

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.

Ultimately, his claim is that it is NOT rational to believe that miracles occur.

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, because we do not observe miraculous events regularly, the majority of our experiences run counter to any claim that there are miracles. If we DID commonly observe miracles, they wouldn’t be called miraculous. Therefore, in order to outweigh the evidence AGAINST miracles (i.e., 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 event 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 a testimony of them. However, the evidence in favor of miracles is not very great, Hume says.

2. There is NEVER enough evidence in favor of a miracle?: Hume defines a miracle as “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 instance, Hume mentions someone from India (a warm climate) who is told that water becomes solid when it is chilled.

Against Hume

Peter van Inwagen rejects Hume's argument.

1. Contrary to Experience: First, he states Hume's argument in premise form:

1. Any report of a miracle is necessarily contrary to one's experiences.
2. One should dismiss any report that is contrary to one's experiences unless:
 - (a) It is even MORE contrary to one's experience that such a report be false.
 - (b) There are multiple, distinct reports which all corroborate one another, and it is even MORE contrary to one's experience such a corroboration is false.
3. No report of a miracle has ever satisfied (2a) or (2b), and it is either impossible or at least extremely improbable that any miracle report ever will.
4. Therefore, one should dismiss any and all reports of miracles.

But, van Inwagen asks, what does "contrary to one's experiences" mean? Suggestion:

Contrary to Experience: A report is contrary to one's experiences if all of the F's one has witnessed, or knows of, have been G's and the report claims that there is an F that is not a G.

For instance, all of the dead people (F's) that I have witnessed or know of have also had the property of STAYING dead (i.e., they've also been G's). Therefore, any report of a dead person that does NOT stay dead (i.e., of an F that is NOT a G) is contrary to my experience.

But, this definition will not do. For, then, the following would all be miracles:

- You've gone to your grandmother's house a thousand times. Every single time, there was a unicorn statue on her coffee table. But, this time, it is missing.
Miracle: The unicorn has vanished.
- You've gone to your favorite restaurant a hundred times for dinner. They have opened at 5pm on the dot every time. But, this time, they open at 5:10.
Miracle: The restaurant's being closed for 10 extra minutes.
- Every person you've ever known or heard of has taken at least 5 minutes to run a mile (and often much more). You hear of someone who has run a mile in 4 minutes. Miracle: Unnatural speed of a human being.
- Every person you've ever met has, at most, been able to climb to the top of a "14-er", a mountain whose elevation is between 14,000 and 15,000 feet. Then, you hear of someone who climbed Mt. Everest, which is over 29,000 feet.
Miracle: The existence of a mountain so tall, and the ability to climb it.

If Hume means that we should not believe things that are “contrary to experience” then LOTS of things will be contrary to experience. According to this view, all of the above would be “miracles” that we should dismiss. In fact EVERY new thing we ever experienced would be a “miracle”. If you had never had a banana before, then all fruit would have the property “tasting like {x, y, z, ...}.” But, a banana would be a fruit that would NOT have the property of “tasting like {x, y, z, ...}”—that is, it would be a fruit with a flavor unlike any you had ever tasted. But, then, such a flavor would be a MIRACLE. Clearly, this definition will not do.

Peter van Inwagen gives another example, supposedly of Thomas Jefferson being very Humean about the testimony of a rock falling from the sky:

- At a museum, when presented by a tour guide of a rock that had supposedly fallen from the sky, Jefferson claimed something like, “None of my experiences of the sky are ones where rocks have fallen from it. But, many of my experiences of men are of them lying. Therefore, since I should believe in whatever is most in alignment with my experiences, I refuse to believe that this rock fell from the sky.”

As it turns out, the rock was a meteorite.

Hume himself even discusses an example of someone from India (where water never gets cold enough to freeze) being told that water is sometimes found in a solid form (your textbook deletes most of this discussion though). Such a claim would be totally contrary to that person’s experiences. Therefore, according to the argument above, they should dismiss the account of ice.

Replace “Contrary to Experience” with “Unreasonable to Believe”? One suggestion might be to replace the term in this way. In that case, P1 would read as, “Any report of a miracle is necessarily a report of some event which it is unreasonable to believe actually occurred.”

First, it is unlikely that this is what Hume meant. Second, on this interpretation, P1 now “begs the question” (i.e., assumes the very thing to be proven).

Conclusion: Premise 1 is false. Therefore, the argument is unsound.

Begging the Question?: Furthermore, we might accuse Hume’s argument of “begging the question”. For note that, if Hume’s argument is correct, then, even if an account of a miracle is TRUE, we would be irrational to believe in it—just as Jefferson ought to have dismissed the report of the rock falling from the sky—since miracles are by definition contrary to experience. This may seem like a bad result. Is it?

2. Objections: Here are some objections on Hume's behalf.

First, Hume surely does not mean that a miracle is just whatever is contrary to ANYONE's experiences. For, in that case, sunlight would be contrary to a cave hermit's experiences, and therefore a miracle. Rather, Hume probably means something more like "contrary to the COLLECTIVE's experiences." His response to the India-ice problem seems in line with this. For, he says that, if the Indian man was taken to the North, he would see that water freezing into ice was not contrary to experience at all. Rather, it had been only contrary to the experiences of people IN INDIA.

Second, Hume might even be able to respond that ice was NOT contrary to the experiences of the Indian man. For, though his experiences gave him some evidence that water never spontaneously becomes solid WHEN IT IS WARM, the claim being made to him is that "water becomes a solid at very cold temperatures". But, having never experienced these cold temperatures, he has no basis upon which to say what happens at them (or else, perhaps he should dismiss the idea even that the cold temperatures themselves exist!).

Third, perhaps most importantly, is that all of the examples above are cases of LAW-LIKE generalities that are not actually laws. Laws come in the form "All F's are G's." But, not all occurrences of this form are in fact laws. For instance, though it might be true that "All instances of this restaurant opening are instances that occurred at 5pm", this is not a LAW of nature. On the other hand, "All human bodies are objects that are compelled to stay on the ground" is true and is thought to express a LAW, or at least one instance of a law—namely, the law of gravity. That is, there is some fundamental feature of reality that GUARANTEES that massive objects attract one another. But, there is no law that guarantees that my favorite restaurant opens at 5pm every day.

So, what Hume may be able to say is that miracles necessarily conflict with our experiences of the LAWS of nature.

Rebuttal: Interestingly, Hume himself did not believe in laws. Rather, he thought EVERYTHING was an "accidental regularity"—that is, a regularity that is not guaranteed by some fundamental feature of reality. But, for those who find this third response attractive, they will have this problem: They will need a way to distinguish laws from accidental regularities. What is it that makes "This store opens at 5pm every day" different from "Massive objects attract" (if anything)? Surely, we must not say that the former can have exceptions while the latter cannot—for then, we have already ruled out the possibility of miracles from the start!

Some Miracle Case Studies

1. The Legend of Saint Francis Xavier: In the reading by A.D. White, he documents the growth of a legend: The legend of Saint Francis Xavier.

Eventually, Xavier is said to have raised the dead, healed the sick, learned languages with no study, turned salt water into fresh, and glowed with the light of God on various occasions. Interestingly, however, there are NO accounts of these events during the lifetime of Xavier—not even in his own letters to others, and letters to him. In fact, quite the CONTRARY! Xavier laments in his letters that no miracles occur during his time; that this gift must have been something that God only gave to Christians in the early days of Christianity, 1500 years prior.

Here is one example of how the legend grew over time. Originally, Xavier himself wrote about the great difficulty of learning the language of the Japanese people, and claimed to have used interpreters, signs, pictures, gestures, and anything he could to convey his message. But, a mere 130 years after his death, the gift of “tongues” is attributed to Xavier, such that he knew the Japanese language fluently without ever having studied it:

In the early biography [1594], Tursellinus writes. “Nothing was a greater impediment to him than his ignorance of the Japanese tongues; for, ever and anon, when some uncouth expression offended their fastidious and delicate ears, the awkward speech of Francis was a cause of laughter.” But Father Bouhours, a century later [1682], writing of Xavier at the same period, says, “He preached in the afternoon to the Japanese in their language, but so naturally and with so much ease that he could not be taken for a foreigner.”

It is very interesting to note that, from the time of his death in 1552 until 1682, 130 years later, accounts of Xavier’s miracles began to pop up, and over time were RADICALLY multiplied and improved. White writes:

At first [1550’s] it was affirmed that some people at Cape Comorin said that he had raised one person; then it was said that there were two persons; then in various authors - Emanuel Acosta [1571], in his commentaries written as an afterthought nearly twenty years after Xavier's death, De Quadros [1555], and others - the story wavers between one and two cases; finally, in the time of Tursellinus [1594], four cases had been developed. In 1622, at the canonization proceedings, three were mentioned; but by the time of Father Bouhours [1682] there were fourteen - all raised from the dead by Xavier himself during his lifetime...

2. The Harvard Prayer Study: The largest scientific study of the efficacy of prayer to date, over 1,800 patients undergoing coronary bypass surgery participated in a study where some were prayed for and others were not. Results showed that complications occurred in 59% of those that were prayed for, and in 51% of those that were NOT prayed for. 2.4% of the prayed-for group died within 30 days of surgery, while 2.3% of the NOT-prayed-for group died within that time frame.

3. The AWARE Near Death Experiences Study: Sam Parnia has been researching near-death experiences for over a decade. Patients who have been declared clinically dead and later resuscitated often claim to have traveled through a tunnel toward a light, where they felt intense love and peace. Strangely, these people's brains were completely inactive during this period. How were these memories (of events that occurred when their bodies were brain dead) formed? WHEN were they formed?

Many people who have had NDE's have also had "out of body experiences" where they floated around in the room that their body was in. They often even claim to have memories of things that were going on while their body was dead. Parnia is conducting a decades long experiment where he puts various pictures and targets in locations around hospital rooms where only people floating near the ceiling could see them. So far, no one who has had an out of body experience has seen the targets.

4. Conclusion: What should we draw from these two case studies?

On Xavier: It is interesting to note that, a mere 70 years after Xavier's death (in 1552), HUGE amounts of miracles are attributed to the man, and these accounts are sanctioned by the church (in 1622). But, the oldest fragments of manuscript that we have from Jesus' own life are from about 100 A.D.—also about 70 years after Jesus' death. What is more, the accounts of Jesus' life are 1500 years OLDER than the accounts of Xavier's life. Does this give us reason to doubt the credibility of the miraculous accounts of Jesus?

On Prayer: If prayer WORKS, as many theists claim, we would EXPECT the prayed-for group to have fewer complications and fewer deaths than the NOT prayed-for group. However, the number of complications and deaths in the two groups was about the same—the NOT prayed-for group actually did a little BETTER all around than the prayed-for group did. What should we conclude from this? Is this evidence that prayer has no miraculous effects on those whom we pray for?

On NDE's: If people truly ARE having out of body experiences (and these experiences are not just a fabrication of their brains), we should expect someone eventually to be able to describe the targets or pictures around the room. So far, no one has.