

## Against Miracles

**1. Being rational:** Hume begins by noting that a rational person “proportions his belief to the evidence.” That is, whenever a claim is asserted by someone, you look at the evidence FOR that claim, and weigh it against the evidence AGAINST that claim. The rational thing to do is to believe whichever side has the greater proportion of the evidence.

Hume's primary target is Christianity. He notes that the entire body of evidence for Christianity is the testimony of some people from 2,000 years ago who claim to have observed some miracles. His ultimate claim is that it is NOT rational to believe that their testimony of these miracles is accurate.

Why? Because, the more extraordinary and marvelous a claim is, the more evidence we have against that claim from the start. In modern terms, we might say that miraculous claims have a very low “prior probability.” That is, we have a great deal of reason not to believe miraculous claims. Why? Because, in our experience, we never observe miraculous things. If we DID commonly observe them, they wouldn't be called miraculous. Therefore, in order to outweigh the evidence of low prior probability, the evidence IN FAVOR of a miracle needs to be very great. Hume gives an example of himself going through the reasoning process of deliberating whether or not to believe a miraculous claim:

When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it is more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived or that the fact which he relates should really have happened. 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. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the even which he relates, then, and not until then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

If the evidence for miracles were VERY great, we might be justified in believing in them. However, the evidence in favor of miracles is not very great, Hume says. In some instances, Hume seems to suggest that the evidence in favor of miracles is, in fact, NEVER great enough to outweigh our prior evidence against the miracle.

**2. There is NEVER enough evidence in favor of a miracle?:** Hume begins by noting that “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.” If a miracle were a part of the natural course of events, which are governed by laws, it would not be a miracle.

In that case, we have a HUGE bit of evidence AGAINST miracles: namely, our observation of regularity in nature, and the absence of miracles.

Now, in order for belief in the testimony of a miracle to be rational, the evidence in favor of the miracle needs to outweigh the evidence against it. However, this can never happen. This is because the testimony of a miracle and the testimony of regularity are of the same kind: namely, they are testimonies of our SENSES.

So, the evidence in favor of miracles will always be less than the evidence against them. This is because, in favor of miracles, you always have the sensory evidence of one or a few people, of an event that occurs one or a few times. On the other hand, against miracles, you have the sensory evidence of all (or nearly all?) people across all time. The latter always outweighs the former. Therefore, even if those who testified to witnessing miracles in the Scriptures were the most reliable, upright individuals known—i.e., if their testimony was of the best kind imaginable—their testimony would still not be enough to establish a rational belief in miracles. But, in fact, Hume argues that their testimony is not even this good.

**3. Evidence for miracles is poor:** Hume cites several reasons why the testimony of the apostles in the Scriptures is not of the best kind:

- They were not esteemed or educated men.
- People are excited by miracles and naturally WANT them to be true.
- We know of a great many claims of miracles that have been debunked.
- Testimonies of miracles are most common in ignorant, uneducated people.
- All of the religions have testimonies of miracles. But, they can't all be true, since all of the religions contradict each other (for instance, Muhammad is supposed to have miraculously received the Koran—though Christianity and Islam both claim to be the one true religion).

Together, these factors diminish the credibility of the testimony in the Scriptures even more, such that there is no hope of the evidence in favor of miracles outweighing the evidence against them.

**4. Belief in miracles is irrational:** Hume concludes that belief in miracles is irrational. However, this does not obviously rule out the possibility of incredible occurrences (though these would not, strictly, be miracles). For, it is sometimes rational to believe what is false. For instance, Hume mentions someone from India (a warm climate) who is told that water becomes solid when it is chilled. Such a person would be quite rational in rejecting this claim (since the sensory evidence of his entire life is against it), though he would be mistaken to do so.