is really carried into execution. *Natural History of Religion*, Sect. 11th.

have been a time of miracles, or of the exertion of supernatural power. Why must this power have then so entirely withdrawn itself, as never to appear afterwards? The vanishing of old stars, and the appearance of new ones, is probably owing to the destruction of old worlds, and the creation of new worlds. It is reasonable to believe that events of this kind are continually happening in the immense universe; and it is certain, that they must be brought about under the direction of some superior power. There is, therefore, the constant exertion of such power in the universe. Why must it be thought that, in the lapse of six thousand years, there have been no occasions on which it has been exerted on our globe?

What I am now saying is true on the supposition that a miracle, according to the common opinion, implies a *violation* or *suspension* of the laws of nature. But, in reality, this is by no means necessarily included

included in the idea of a miracle. A sensible and *extraordinary effect* produced by *superior power*, no more implies that a law of nature is *violated*, than any *common effect* produced by *human power*. This has been explained in the dissertation on Providence, p. 80, 81. and it has a considerable tendency to render the admission of a miracle more easy.

These observations demonstrate, that there is nothing of the improbability in miracles which some have imagined. I may even venture to say, that they have in them a much less degree of improbability, than there was, antecedently to observations and experiments, in such *phænomena* as *comets*, or such powers as those of *magnetism* and *electricity*. My reason for this assertion is, that it is far more likely that the course of nature should some time or other fail, than that any particular powers or effects should exist in nature, which we could before-hand guess.

A due attention to these arguments will necessarily dispose a candid enquirer to give a patient hearing to any testimony which assures him, that there actually have been miracles. It appears that to decline this, under the pretence that nothing different from the common course of things can be proved by testimony, is extremely unreasonable.—The miracles of the New Testament, in particular, have many circumstances attending them which recommend them strongly to our good opinion, and which lay us under indispensable obligations to give the evidence for them a fair and patient examination.—Such is the state of mankind, that there is nothing more credible, than that our affairs have not always been suffered to go on entirely of themselves. A revelation to instruct and reform a sinful and degenerate world is so far from implying any absurdity, that it is an effect of divine goodness which might very reasonably be hoped for. There appears to have been great need of it; and it seems to be certain, that there

must have been a revelation at the beginning of the world. If we reject the miracles mentioned in the New Testament, it will not be possible to give any tolerable account of the establishment of such a religion as the christian among mankind, by a few persons of no education or learning, in opposition to all the prejudices and powers of the world. The excellence of the end for which they were wrought; the myriads of mankind which they brought over to piety and goodness, and the amazing turn they gave to the state of religion by destroying, in a few years, a system of idolatry which had been the work of ages, and establishing on its ruins the knowledge and worship of the one true God; these, and various other undeniable facts which might be enumerated, give them a high credibility. We see here an occasion worthy of the use of such means, and a probability that, if ever since the creation there has been any interposition of superior power, this was the time.

C O N C L U S I O N.

Enough has been now said in answer to the objection which has been the chief subject of this dissertation *. The necessary
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* Some of the principal observations which I have made may be found in the chapter of Bishop *Butler's Analogy* on the *supposed presumption against a Revelation, considered as miraculous*. Had I remembered this, it is probable I should not have thought of drawing up this dissertation. The greatest part of the passage I refer to I shall here give, in order to save the reader the trouble of turning to it, and also to enable him to judge how far what I have writ, should it answer no other end, may be of use to illustrate and strengthen what this excellent author has said.

“ First of all, there is a very strong presumption
“ against common speculative truths, and against the
“ most ordinary facts before the proof of them,
“ which yet is overcome by almost any proof. There
“ is a presumption of millions to one against the story
“ of Cæsar, or any other man. For, suppose a num-
“ ber of common facts so and so circumstanced, of
“ which one had no kind of proof, should happen to
“ come into one's thoughts, every one would, with-
“ out any possible doubt, conclude them to be false.
“ And

conclusion from it is, that the main business of those who oppose christianity should

“ And the like may be said of a single common fact.
 “ And from hence it appears, that the question of
 “ importance, as to the matter before us, is concerning
 “ the degree of the peculiar presumption supposed
 “ against miracles; not whether there be any pre-
 “ sumption at all against them. For, if there be the
 “ presumption of millions to one against the most
 “ common facts; what can a small presumption,
 “ additional to this, amount to, though it be pecu-
 “ liar? It cannot be estimated, and is as nothing.
 “ The only material question is, whether there be
 “ any such presumption against miracles, as to ren-
 “ der them in any sort incredible. *Secondly*, If we
 “ leave out the consideration of religion, we are in
 “ such total darkness upon what causes, occasions,
 “ reasons or circumstances the present course of
 “ nature depends, that there does not appear any
 “ improbability for or against supposing, that five or
 “ six thousand years may have given scope for causes,
 “ occasions, reasons or circumstances, from whence
 “ miraculous interpositions may have arisen. And
 “ from this, joined with the foregoing observation,
 “ it will follow, that there must be a presumption,
 “ beyond all comparison greater, against the *par-*
 “ *ticular* common facts just now instanced in, than
 “ against miracles *in general*, before any evidence
 “ of

should be, to invalidate the *direct* evidence for it. Every attempt of this kind would
deserve

“ of either. But, *thirdly*, take in the consideration
“ of religion, or the moral system of the world, and
“ then we see distinct particular reasons for mira-
“ cles ; to afford mankind instruction, additional to
“ that of nature, and to attest the truth of it.—
“ *Lastly*, Miracles must not be compared to com-
“ mon natural events, but to the extraordinary phæ-
“ nomena of nature. And then the comparison will
“ be between the presumption against miracles, and
“ the presumption against such uncommon appear-
“ ances, suppose, as comets, and against there
“ being any such powers in nature as magnetism and
“ electricity, so contrary to the properties of other
“ bodies, not endued with these powers.—Upon
“ all this, I conclude, that there is certainly no such
“ presumption against miracles as to render them in
“ any wise incredible. That, on the contrary, our
“ being able to discern reasons for them gives a posi-
“ tive credibility to the history of them, in cases where
“ those reasons hold: And that it is by no means
“ certain, that there is any peculiar presumption
“ at all, from analogy, against miracles, as distin-
“ guished from other extraordinary phænomena.”

Analogy of Religion, &c. p. 243, &c.

Since the first publication of these Dissertations,
what is said in this passage of “the improbability in
common

deserve the most serious regard ; and, it is vain to think of overthrowing christianity

common facts," has been controverted by persons of whose judgment I have reason to entertain a high opinion. I must, therefore, beg leave here to recal the reader's attention to this subject, by laying before him some further observations upon it. Those who are already satisfied, and to whom probably, in what follows, I shall appear too minute and tedious, will, I hope, excuse me.

In order to discover whether there is an improbability in common facts, independently of the testimony on whose credit they are believed, let the connexion of such facts with testimony be withdrawn, and then let it be considered what they are. If upon doing this ; that is, if upon making them objects of imagination unsupported by any proof, they become improbable, the point, I should think, will be determined : For to find that a fact, when its connexion with testimony is withdrawn, becomes improbable, is the same as to find, that, independently of testimony, it is improbable. A fact reported by testimony, if it has in itself no improbability, will continue to have no improbability when the support of testimony is taken away. This is true of such a fact as that it froze in England between the 1st and 10th of last January ; but the contrary is true of such facts as that the king was then ill, or that the ministry was then changed, and such and such persons advanced to power.

anity in any other way. As far as there is reason to believe, that the Apostles were
neither

power.—I cannot conceive of any clearer way of deciding any point than this is. However, as to some it is not satisfactory, let us consider this point in other lights, taking along with us the following definitions and propositions.

Definition 1st. An event is *probable*, when the odds *for* its happening are greater than those *against* its happening; *improbable*, when the odds *against* are greater than those *for*; and neither *probable* nor *improbable* when these odds are equal.—This is the proper sense of these words; but the writers on the *doctrine of chances* use the word *probable* in a more general sense.

Definition 2d. Two events are *independent*, when the happening of one of them has no influence on the other.

Proposition 1st. The improbabilities of *independent* events are the same whether they are considered *jointly* or *separately*. That is; the improbability of an event remains the same, whether any other event which has no influence upon it happens at the same time with it, or not. This is self-evident.

Proposition 2d. The *improbability* that two independent events, each of them not improbable, should both happen, cannot be greater than the odds of *three to one*; this being the odds that two equal chances shall not both happen; and an equal chance being the lowest
event

neither deceived, nor intended to deceive,
we are under a necessity of receiving the
facts

event of which it can be said that it is not improbable. Thus, in throwing up a half-penny, I have an equal chance for turning up *heads*. Another also, in doing this at the same time, has an equal chance for turning up heads. It is *improbable* that we should both of us turn up heads, and this improbability is the odds of *three* to one. If two events are in any degree *probable*, there is not so much as these odds against their co-incidence.

From these premises will arise a *demonstration* that common facts, or (to speak more properly) particular facts of a common nature, have a very high improbability in them which is conquered by testimony. For, in order to be sufficiently explicit, let us take the two following facts: "The laying of a wager that "number 1500 shall be first drawn in a lottery;" and "the actual drawing of that number first." These are independent events; for laying the wager cannot of itself have any influence on the *probability* or *improbability* of drawing the number about which it is laid. They are also, when taken separately, common facts, and would either of them, if reported separately, be believed without scruple on common testimony. When reported together; that is, when it is said that they have both happened, every one is necessarily sensible of an improbability, and that this improbability is at least 49,999 to 1, supposing

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facts to which they gave witness, tho' miraculous. Let then unbelievers prove,
if

ing the number of tickets in the lottery to be 50,000. But, by proposition 2d, there could not be a greater improbability in the happening of both these events (if separately not improbable) than the odds of 3 to 1. It follows, therefore, with the strictest evidence, that this is a false supposition.

Let us next consider what the degree of this *separate improbability* must be.—It appears that at least it must be so great as to be capable of producing an improbability of 49,999 to 1 in the happening of both events. But it is obvious that, after the wager, this is the improbability of *one* of the events, or of drawing number 1500; and by proposition 1st, if it has this improbability *after* the wager, it must have had it *before*. 49,999 to 1, therefore, was the *separate* improbability of this event; that is, it is the improbability of it when reported by itself, and independently of its having been before-hand named. And there being no reason to think that the improbability in the other event, or in laying a wager about this particular number, is not at least equal, the resulting improbability that *both* should happen, must, according to the laws of chance, be 2599'.999,999 to 1.

Further. This point may be otherwise proved thus. The same event cannot be both improbable and not improbable at the same time. Different persons in judging of the same event will form the same judgment, as far as they judge rightly. Suppose then that

if it be possible, that there is no sufficient reason to believe this. Let them shew, that

two different persons are told such a common fact as that number 1500 was first drawn in a lottery, one of whom knows that a wager had been laid about it, or that it had been before-hand named, and the other knows nothing of any circumstance of this kind. The former would judge the event improbable, and the latter would be sensible of no improbability in it. Which of these persons judges rightly? the former without doubt. There was indeed an improbability that this number should be drawn: and it makes no difference, that one man happens to be in circumstances that force him to perceive it, and another not. That this number happened to be named before-hand, no more affects the improbability of drawing it, than that I yesterday writ a letter or took a walk; and the improbability of drawing it after being so named, is no more than the improbability of drawing any other *particular* number. So true is this, that were two witnesses apparently of equal credit to report, one that this number had been drawn, and the other that another had been drawn, there would not arise the least reason, merely from the improbability that the number should be drawn which had been named, for any preference of one report to the other. Suppose a trial at law about the number first drawn, and one witness to depose that number 1500 had been first drawn, and another, number 1600, how ridiculous

that Christ and his Apostles were either *enthusiasts* or *impostors*, and account for
their

culous would it be to alledge as a circumstance rendering one of the depositions less likely to be true than the other, that some time ago, and unknown to the witnesses, there had been a wager laid about drawing the former number ?

In the latter end of the preceding section I have assigned the reason of the greater reluctance with which, after being previously named, we should believe that number 1500 had been drawn than any other. It is only when the reporter is known to be acquainted with this circumstance, that there would be any reason for such reluctance.—In cases where there appears any striking co-incidence, we are led to entertain a distrust of testimony, or to apprehend that it wants the probability it would otherwise have, on account of the temptation which there is in such cases to deceive. Where we see nothing of this kind, we at once receive its reports without regarding improbabilities. On the contrary; where any circumstance appears which may be the foundation of a design to deceive, we receive its reports with almost equal diffidence, whether the improbabilities are little or great: And it is on this account that, in many cases, we are much affected with particular improbabilities, though in others we are not at all sensible of equal or greater improbabilities.—I do not know
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their conduct and writings on one of those suppositions, taking along with them
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how better to illustrate this than in the following manner.

Suppose a heap of 1000 bits of *white* paper, marked with the numbers 1, 2, 3, &c. up to 1000, with one *black* paper among them. Were it reported that out of such a heap a person had drawn the first trial the white paper marked 512, we should easily assent without *minding*, or even *seeing* any improbability. But were it reported, in the same manner, that the black paper had been drawn, we should hesitate, and think what we heard improbable. Now, the improbability in both cases is the same; and, there being no more danger of a deception of *sense* in one case than in the other, the true reason of the difference must be, agreeably to what I have observed, that in the former case, we see nothing that can be a foundation for a design to deceive, number 512 having nothing in it to recommend it to a preference; whereas in the latter case we see the contrary. For this reason we should, in like manner, give a readier assent to a report that number 512 had been drawn than number 1, or any other number which seemed to have any thing distinguishing in it that could tend to prejudice the mind in its favour. And for this reason also, we should believe an account that this number had been drawn out of such a heap, more readily than that a

the consideration, how *wild* and *frantick* they must have been if the former, and
how

black paper had been drawn out of a heap of only ten white and one black, tho' the improbability in the one case is a hundred times greater than in the other.

——It is thus chiefly, in my opinion, we are to account for the difference in our regard to the reports of testimony, and for our being determined in such cases, much more by some particular circumstances in facts than by any intrinsic improbabilities which they have.

——Were a person to tell us that in throwing *six* common dies together, he had thrown the *six* numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, our assent would be gained with some difficulty, though the improbability of doing this is only 64 to 1. But were the same person to tell us any story of a common and uninteresting nature, we should receive it without scruple, though perhaps, on account of the variety of particular circumstances in it, previously improbable in a higher degree than can well be computed.—As *sense*, wherever it is equally free from the danger of deception, convinces equally of an event, whatever its improbabilities are: As, for instance, it convinces equally that a black paper has been drawn out of a heap of white papers, whether the chance against it was a hundred, a thousand, or a million to one; so likewise does *testimony*, unless there appears something that may be likely to give occasion to deceit.

how *profane* and *abandoned* if the latter. But let them not pretend that they are able to

In what I have said, I have all along kept to the proper sense of the word *improbable*, as it has been defined at the beginning of this note. But it is generally used with such laxness and ambiguity, as cannot but mislead us, if we are not attentive.—Were we to be told that there was a storm of thunder and lightning at such a place in the month of July, we should say that it was not *improbable*. And we should say the same, were we to hear that it happened on such a day, at such an hour, and that such and such persons were killed: In both cases meaning only in general, that events of this kind frequently happened, and that there was no reason to consider them as *incredible*. But if we aimed at speaking with strict propriety, we should use different language; for, if a storm of thunder in July is only not improbable, that is, an event not more unlikely to happen than not; a storm on such a day, and at such an hour, doing such and such particular damages, is an event of which the contrary must be true.—In like manner; should we be told that such a person had got the 10,000l. prize in the lottery, it might be said that it was not *improbable*, meaning that as some person must have it, we can easily believe that this person has had it: not that there were no odds against his having it; for all know that there must have been very great odds against his having it, though a

to prove *a priori*, that no accounts of miracles *can* be true; or satisfy themselves with
saying

report which comes through a hundred hands, and for the truth of which perhaps the odds are very inconsiderable, would convince us that he really has had it. Should it be added, that he had but one ticket, we should receive the report as readily as if we knew he had 20, though this makes a great difference in the improbability of the event.

These observations, I hope, may be of use to explain and confirm those which have been made before on the nature of *Historical Evidence*. It seems to follow from them undeniably, that the previous improbabilities of events do by no means affect the credit of testimony in the manner implied in Mr. *Hume's* argument. The position, therefore, on which this argument is founded, cannot be maintained. In order to gain assent to a report, it is not necessary that there should be greater probability or odds *for* its truth, than *against* the happening of the event.

There is a very strong presumption against the simplest common story before any evidence for it. On the contrary; against miracles *in general* there is no presumption at all; for it has been proved that we have no reason for thinking that the course of nature will continue always the same. Miracles, therefore, *in general*, are in the strictest sense, *not improbable*. That is; it is as likely as not, that some time or other, during the continuance of a world, the usual operations

saying lazily, that deceit and falsehood are very *common*, and miracles very *extraordinary*; and that, therefore, the whole question is decided, and there can be no occasion for any further examination. A person who should reason in this manner, in other instances, would be quite ridiculous. Testimony is an evidence which admits of an infinite variety of degrees, and which, sometimes, is scarcely short of demonstration. Tho' it often deceives, yet there are some kinds of it that have never deceived, and that cannot deceive. It is one of the principal sources of all our

G g 3 information

rations of physical causes should, in some instances, fail, and supernatural power interpose. And with respect to *particular* miracles, or miracles said to have been wrought at *such* a time, and attended with such and such particular circumstances, they are capable of being proved by testimony in the same manner with any other *particular* facts. And if it is any proof of the contrary, that they are more improbable and extraordinary than it is that the reports of testimony should be false, there is likewise a proof, that we ought not to believe testimony when it reports numberless facts, which every one in the common course of life is continually ready to believe without difficulty on its credit.

information and knowledge. To argue, therefore, against christianity from the general topic of the commonness of false testimony, is trifling and unjust, unless it can be shewn, that it has been common for *such* testimony as that of the *apostles* to be false *. Historical evidence being of all

* It has appeared in this Dissertation, that the objection, which is the main subject of it, is applicable to facts for which we have the evidence of *sense*, as well as those which depend on the evidence of *testimony*. Were we to be eye-witnesses to any thing quite new to us, and out of the usual course of nature, it might be said, that what we perceive being contradictory to uniform experience, but deceptions of our senses common; therefore, it must be wrong to believe the reality of it; because, this would be trusting a feebler experience in opposition to a stronger, or, receiving a fact upon an evidence, the falsehood of which would be less uncommon than the fact itself. He, therefore, that will guide himself by the principles which are the foundation of this objection, and balance opposite experiences in the manner it requires, must have been an unbeliever, though he had *seen* the miracles related in the New Testament. — Though our senses have often deceived us, we cannot help relying, in general, without diffidence on their information. There are innumerable circumstances

all degrees, what is true of *other* historical evidence is nothing to *this*. If the facts are extraordinary, there may be peculiar circumstances attending them taking off all improbability from them on this account; and it may be even less wonderful that they should be true, than that the testimony reporting them should be false. It has been shewn indeed, that, in order to our reception of the christian miracles, it is by no means necessary to prove this. A great deal, however, has been said to prove it with much strength of reason, by

G g 4

the

circumstances and instances in which they have never deceived us: And, therefore, when in any particular instance they convey to us any information, it is trifling to object, that they have informed us wrong in some *other* instances, except those other instances were of a similar nature. And even supposing the similarity, the objection will be of little weight, unless the number of such instances in which they have deceived us, is nearly equal to or greater than those in which they have not deceived us.—It has been shewn that these observations are applicable, with like propriety and force, to the information we receive from testimony.

the defenders of Christianity *. Why should not some notice be taken of the
argu-

* See Dr. Adams's Essay on Miracles.—When Mr. *Hume*, in a passage before quoted, p. 387, lays it down as a *maxim*, “That no testimony is sufficient to
“ establish a miracle, unless the falsehood of it is more
“ miraculous than the fact it endeavours to establish;” his meaning, I should think, must be, that as, according to him, no testimony is sufficient to prove an *ordinary* fact, unless its falsehood is *improbable* in a higher degree than the fact is improbable, in the case of a *miraculous* fact the falsehood of the testimony must be *miraculous* in a higher degree than the fact is *miraculous*: that is, it must be *certain*, that there is no other account to be given of the falsehood of the testimony, besides a miraculous deception of the senses and subversion of the faculties of the persons who give it. We should not, therefore, be able to convince Mr. *Hume* of the truth of christianity, though we could prove *to a demonstration*, that the apostles did not intend to deceive, and were not themselves deceived except miracles were employed to deceive them. It must be further proved to him, that a miraculous deception of their senses and subversion of their faculties would be *greater* miracles than the facts they attest. At this rate, agreeably to what was observed in the last note, it is plain, that had we ourselves *seen* the miracles of Christ and his apostles, we must have been entirely doubtful
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arguments they offer? Why should not those who reject christianity tell us, in
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about them, unless we were persuaded that a deception of our senses required a greater exertion of supernatural power, than the reality of what we saw.— Surely, an argument that proves so much cannot have any real weight. If just, we are under a necessity of concluding, that there is no reason to believe the reality of any thing we hear, see or feel in any other sense, than as an *idea* or *mode of perception* in our minds. This, however, cannot startle Mr. Hume; for it is the very conclusion to which his philosophy carries us, and which, in his *Treatise on Human Nature* and *Philosophical Essays*, he has, with an ingenuity that distinguishes all his writings, taught us to draw.

I hope I shall be excused if I give room here to an observation which is a little foreign to the present purpose.—It has been objected, that supposing the reality of the miraculous facts of christianity, there is no connexion between them and the truth of its doctrines. This, in my opinion, is to trifle inexcusably; nor can it be worth any christian's while to say a word in answer to it, till *one* person is found who can honestly declare, that he believes the miracles of Christ, but denies his divine mission; that, in particular, he is convinced that he raised several persons from the dead, and at last rose himself from the dead and ascended to heaven, and afterwards poured forth
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particular, how they account for the rapid progress it made in the world; for the manner in which St. Paul mentions the miraculous gifts in his epistles; and for the fortitude with which the apostles, in giving their testimony, sacrificed every worldly interest, and at last laid down their lives? Why, instead of making any attempts of this kind, do they, in general, insist on topics which affect not the *direct* evidence, or found their objections on the adulterations of christianity by human inventions and civil establishments, without taking pains to discover what it is as it lies in the New Testament?

If the christian religion is true, we have clear information on points the most interesting.

on the apostles and first christians those gifts of the spirit mentioned in the New Testament; but, at the same time, doubts whether he said true when he declared, that he was the *resurrection and the life; that all power was given him in heaven and earth; and that the hour would come, when all that are in their graves should hear his voice and come forth, they that have done good to the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil to the resurrection of damnation.* John xi. 25.—Ver. 28, 29.

resting. A vicious man has *every thing* to fear, and a virtuous man *every thing* to hope. The question, therefore, whether it is of divine original, is, as I observed at the beginning of this dissertation, of unspeakable importance. It is inexcusable to treat it with indifference; or, with conceited half-thinkers, to suffer ourselves to be led into infidelity by a few specious difficulties, without critically examining the original code itself, and considering carefully the joint force of all the evidences *internal, external* and *presumptive* taken together. If, after such an examination, any person should judge, that the whole amount of the evidence is inadequate to the proof of the facts on which christianity is founded, he ought next to consider how far it goes towards proving them. That it goes some way towards this is absolutely certain. The furthest that any enquirer can go in his rejection of christianity is, to think that the objections outweigh the evidence; but he cannot possibly think that there is *no* evidence. I
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should imagine indeed, that he cannot possibly avoid seeing, that there is very considerable and striking evidence, though he may judge it *insufficient*. It is not conceivable, that any one can read the New Testament, and observe with what a force and purity, before unknown, it teaches morality and natural religion; the sublime and singular character it has drawn, without the least appearance of art or effort, in the history it gives of the life, discourses and Miracles of Jesus Christ; and the spirit of piety, goodness, love and heavenly mindedness which breathes through all its parts: It is not, I say, conceivable, that any person after such a perusal of the New Testament can be able easily to persuade himself, that the writers of it were such *miracles* of madness or profligacy, as they must have been, if the facts to which they bore testimony were false, and the religion they taught an imposition on mankind.— But not to dwell on this. For the reason which has been assigned it is certain, that no infidels, who are inquisitive and candid,

did, can go beyond a state of doubt. They must acknowledge that, at least, there is evidence enough to give a chance for the truth of christianity, and they ought to consider seriously to what this chance amounts, and what obligations, in respect of practice, their own state of doubt lays them under. Would they do this, they could never make christianity a subject of ridicule or contempt. Though not convinced of its truth, they would live under the apprehension that it may possibly prove true. Those who do not act thus cannot reasonably complain of the threatnings denounced in the scriptures against infidelity. These threatnings certainly should not be applied, nor were they ever intended to be applied to any honest enquirers, be their doubts what they will. Nothing is *fundamental* besides a sincere desire to know and practise truth and right, or an honest and good heart. Speculative errors can be no further *criminal*, than they proceed from *criminal* dispositions, and are made fanc-
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tuaries for vice. The unbelief condemned in the *New Testament* is only that which has this source, as our Lord has himself expressly told us. John iii. 18, 19. *He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, the reason of the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. For every one who doth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd.*——How far these words are applicable to any *modern* infidels they themselves only are capable of determining. There is a wide difference between the state of things now, and in the times of Christ and his Apostles.——The favourableness of christianity to virtue must indeed be a powerful recommendation of it to good minds; and is almost enough, without the aid of miracles, to prove its heavenly original. For this reason, those who *do the will of God* are

likely to know of the doctrine whether it be of God*. Nothing is much more incredible than that a religion so calculated to raise our affections above this world, and to lead us to all that is holy and worthy, should be the offspring of such wickedness as that of its first preachers must have been, if they were impostors.—But whatever effect considerations of this kind have upon me, I am far from thinking that it is necessary they should have the same effect upon *others*. The difficulties which all inquisitive and candid christians must themselves feel, may undoubtedly appear to even good minds in so strong a light, as to leave them unsatisfied. It would be much better, if christians, instead of being so free as they often are in ascribing infidelity to the worst motives, would take care that their own faith is the result of honest enquiry, and at the same time study to demonstrate the excellence of their religion by the excellence of their tempers and lives. Would
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* John vii. 17.

to God, they could be engaged to this. Christianity would then flourish, and the whole world would be soon won to the love and admiration of it.—Those christians who, instead of acting thus, *disgrace* their religion by bitter tempers and evil works, while they pretend zeal for it; and, though they own the authority of Christ, break his laws and cause his name to be blasphemed; such christians have more to answer for than can be imagined. They ought to ascribe to themselves, in a great measure, that infidelity which they are disposed to lament, and which, perhaps, they wish to punish. Their *faith* is a *curse* to them, and their *friendship* an *enmity* to Christ, by which he is injured more inexcusably and dangerously, than by any open and avowed opposition.

THE END.