

Hume on miracles

In *Enquiry* §X, Hume uses his views about our knowledge of matters of fact to reject belief in miracles. Before looking at his argument, it is worth noting that there are different ways to define what a miracle is. Three important definitions are:

1. an event that has religious significance;
2. an event caused by God; and
3. an event that violates (or is otherwise not in accordance with) the laws of nature, caused by God.

The appeal of the first definition is that people do talk of events as miracles even when the event isn't outside the laws of nature. However, whether an event has 'religious significance' or not may be a matter of subjective interpretation. An event can qualify as a miracle for one person and not another, even when both are religious believers.

The second definition rules out subjective interpretation, as miracles are only those events that are *in fact* caused by God. But it says that *every* act of God is a miracle, e.g. God's continuous creation in sustaining the existence of the universe or all genuine religious experience.

The third definition has been most common with philosophers. Aquinas says a miracle is 'beyond the order commonly observed in nature', and it is the sense that Hume discusses.

HUME'S ARGUMENT AGAINST MIRACLES

Hume defines a miracle as 'a violation of the laws of nature', or more fully, 'a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity' (p. 173). He then argues that it can't be reasonable to believe that a miracle has occurred: 'as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws [of nature], the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined' (p. 173). By definition, a miracle goes against our very regular and extensive experience of how the world works. Therefore, on the basis of experience, the probability that a miracle has occurred must always be less than the probability that it hasn't. Because it is rational to believe what is most probable, we never have a good reason to believe that a miracle has occurred.

Hume is joining a debate about miracles that was going on at the time, about whether historical reports of miracles, e.g. in the New Testament, could be believed, and what role they had in the foundations of Christian faith. So he considers the issue of testimony. i.e. other people saying that they witnessed a miracle. (We will come back to the question of what it is reasonable to believe if you (think you) experience a miracle yourself.)

Testimony is very important in forming our beliefs. We experience so little of the world directly, so we rely on what other people tell us. This is reasonable, because we have discovered that testimony is generally reliable. However, we rightly distinguish between more and less reliable testimony, e.g. depending on whether some witnesses say one thing, others another; how many people were witnesses, how they report what they experienced, and so on. These judgments are important in court, for instance. One factor in believing testimony is whether what is reported is probable or extraordinary. You're more likely to believe a friend who says they saw your mum in the street than one who says they saw a pig flying! So to believe testimony rationally, it needs to be more likely that the testimony is true than not; and there are many factors that affect this.

When it comes to miracles, then, to rationally believe someone who claims to have witnessed a miracle (a violation of the laws of nature), it must be less probable that the testimony is false than that the miracle occurred. But this, Hume argues, can never be. The miracle is extremely improbable: *all* our experience of matters of fact supports the belief that laws of nature are not violated. So Hume argues that the evidence against the belief that a miracle has occurred is *always* stronger than the evidence from testimony that it has occurred. And when the evidence against a particular belief is stronger than evidence in its favour, then we should not hold that belief.

We can compare miracles to unexpected events. After all, these *also* go against our experience, so do we ever have good reason to believe some unexpected event has occurred? Yes, says Hume, on two conditions: first, there is widespread, consistent agreement that the event occurred; and second, there are 'analogies' of the event in our experience. Our experience leads us to expect the unexpected, *within limits*. These may vary from person to person; Hume presents the case of an Indian who, never having lived anywhere cold enough, refused to believe that water turned into ice (p. 172). Hume thought he was right to do so until he was shown that the testimony was very strong. If we hear of someone coming back from the dead, we would be in a similar situation, and should not believe it.

Furthermore, he continues in §X, Part 2, the testimony for miracles is not very good evidence as testimony goes:

1. there is no miracle attested to by people of good sense, education, integrity, and reputation, where the miracle is witnessed by many such people (the attributes listed describe people we can trust not to be easily fooled and to tell the truth without exaggerating);
2. human nature enjoys surprise and wonder, which gives us a tendency to believe unusual things when the belief isn't justified;
3. tales of miracles are common among ignorant peoples, and diminish in civilization; and the tales of miracles are often given in explanation of everyday events, such as battles and famine, that don't need a miraculous explanation.

(Hume adds a fourth point against supporting religious belief by appeal to miracles, viz. that every religion proclaims miracles, but not all religions can be true. So the force of each claim to miracles destroys the force of the others, and it is rational not to believe any claim.)

However, Hume's later remarks show that his first argument is his main objection. If there were reports of miracles in contemporary society, and they were attested to by

people of integrity and education, ‘the absolute impossibility... of the events’ (p. 181) is reason enough not to believe the reports. No matter how strong the testimony is,

It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature. When, therefore, these two kinds of experience are contrary, we have nothing to do but subtract the one from the other... this subtraction, with regard to all popular religions, amounts to a total annihilation.... (p. 184)

So even if the evidence mounts up, we should not believe that a *miracle* has occurred; we should try to find what the natural cause of the event is. The only rational response is scientific discovery, not religious belief.

DISCUSSION

The laws of nature

It is important to interpret Hume’s definition of a miracle correctly. A miracle not a violation of something we *believe* to be a law of nature, but a violation of what *is* in fact a law of nature. For instance, it may turn out that what appears to violate the laws of nature simply demonstrates that we were wrong about what the laws of nature are. Being able to transmit the sound of someone talking over thousands of miles may once have seemed miraculous; but radio waves enable us to do that. It is not a miracle – even if someone thinks it is a miracle.

When faced with an event that challenges the laws of nature as we believe them to be, we will change our beliefs if we are able to repeat the event and if we are then able to explain it by reformulating the laws of nature. For Hume, this is always a path we must explore first. He is not arguing that events that *seem* to be miracles are impossible; he is arguing that it is unreasonable to believe that they are genuine miracles.

Experiencing miracles

Suppose we have good evidence for considering a miraculous event to have occurred, and we investigate it and are unable to find any natural causes that would explain it. Can’t we reasonably conclude a miracle had occurred? According to Hume, we have only two choices: reject the claim that the event happened or look for a natural cause of it. But does experience support his claim? Is there *no* experience that could support a belief in a non-natural cause?

Hume does not discuss experiencing a ‘miracle’ oneself. But we can adapt his arguments regarding testimony. He could claim that no *experience* is evidence for a non-natural (‘miraculous’) explanation, because we never experience a *non-natural cause*. To suppose that God caused some event will always be speculative, because we have no experience of God. So even if we don’t find a natural cause, we can only conclude that *we don’t know* what the cause is, not that the cause is non-natural.

On Hume’s account, if I personally witness someone undoubtedly killed before my eyes get up, wounds healing, and walk off, I *still* shouldn’t think there is a non-natural cause of this. All the rest of my experience casts doubt on the belief that what I am seeing is actually taking place. Is it not more likely that I cannot trust my eyes? To have good enough reason to believe the event actually happened as I experienced it, it must be analogous to the rest of my experience. But if it is analogous, then it will probably have a natural cause. If it is not analogous, then can my current experience be trusted?

We may argue that it can. For instance, if I am not the only witness (so I wasn't hallucinating or going mad), and everyone else who witnessed it are reliable witnesses, and there is simply nothing in current scientific understanding that relates to what happened, then perhaps it is reasonable to think a miracle has occurred.

This conclusion doesn't justify many people believing in miracles! It also doesn't mean that miracles have ever occurred.

Are miracles violations of the laws of nature?

A different response to Hume is that his definition of a miracle is wrong; and as a result, his argument from probability doesn't work. If we say a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, we risk *defining* miracles out of existence (not just showing that it is unreasonable to believe in them). Here's how: a statement is only a law of nature if it is true, general (or universal), and contingent. It must be general to be a law, and it must be contingent to be a law of *nature* rather than a law of logic ('all bachelors are unmarried' is true and general, but not a law of nature!). However, the occurrence of a natural event that violates the law makes the statement either not true or not general. But if it is not true or not general, it is not a law. Any statement that is a law of nature cannot be violated while remaining a law. Therefore, by definition, there can be no violations of a law of nature; if a miracle is a violation of a law of nature, then a miracle is a contradiction in terms. But this is wrong. Miracles are not *logically* impossible.

So what is a miracle? If we say that miracles are violations of what *we think* the laws of nature are (discussed above), then whether an event is a miracle or not depends on what we believe about the laws of nature. We have rejected this view.

An alternative definition is this: A miracle is an event, caused by God, that is *outside or not in accordance with* the laws of nature. This definition preserves both the idea that miracles are somehow 'at odds' with the laws of nature, and the idea that they are still laws. How? The laws of nature only apply to *natural* events. If an event is caused by God, it is not a natural event. So the event doesn't *violate* the laws of nature, it just falls outside them. (You aren't *breaking* the US limit of 55 mph if you drive at 60 mph on the motorway in England.)

We can now reply to Hume. The evidence, against a miracle occurring, from our experience of natural events is *irrelevant*, because miracles are not natural events. Our experience shows that events thought to be miracles (say, coming back from the dead) do not happen *as natural events*. But since miracles are non-natural events, this doesn't undermine belief in miracles.

Hume can reply that we now need good evidence to suggest that an event is non-natural rather than natural. And on this matter, his arguments about experience and testimony still apply.