The purpose of this paper is to investigate the key claims and arguments of Section X, “Of Miracles,” in Hume’s *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hume says on p. 536\(^1\) that “a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.” Hume believes miracles are unjustifiable from the fact that the whole course of nature, the universe, its laws, its order, all serve as evidence against it. “Commit it then to the flames,”\(^2\) he will sternly conclude. By way of a negative causation\(^3\), Hume will show that any belief concerning miracles or any matter of fact lacks a rational foundation. Then, by a positive analysis\(^4\) of the same, he will show that beliefs are formed by the experience of custom and habit. The paper will also compare which probability is the more convincing: on the one hand, the testimony of witness, and on the other hand, the testimony of nature. Arguing normatively, Hume will conclude that assent ought to be given to that experience which is most probable and strong, which he will argue to be the testimony of nature. So while it may be the case that one believes in miracles, it can never be the case that one ought to, he will say.

First, we must understand Hume’s argument. Miracles are “a violation of the laws of nature.” The laws of nature are those constant conjunctions of observed experience that allow for the predictability of future events. From the establishment of these observations we can determine “laws.” Now, a miracle is a violation of the system of observed data that gives occasion to laws. This is to say that when a miracle happens, an event occurs that is not of the ordinary. A person who comes back to life violates that law which says a man dead stays dead. Thus, there is an experience (a dead person coming to life) against a manifold of the contrary. Hume’s argument states that you must weigh both experiences, look to the one that is most probable, and give assent to that one. By this method, the dead resurrecting is discredited.

Each miracle entails having a “uniform experience” against it. By uniformity, Hume means a constant manifestation of similar events that over time seem as one, like the formula “A then B.” Miracles are a deviation from this uniformity, from those laws given to us by nature. Nature never changes and is always longstanding, or as Hume puts it, nature is the

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\(^2\) This normative passage found in the closing paragraph of the *Inquiry* aims to attack metaphysics, theology and any field of study falling outside the bounds of logic, geometry, math and the empirical sciences.

\(^3\) By “negative causation” I mean his consideration in establishing miracles as non-rational.

\(^4\) By “positive causation” I mean Hume’s way of affirming belief as merely customary and habitual.
“firm and unalterable experience,” (cf. p.536). A miracle rejects this nature, or rather interrupts it in a manner offensively, and it stands alone in isolation against the uniformity of observed events.

Inductively, we take experience uniformly and are able to predict from past events what will follow in the future; the future resembles the past\(^5\) and we bend our will to that experience or rather our will is bent by it. A miracle would interrupt the course of our beliefs, but it only ought to if that miracle can come in uniformity. If not, there is no rational foundation in believing in it. By its very nature, a miracle is a singular activity that brings with it “a uniform experience” against it, “other wise the event [miracle] would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle…” (p. 536).

That successive and conjoining experience is a motif for belief arises from Hume’s negative analysis of causality in Section IV of his *Inquiry*. In that chapter, he wants to investigate the impression from which we come to the idea of continuity and he finds it in a “relation of cause and effect,” (p.500). A man who finds a footprint on the beach will conclude that someone walked there previously. He is able to make the connection, not by any reasoning *a priori* (negative causality), but through the manifold observation of the same experience (positive analysis). He has observed a thousand times before that a footprint relates to man, and this alone, this uniformed experience, enables him to connect the effect to the cause. Hume says that “this relation is not, in any instance, attained by reasoning *a priori*, but arises entirely from experience when we find that any particular object is constantly conjoined with each other.” (p. 500). One almost intuits that this is the argument he will use later against miracles, and this is exactly what he does when he says in Section X that “the proof against a miracle…is as entire as any argument from experience can be possibly be imagined,” (p. 536). Hence, as there is no rational foundation for connecting the footprint to man, since this connection is made by observed date, not *a priori*, he concludes negatively that there is no justified reason for believing in miracles.

Returning to Section X, Hume wants to consider the reliability of testimony. “No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle,” he says (p. 537). This is because testimony rests not in reason (again emphasizing his negative causality) but in human experience. Our assent to and belief in what others say initiates in custom and habit (positive causation, p. 535). That is, we place credence to that which we are accustomed to find in conformity with the real, (cf. p. 535). And when a witness testifies to what is not in conformity to reality, “the evidence resulting from the testimony admits of a diminution, greater or less in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual,” (*Ibid*). Miracles are of the nature to admit a most probable diminution of evidence as there is no conjoining experience to call witness to it. The reason why miracles produce belief in the mass is due to reasons Hume will now consider.

First, credence in miracles lends itself to the ignorance of those who fancy with the imagination and live accordingly in primitive states. Belief in miracles is “observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations,” (p. 538), and have a less likelihood to develop from a civilized people. Secondly, we tend to that which gives us a sense of pleasure, and what more provides this than those miracles that come to us as a *surprise* or as *wonder*, and which cause the same when we tell it to others. And thirdly, yet not the least, the testimony of miracles discredits itself, “so that not only miracles destroy the credit of

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\(^5\) Cf. p. 504, implication towards negative causation where it is not reason that enables us to form a belief about the future, but inductive experience.
testimony, but the testimony destroys itself,” (p. 539). Hume compares the different religions of the world and how each one in some way or another vouchsafe to themselves miracles as the starting grounds for their existence. Muhammad’s successors, (he will call them “barbarous Arabians”) in positing their religion to be founded in miracles have the same authority in testimony as a Titus, a Plutarch, a Tacitus or a Roman Catholic who relate similar testimony, says Hume. In seeking to destroy the testimony of others, they “likewise destroy the credit of those miracles on which that system was established, so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts,” (p. 539).

Hume wants to convince us, using normative arguments, that there is no reason to believe in miracles. Experience is its own testimony against the testimony of miracles. We have proof against proof, and both proofs (though in actuality they are probabilities) rest in experience. One however is always the more superior and to believe in that one is always of the wise, says Hume. My belief towards that one which is most probable is not controlled by the will but by the laws of nature (cf. p. 509), and I ought to bend my will to that which is true. But for reasons already mentioned, people tend towards fiction. Though I may believe in miracles there exists a more probable likelihood that it is my imagination playing tricks on me than that it is an actual and true belief.

Hume is tireless in positing belief to be the product of custom. He fashions a descriptive analysis from his natural empiricism. He shows how beliefs are founded on sentiment and feeling. In distinguishing between imagination and belief, he reminds us that imagination or fiction is free from feeling, but not belief: “…the difference between fiction and belief lies in some sentiment or feeling which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure. It must be excited by nature…”, (Ibid) that is, custom or habit. And because miracles are a violation of custom and habit, there ought not to be a place for them in the will.

After these considerations, Hume now wants to weigh the testimony of witness with that of the testimony of laws. He sees there occurs a violation in both, and asks which violation is more frequently repeated. Almost immediately one acknowledges a more frequent abuse on truth than on the laws of nature. Man is more prone to cheat and deceive than nature’s susceptibility is to suffer violation. He does not deny the existence of extraordinary phenomena or that it occurs. When and if it occurs, one must acknowledge that it will come with an exceedingly high and uniformed testimony, and that such testimony, as the one he hypothesizes about the eight hour eclipse in 1600 England followed by a number of credible witnesses, can be granted belief. However, such phenomena will have an undiscovered law attached to it, and “philosophers ought to search for the causes from which it might be derived,” (p. 542). Following the comparison to this example, he puts forth another and says if someone was to say that the Queen of England died, came back to life and reigned three more years, though accompanied by many credible witnesses, it would be more probable that the event was “pretended” than it be real, and that such folly of testimony ought not to be passed without rejection. Hume says: “I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature,” (p. 542).

So the question to that which is most probable is a question that ultimately has to be judged according to that which is more experienced. Which is more credible; the violation of the laws of nature or the violation of truth? Experience itself is witness to the fact that men more often lie and deceive or are deceived, than that one single law of nature be interrupted and offended by the testimony of miracles says Hume, “…the violations of truth are more
common in the testimony concerning religious miracles than in that concerning any other matter of fact,” (p. 542) and so we should “never lend any attention to it, with whatever specious pretense it may be covered,” (Ibid).

In conclusion, we have seen Hume’s claims in Section X, and how they connect to his previous arguments of negative and positive causation. Speaking as an empiricist in modern Europe, Hume acknowledges that miracles are a contradiction to science. He advocates for an empirical inquiry to make manifest the nature of miracles, by which investigation he hopes to convince the reader of the superiority of laws to that of miracles. Our feeling and sentiment ought to be placed on that which is more probable, he concludes. Commit then metaphysics, theology or whichever pseudo-science presents itself outside the bounds of sense experience, to the flames, and include in those flames superstitions, miracles and like phenomena, “and whoever is moved by faith to assent to [miracles] is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person which subverts all the principles of his understanding and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience,” (p. 543). Once you understand Hume’s definition of miracles, you understand that you can never have reason to believe in one.

References