

## **Sceptical arguments regarding the occurrence of miracles**

### **MIRACLES AND THE COMPETING TRUTH CLAIMS OF DIFFERENT RELIGIONS**

There is a common assumption among many religious believers that only the ‘true’ religion could have ‘true’ miracles. Some have maintained that other religions have no miracles, others that the miracles of other religions are ‘false’ (the product of magic, sorcery, or devils). From a neutral standpoint, it is difficult to agree with any conclusion of this sort. Hume pointed out that every religion proclaims its miracles as indications of the truth of its message (*An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, p. 178). But not every religion can be true. So if miracles support the truth claims of the religion, then the miracle stories of one religion are evidence against the miracle stories of another. On these grounds we should not accept any miracle story as true. An alternative response, of course, is not to appeal to miracles in support of the truth claims of one’s religion.

### **THREE THEOLOGICAL OBJECTIONS TO MIRACLES**

Some religious thinkers have reservations about thinking of miracles as specific acts of God can undermine the idea that God is active throughout creation. We need to realize that God and the miraculous are present in everything. Second, the understanding of miracles as specific acts suggests that God acts selectively, and this considerably sharpens the problem of evil. If God cured your son from cancer, why did he not cure mine? If God gave you a premonition not to board the doomed plane, why did he not share that information with the rest of the passengers, who then died? Many theologians argue that God’s activity in the world is not selective in this way, so miracles in this sense don’t occur.

We can reply, however, that if the purpose of the miracle is not so much to benefit some particular person, but to support their and other people’s religious faith, the theory is not so objectionable. Selective benefit may make evil harder to understand; selective revelation does not.

Other religious thinkers object to the idea that God would use miracles to support religious faith. It suggests that people are incapable of recognizing moral and religious truth when presented with it. We can reply that this may be true, but it is no objection. People are not always capable of recognizing the truth, and may need some ‘wonder’ to move them towards religious faith.

### **HUME’S ARGUMENT AGAINST MIRACLES**

Hume defines a miracle as ‘a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity’ (*An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, p. 173). He argues that we never have a good reason to believe that miracles occur.

He claims that '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'. 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.

In fact, Hume only considers the evidence for miracles from testimony, rather than from experiencing an alleged miracle oneself. (This is because the debate at the time was whether we should believe the miracles reported in the New Testament.) Now, we can often rely on testimony, and we have established this by our experience that what people tell us is true we can later learn directly is true. To rationally believe testimony, though, it needs to be more probable than the testimony is true than not.

Hume argues that this is never the case with miracles. It is always more probable that the testimony is false than that the events reported actually occurred:

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 abound amongst 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.

However, Hume's argument really rests on the conflict between miracles and laws of nature, since he argues that even if there were good testimony for a miracle, we should not believe it. It is our experience that establishes the reliability of testimony. But it is also our experience which establishes the laws of nature. The evidence on the two sides cancels out.

We can understand the importance of these arguments if we 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. Hume thought he was right to do so until more evidence appears. If we hear of someone coming back from the dead, we would be in a similar situation, and should not believe it.

If the evidence mounts up, we should then 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.

## Objections

Suppose we investigate an event 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 would 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, for 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 a good enough reason to believe the event actually happened, I must think it is sufficiently analogous to my experience. But then if it is sufficiently analogous, it will probably have a natural cause. If it is not analogous, then can my current experience be trusted? At best, the evidence cancels out.

We may argue that if I am not the only witness (so I'm not hallucinating or going mad), and the other witnesses are reliable, and there is no scientific explanation that could account for it, then it is reasonable to believe a miracle has occurred.

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