

**A REVIEW OF HUME
AND HUXLEY
ON MIRACLES**

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A Review of Hume and Huxley on Miracles by Edmund Beckett

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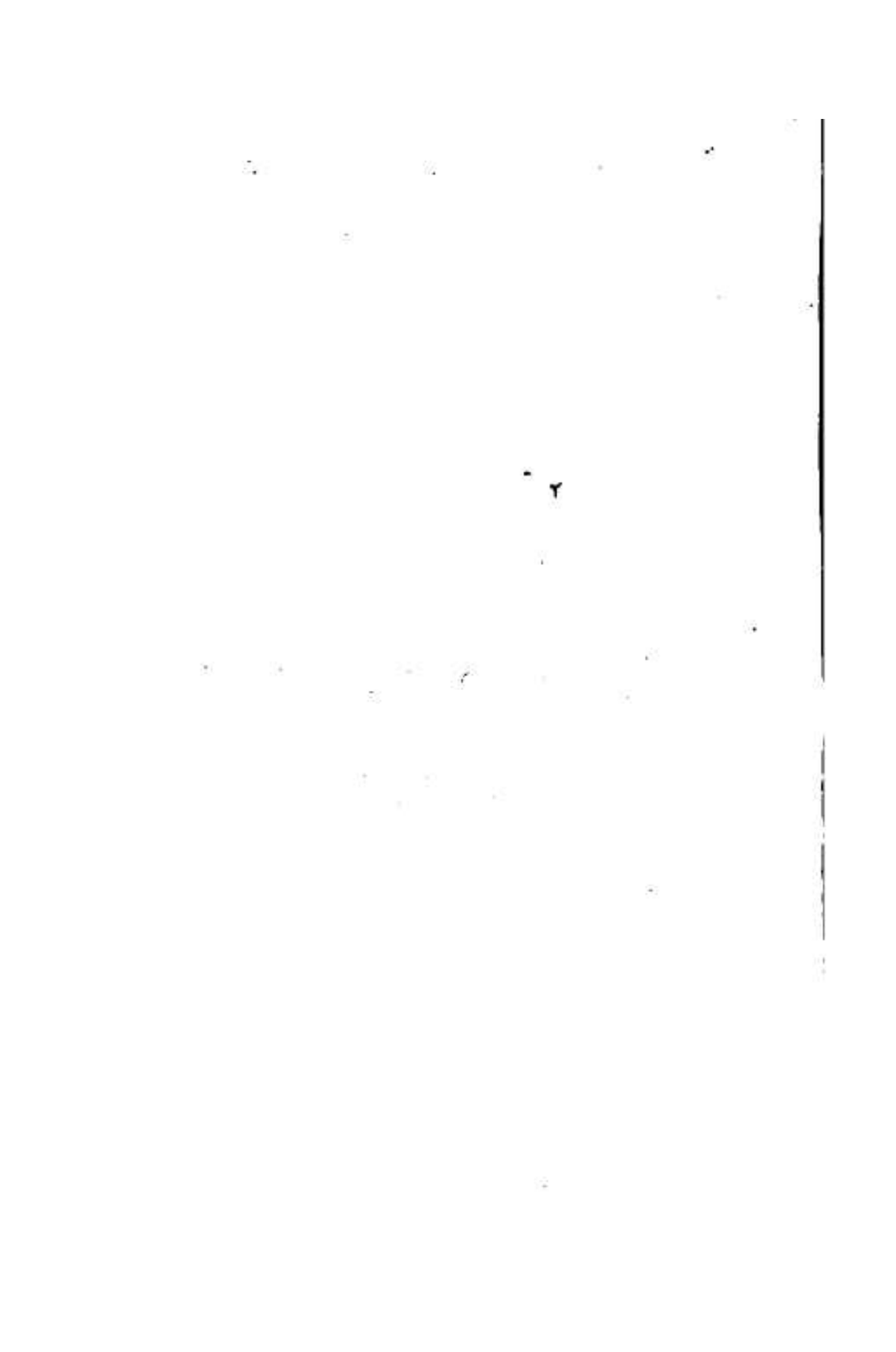
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A REVIEW
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THE restatement of Hume's well-known argument against Miracles, with corrections and improvements by so eminent a natural philosopher as Professor Huxley, in his book entitled 'Hume,' seems to require a more express answer than it has received, so far as I can learn. That part of the book was indeed noticed shortly in some of the Reviews of the time; and it may be that all the arguments contained in it had been answered substantially by anticipation in other books, and especially in Dean Mansel's essay on Miracles in the 'Aids to Faith'—a volume full of valuable information and reasoning on most of the subjects of the once famous 'Essays and Reviews.' But Dr. Huxley's chief argument had not then been so specifically stated, though it was suggested in substance by Babbage forty years before. Moreover, any such treatise by the President of the Royal Society may be assumed to be the best that science can furnish on that side; and scientific objections are thought more of just now than evidential.

It will be seen too, that on one or two points, and even in the definition of a miracle, he flatly contradicts Hume, and even charges him with absurdity, though where they agree he exalts him as a 'specialist' in that kind of learning, and adopts the same conclusion. So we must first clear the ground by seeing which has the best of it where they differ, and then deal with the conqueror, and with them both where they agree. Occasionally it will be necessary to notice other objections not specifically made by them, but so logically connected with theirs that they ought to be answered at the same time.

Dr. Huxley states 'the essential argument of Hume's 'famous disquisition on Miracles' accurately enough as follows, though not exactly in his own words: 'It 'must be admitted to be a reasonable request if we ask 'those who would have us put faith in the actual 'occurrence of interruptions of the order of nature, to 'produce evidence in favour of their view, not only 'equal but superior in weight to that [evidence] which 'leads us to adopt ours' (p. 130). This he pronounces irrefragable; and so it is in the abstract; but we on the other hand have to see how much real evidence they have against miracles. Then he adds, beginning immediately to contradict his leader, 'Hume has sur- 'rounded the kernel of his essay with a shell of very 'doubtful value. . . . Argumentation whether miracles 'are possible, and if possible, credible, is merely beat- 'ing the air until the arguers have *agreed* what they 'mean by the word Miracle. Hume, with less than

'his usual perspicacity, but *in accordance with the common practice of believers* in the miraculous, defines a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature by a particular volition of the Deity.' And be it remembered that Hume did believe in a Deity, *i.e.* in a personal, designing Creator; for he wrote, 'The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational inquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine theism and religion.' Dr. Huxley quotes this himself in another chapter, and then tries to explain it away by virtue of some other words which Hume puts into the mouth of one of the interlocutors in an imaginary dialogue.

We are not concerned however with the amount of Hume's belief, but only with his arguments, and perhaps a little with the fairness of his commentator, and more just now with his logic. Dr. Huxley says a little farther on, 'The definition of a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature is in reality an employment of language which on the face of the matter can not be justified. For Nature means nothing more nor less than that which is; the sum of phænomena presented to our experience; the totality of events, past, present, and to come:—a very important definition from such a philosopher, and deserving to be more borne in mind than it generally is by those of his own school, who fancy that they are demolishing a Creator by using 'Nature' for a prime cause, instead of the consequence of all causes. And there is a good deal