

Hume's Miracle Test

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Modern Philosophy

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November 29, 2018

Hume, the laughing Scotsman, woke Kant from his “dogmatic slumber” with his skeptical attempt to formulate a science of human nature and has continued to variously puzzle, provoke, and inspire philosophers ever since with his half-mocking and sometimes ambiguous writings. His views on religion, particularly his attack on miracles, have stimulated some outrage and a flurry of discussion in contemporary Christian philosophy. In this paper, I compare a range of scholarship on Hume’s miracle test – from Johnson’s utterly denunciatory *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* to Fogelin’s aptly-named *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* to Yandell’s relatively neutral *Hume’s Inexplicable Mystery: His Views on Religion*. My intention is to demonstrate that Hume’s argument continues to remain contentious for two main reasons: (a) contradicting understandings of Hume’s intentions (b) the argument’s connection to Hume’s empiricist, atheist, naturalist worldview. At the end, I suggest a way to interpret Hume, taking into consideration both his intentions and the conditions on which his argument’s force depends.

Hume’s primary argument from Section X of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* states that one cannot reasonably belief in a miracle. There have been many restatements of his argument. For example, take Johnson’s quotation of William L. Rowe:

- I. The evidence from experience in support of a law of nature is extremely strong.
2. A miracle is a violation of a law of nature. Therefore,
3. The evidence from experience against the occurrence of a miracle is extremely strong.¹

This simplification strips Hume’s argument down to something almost anybody would agree with and ignores Hume’s conclusion he cannot believe in a miracle. Since Hume seems to make slightly stronger claims, I provide my own summary.

1. Belief-producing evidence is based solely on experience.

¹ David Johnson, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles*. (Cornell, 1999), 70.

2. When two testimonies come into conflict, we judge them based on which is more probably true according to our experience.
3. A law of nature is established by “a firm and unalterable experience.”
4. A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.
5. Because we have frequent, verifiable experiences of human fallibility and none of violations of laws of nature, it is always more likely that a testifier is lying or mistaken than that laws of nature have been violated.
6. Therefore, if somebody testifies that they have seen a miracle, we must always consider it more unlikely that the testifier is lying or mistaken than that the laws of nature have been violated.
7. It is unreasonable to believe in miracles.

In addition to this, Hume includes four subsidiary arguments. Most scholars do not give these subsidiary arguments much attention, largely because the arguments against the first part extend to cover the second. Fogelin, after expressing annoyance at what he considers misinterpretation of Hume’s subsidiary arguments, offers the following interpretation of Hume’s rhetorical purpose: The primary argument establishes that miracles have low probability no matter what the context, while the subsidiary arguments establish that no historical contexts meet the standard of credibility required to prove a miracle.² My reading agrees with this interpretation, at least insofar as the subsidiary arguments do appear to center around an interpretation of matters of fact that can only be countered by a different portrayal of the facts. Fogelin takes his coherency argument so far as to stake everything on the subsidiary arguments’ success, stating, “So, in the end, Hume’s case against the acceptance of testimony in support of

² Robert Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles*. (Princeton, 2005), 30.

religious miracles turns on an assessment of factual evidence. Is his argument then merely a posteriori? The word “merely” is out of place. Given Hume’s fundamental commitments, it could not take any other form” (62). However, because I do not intend this paper to be a stream of endless evidence-flinging (which does not tend to be very productive), and because Hume himself had access to different evidence than I do today, I will not give the subsidiary arguments much attention in this paper. However, the fourth argument, being more theoretical, merits a brief discussion.

Yandell claims that though three out of these four depend upon the success of the primary argument (no miracles have reliable testimony; religious feelings bias witnesses; miracles occur primarily in “ignorant and barbarous nations”), the final stands alone.³ The argument is that if a miracle in one religion is believed, miracles claimed by other religions must also be believed. Hence, a reasonable person must either accept all religions, or none of them. Yandell briefly criticizes this argument by providing a counterinterpretation. For instance, a miracle in one religion could be interpreted to support a different religion. Hume’s argument supposes a “democracy of religions,” which in turn rests on the assumption that because religions are lumped into a category, they share a common standard of interpretation. In practice, however, it seems that most religious people have strong convictions of “religious elitism,” just as philosophers have strong convictions that their understanding of the world is correct. Therefore, the success of the argument depends on whether the reader believes religions are all equally believable, or that some are superior to others, something Hume does not address in “On Miracles.”

Definitions: “Laws of Nature” and “Miracle”

³ Keith E. Yandell. *Hume’s Inexplicable Mystery: His Views on Religion*. (Temple University Press, 1990), 330.

“Fire has always burned, and water suffocated every human creature: The production of motion by impulse and gravity is an universal law, which has hitherto admitted of no exception.”⁴

The biggest criticism of Hume’s definition of a miracle is that it is too narrow and too vague. It is too narrow because if I believe in God, I know he can bless me through natural means just as well as through the preternatural. In fact, it makes little sense why he would go out of his way to violate the order that he himself instilled in the universe. For example, as Hambourger observes, a miracle like the parting of the Red Sea might not have been exercised through supernatural means.⁵ God could have caused it by preordaining that an earthquake or a tsunami occur at the precise moment the Israelites found themselves cornered by the Egyptian army. Yet the coincidence is so massively unlikely that one would naturally call it a “miracle.” In this case, the only qualification of the word seems to be that it must be God-directed and improbable. Under this view, literal seven-day creation and theistic evolution are equally miraculous. However, if we exclude all cases that have a possible natural explanation from Hume’s test, we are left with very few, if any, “real” miracles. Resurrection from the dead is one of the only Christian miracles that seems to fit Hume’s definition, for it seems completely impossible given our knowledge of human physiology.

However, probability-wise, the lines are blurry. Should we assess a massive coincidence (each part of which technically is possible under established scientific laws like gravity) differently than we assess a direct violation of those laws? Both offend reason considerably, and Hume does not offer a clear reason why one should be considered more of a miracle than

⁴ David Hume, quoted by Forrest E. Baird. *Modern Philosophy*. (Prentice Hall, 2011), 371

⁵ Robert Hambourger “Need Miracles by Extraordinary?” (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Mar., 1987), pp. 435-449): 438

another. Hence, while his definition seems at first glance to offer a bright line distinction, it is problematic when applied to cases like the parting of the Red Sea or creation *ex nihilo*.

Here is where Yandell's exposure of an epistemological problem in Hume's definition of "laws of nature" becomes pertinent. Yandell spends some time discussing the "stormy history of science" to show that the meaning of "law of nature" is vague and unstable (316). Just as there may be many apparent miracles that do not actually violate the laws of nature but only seem to at the time, many "laws" of nature are refuted conclusively by later discoveries. Paradigm shifts may occur, such as that from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics. So Yandell concludes: "Miracle M is inevitably entrenched if and only if any plausible paradigm includes some theory which in turn includes some law that M violates" (318). If paradigm shifts may occur in the future, events that appear to violate the laws of nature are perhaps unlikely, but still believable, since they may usher in the new paradigm.

However, I believe this is a weak argument. The Newton-Einstein shift did not outmode the use of Newtonian mechanics for everyday calculations. Though a massive paradigm shift is possible, it is beyond the scope of what we can think about, and simple faith that one will occur in the future leaves our judgment open to the attacks of any manipulative conman with a phony invention. Besides, Hume himself is famous for pointing out the weakness of induction and the frailty of human knowledge. He is most well-known for claiming that there is no way to be certain the sun will rise tomorrow. Yandell points out that with the abolition of "real" natural laws, "real" miracles disappear. When we consider that the unbelievable may be believable in the future, the whole discussion turns into epistemological despair. Therefore, "the real miracle-apparent miracle distinction has purchase only on paradigms, not on the world" (320). Hume must be assuming an intra-paradigm perspective in his argument because that is the uncertain

space in which we *must* make our practical decisions. The future is inaccessible. What Hume seems to be getting at, then, by defining a miracle as a “violation of natural law” is simply that a miracle is something that runs counter to everything one has reason to believe.

Another reason to avoid quibbling over Hume’s specific definitions is that Hume himself uses terms inconsistently. Going back to his initial argument, Hume concludes that in a case where a witness claims to have seen a miracle: “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” (Baird, 398). Here, he uses “miracle” counter to his own definition, this time as a low-probability event instead of a violation of the laws of nature. Since he also uses “proof” interchangeably to mean both probability and near certainty, it seems that Hume does not think the argument depends on definitions.

Instead, given his philosophy’s accordance with paradigm-shift views of science and his abandonment of his own definitions, Hume’s purpose seems to be practical: to educate his readers about thoughtful consideration of contradicting evidence. The scholarly attention paid to Hume’s definition of miracle is useful to understand Hume more thoroughly but is not tremendously relevant to his main argument. This brings us to Hume’s standard for belief.

Definitions cont.: “Proof”

Johnson observes that Hume specifically wants us to examine miracles in terms of proof. He and Gower both show that Hume thinks about proof in terms of comparison: “proof against proof, of which the strongest must prevail” (Baird, 397). Gower compares it to a court case, in which witnesses give conflicting evidence and connects this proclivity of Hume to his career in law. In a case where two accounts are at conflict, their corresponding strengths should be measured by preponderance of evidence, which Hume measures in terms of experimental

experience. “A hundred instances or experiments on one side, and fifty on another, afford a doubtful expectation of any event; though a hundred uniform experiments, with only one that is contradictory, reasonably beget a pretty strong degree of assurance.” (396) Hume points out that, given this standard of belief, “a uniform experience amounts to a proof” (398).

Gower points out a flaw in this standard. If there is any chance at all that an event could occur, even if it is perhaps unusual, it is not irrational to believe it will occur.⁶ However, this attack seems to rest in a misunderstanding of Hume’s purpose. We have already discussed the ever-looming possibility of a paradigm shift in science and observed that Hume clearly recognizes the problem of induction. So again, we safely conclude that Hume’s purpose is not to disprove all possibility of miracles but to suggest the best possible way to weigh evidence in an epistemologically non-ideal world.

Two Criticisms

Now that we have established definitions (or a lack thereof) we can dive into criticism of a larger scope. Johnson criticizes Hume on every front he can find. He first restates C.S. Lewis, who famously claimed that Hume begs the question by appealing to a uniform experience that is only uniform if miracles have never occurred (18). Counter this, Yandell, in agreement with Fogelin, states that “the addition of subsidiary arguments most naturally suggests that the conclusion of the subsidiary arguments does not suppose that the conclusion of the main argument is mistaken” (325). In other words, it is unlikely that Hume would make an argument that the concept of a miracle is incoherent before moving on to an argument that assumes miracles are possible. Therefore, for fear of taking one aspect of Hume’s words out of the

⁶ Barry Gower. “Hume on Probability.” (The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Mar., 1991), pp. 1-19), 9

context of his whole argument, we should assume that Hume does not intend to discredit the possibility of miracles but only the credibility of testimony concerning them.

Johnson next criticizes Hume for assuming in his example of the eight days of darkness that many witnesses will automatically be more reliable than one. In Hume's example, he admits he would accept a miracle affirmed unanimously by diverse and numerous witnesses. Johnson complains in response: "But whenever the available opposing testimony, to an A that is not a B, is that of one witness (of whatever apparent fine character and capacity and circumstance), it is said that we ought to think it probable that all As are Bs, relative to all that we know. Why?" (70). He then gives a parallel example of rubies. He has never seen a large ruby, but believes they exist for the simple reason that many people say they do; but surely it would not be unreasonable to believe in rubies based on just one testimony. Johnson questions Hume's move "from what is probable (or improbable) relative to partial evidence, to what is probable (or improbable) relative to total evidence" (70). However, even deigning to compare eight days of darkness to a never-experienced ruby seems to demonstrate a misunderstanding of Hume's undertaking. Hume does not appeal to numbers alone in this example of convincing testimony for a miracle; he is showing that in the context of his overall argument, given the low probability of a miracle's occurrence, it would require an unusually strong and complete testimony to convince him. It is natural that a strong and complete testimony would be based in (a) a large number and (b) a large diversity of witnesses because those two factors together negate the threat of human fallibility and deceitful interests.

However, even if Johnson's arguments do not stand, C.S. Lewis does draw attention to a second possible variety of criticism: that concerned with Hume's general beliefs. Even if Hume

did not intend a circular argument, the empiricist, naturalist beliefs underlying his argument contribute significantly to its perceived vigor, or lack thereof.

The Real Crux of the Argument

Hume states that upon receiving communication of a miracle, he would believe in a conspiracy theory rather than admit the supernatural because “the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that 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” (89). Hume then crafts an example that forces one to choose between two completely ridiculous theories. He describes a case in which he hears from all the news sources and historians that Queen Elizabeth died and rose from the dead. Hume argues that in this instance, he sees no reason why Queen Elizabeth would rise from the dead but can conceive of some reasons why certain people might stand to benefit from telling the tall tale. Therefore, he chooses to believe in a massively unlikely conspiracy theory than the miracle. However, if a person has a prior, rationally justified belief that God, or some other outside force, occasionally interferes in customary patterns of Nature, they might believe in some miracles, if not the particular one Hume provides. Hamburger gives the example of Jesus walking on water, pointing out that if somebody believes in God and sees a reason God might want Jesus to walk on water, the event is not unbelievable (447).

By translating Hume’s argument into modern probabilistic language⁷, Dawid and Gillies show how the reasonability of belief in a miracle depends on prior beliefs about the nature of the world. I restate their basic Bayesian argument below, having modified it to be more straightforward.

⁷ Note that Hume himself had no contact with Bayesian probability theory, though Bayes was familiar with Hume. In his work on Humean probability, Gower issues this caveat: “Hume's conclusions, about induction, miracles, and natural religion can, indeed, be generated by Bayesian methods. Perhaps, even, some of Hume's premises can be fairly represented in Bayesian terms. But it does not follow that his reasoning is Bayesian.” (17)

$$\Pr(A|X) = \frac{\Pr(X|A) \Pr(A)}{\Pr(X|A) \Pr(A) + \Pr(X|\text{not } A) \Pr(\text{not } A)}$$

A = Event of a miracle

X = Report of a trustworthy group of scientists

$$\Pr(A) = \Pr(\text{miracle occurs}) = 10^{-6}$$

$$\Pr(X|A) = \Pr(\text{given a true miracle, the scientists will report it}) = .99$$

$\Pr(X|\text{not } A)$ or the $\Pr(\text{scientists report a miracle falsely}) = 10^{-3}$ *This probability is reasonable; since we have chosen the most trustworthy people possible, it is unlikely they would lie or be mistaken.*

$$\Pr(\text{not } A) = \Pr(\text{no miracle occurs}) = 1 - 10^{-6}$$

then

$$\Pr(A|X) = \Pr(\text{miracle actually occurred, given the report of trustworthy scientists}) = 10^{-3}$$

This accedes with Hume's argument. 10^{-3} is far too low a probability to reasonably believe a miracle occurred, even with the most reliable witnesses.

However, if we have background knowledge that leads us to believe that miracles are just as probable as the event of a trustworthy witness (or group of witnesses) being mistaken or lying, Dawid and Gillies point out that $\Pr(A)$ could be raised to 10^{-3} and then $\Pr(A|X)$ rises to 50% probability. In that case, believing or not believing would be equally reasonable.

I take this Bayesian analysis to show that Hume's miracle test really depends on the assumptions the decider has going into the situation. If she believes we live in a world where miracles can occur, the event of the miracle itself will not be so highly improbable. Her decision to believe will depend solely on how much she trusts the testifier. All the factors of human

fallibility and evil that Hume mentions will factor into her calculations of the testifier's trustworthiness. If the chance of them lying or being mistaken exceeds 50%, she will not believe the miracle happened. Elsewise, she has no reason not to believe them.

If the only explanation for trustworthy individuals agreeing on the event of a miracle, then one can choose either to think the connection of the sources to be a miracle, or accept the miracle. A "miracle," or extremely low probability event, occurs either way.

Hume's Underlying Purpose

A philosophical system has many parts. Some are persuasive, and some are supportive. Fogelin thinks it is "important to see [Hume's] treatment of miracles as of a piece with his general commitment to the methods of natural science" (61). He backs this up by referring to Hume's overarching mission to formulate a science of human nature. Since Hume operates within a naturalistic worldview, he has no room to account for miracles or, as Fogelin observes, free will (61). His argument against miracles is then posterior to his more fundamental epistemological principles, and C.S. Lewis' observation of an inherent bias in Hume's thoughts about miracles is not completely wrong. In order to figure out exactly what Hume's intended purpose for the argument is, we must pay some attention to his philosophy as a whole.

Hume states after his Queen Elizabeth example that any reason to believe that is based upon knowledge of the God supposed to originate it is invalid because "is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being, otherwise than from the experience which we have of his productions, in the usual course of nature" (89). Throughout Hume's "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," he speaks through the mouth of Philo against the deist Cleanthes, who claims to be able to discover God's qualities through experience. Putting these two statements together under the net of his epistemological method, we see that Hume is a complete

agnostic when it comes to God because God simply has no place in empirical, scientific knowledge. However, beyond simple, psychological preference for this type of knowledge, Hume has no clear proof for his empirical system. As Wittgenstein might say, Hume reaches bedrock. Yandell pulls one of Hume's famous skeptical quotes to illustrate this mentality: "My natural propensity, and the course of my animal spirits and passions, reduce me to indolent belief in the general maxims of the world I must yield to the current of nature" (319). In the end, Hume chooses to believe in what seems most natural to him.

But although Hume personally adhered to atheism, he had an affably pluralist spirit. His writings display a strong distaste not for religion *per se* but more for the superstition that can accompany it. At the end of the day, Hume is not attempting to convince a Christian to abandon the faith but using miracles to give an exposition of why he will never be convinced to accept Christianity. He would choose miracles in particular because that is the point at which Christian faith and Hume's empiricism seem they might intersect; while his objection to Christian claims like Descartes' "divine light" and the soul are obvious, God's interference in the natural world could conceivably be used as an apologetic argument with empiricist tenets. So, when Hume says "a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion," he is destroying that last claim a Christian might make that his philosophy is compatible with religion. Even more evidence for this defensive interpretation lies in Hume's concluding paragraph. After specifying that prophecy counts as a miracle, he makes a statement that reveals an underlying strain of defensiveness in his essay: "So that, upon the whole, we may conclude, that the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one" (91). By focusing in specifically on Christianity's necessary reliance on the veracity of miracles, Hume makes the implicit statement:

Since I do not believe in miracles for the reasons listed above (all of which link into my epistemology), I cannot believe in Christianity. Though Hume's slightly inflammatory rhetoric might offend readers like Johnson, if a reader does not agree with Hume's overall philosophy, he need not view Hume's miracle argument as a true threat to Christian belief but should instead see it as Hume's justification of his unbelief.

Regardless of personal convictions, Hume's more general purpose of trying to dispel unfounded superstition remains helpful. Although many fundamentally disagree with Hume's premises, they can agree that Hume is right to discourage people from gullibly accepting marvelous reports. Scurrilous con-men exist in religions. Corrupt religious authorities have abused the common people all through history, covering their deceit over with high-flown rhetoric about God. Their appeals to authority and sophistical exhortations that the people exhibit "faith" should be countered, and Hume provides a strong voice of opposition to this purpose. Provided she manages to cut through Hume's inflammatory rhetoric to his actual argument, any reader will benefit from entering briefly into Hume's modest, skeptical mindset and acknowledging the general merits of his simple, reasonable framework for testing truth-claims.

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