
David Hume's Discourse "On Miracles": An Evaluative Study

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Abstract

In this paper my aim is to discuss Hume's definition of miracles. I shall also address the problem of "causality" and "induction" as themes related to Hume's thesis on miracles, in order to have a better understanding of his position. This paper assumes the existence of God, as revealed in Christian Scripture, but does not have as its purpose the attempt to prove it, although God's existence and the working of miracles in this world are, without doubt, related. Finally, adopting an analytic and critical style, this work will assess the putative worth, if any, of Hume's anti-miracle arguments, with an advocacy for a synergy between faith and reason, in religious practices.

Keywords: Agnosticism, Discourse, Implications, Miracles, Religion, Theism.

1. Introduction

One of the most remarkable works of the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, is *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, and the tenth chapter of this work "On Miracles," contains some arguments which are often quoted to show that no evidence can satisfactorily prove a miracle. Hume maintained that whatever evidence exists that a certain phenomenon miraculously violates a scientific law is evidence as well that the scientific law in question is flawed or irrelevant. Hume seemingly had great confidence in this part of his work. He says at the beginning of the chapter:

I flatter myself that I have discovered an argument which, if just, will with the wise and learned be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently will be useful as long as the world endures; for so long, I presume, will the accounts of miracles and prodigies be found in all history, sacred and profane¹

2. Hume's Definitions of a Miracle

Hume gives two definitions of miracle, in different parts of his essay. The first is - "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature."² The second is - "A miracle is a transgression of a law of nature, by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent."

¹ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, Richard Taylor (ed.) *The Empiricist* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday Garden City, 1961), 110

² David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, Richard Taylor (ed.) *The Empiricist* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday Garden City, 1961), p. 114

This second definition is reflected in his footnote entry. Here is a more comprehensive text of his first definition of a miracle:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined... Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature... There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior.³

3. Reasons for His Anti-Miracle Stance

Hume was aware that no matter how scientific or rational a civilization became, belief in miracles would never be eradicated. Human nature is such that we love the marvelous and the wondrous. Human nature is also such that we love even more to be the bearer of a story of the marvelous and the wondrous. The more wondrous our story, the more merit both we and it attain. Vanity, delusion and zealotry have led to more than one pious fraud supporting a holy and meritorious cause with gross embellishments and outright lies about witnessing miraculous events. Hume begins his essay on miracles by praising Tillotson's argument as being "as concise and elegant and strong as any argument can possibly be supposed against a doctrine so little worthy of a serious refutation."⁴ Hume discredits the belief in a miracle because it goes against the laws of nature. Hume defines the laws of nature to be what has been "uniformly" observed by mankind, such as the laws of identity and gravity. He views society as being far too liberal in what they consider to be a miracle. He gives the reader four points to support his philosophy in defining a true miracle, or the belief in a miracle. These points of Hume, lead us to believe that there has never been a miraculous event established. Hume's first reason in contradicting a miracle is that throughout history there has not been a miraculous event with a "sufficient number of witnesses". He questions the integrity of mankind and how we can trust the testimony of men. Throughout the passage, Hume is constantly looking for proof to support a miracle. He asks questions such as: Who is qualified? Who has the authority to say who qualifies? As there are no plausible answers to these questions, the validity of having witnesses to miracle becomes impossible.⁵ Hume's second reason in contradicting the validity of a miracle is that he views all of our beliefs, or what we choose to accept, or not accept as a result of "past experience and what history dictates to us". Furthermore, he tends to discredit an individual by playing on a human being's consciousness or sense of reality. An example of this is when words such as the individual's need for "excitement" and "wonder" arise from miracles. Even the individual who cannot enjoy the pleasure immediately will still believe in a miracle, regardless of the possible invalidity of the miracle because it leads the individual to feel a sense

³ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, pp. 114-115

⁴ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 109

⁵ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 161

of belonging and a sense of pride. These individuals tend to be the followers within society and will believe faster than the leaders in the society.⁶ Hume's third reason for discrediting the belief in miracles, is on the issue of "testimony versus reality." He says:

It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous events, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous ancestors; or if civilized people have ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from these barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with that inviolable sanction and authority, which always attend received opinions.⁷

In any case, many of the miraculous events which happened in past history would not be considered a miracle in today's world, or at any other time in history. The reality most people believed at that period, as a result can be considered lies or exaggerations. Hume discredits the miracle as to the time period in which the miracle is taking place, the mentality, or the reality of individuals at that given time. He says that humans have a propensity towards the marvelous and though this inclination may occasionally be checked by the senses and by our learning, it can never be thoroughly extirpated from human nature.⁸ Fourthly, David Hume argues that all world religions make claim to miracles. "All the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts, and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite to each other."⁹ This means that miracles have the propensity to be contradictory, (or self-cancelling). He then goes ahead to make the point that their conflicting claims cancel out one another, that two witnesses in a court of law giving conflicting testimony would both be disregarded by the court.

4. A Critical Assessment of Hume's Discourse "On Miracles"

Hume is a skeptic of miracles. He claims that it may be possible for a miracle to exist. However, he says that there can never be proper evidence to provide rational acceptance of miracles. Thus, even if miracles existed, they could never be proven. Hume also attacks the testimony of those who report miracles. Hume asserts, "We may observe in human nature a principle which, if strictly examined, will be found to diminish extremely the assurance, which we might, from human testimony, have, in any kind of prodigy."¹⁰ A testimony may not be entirely accurate because the surprise and wonder of an apparent miracle may invoke emotions that cause the person to believe in the miracle, without exacting necessary scrutiny. However, he does not claim that they are impossible, just improbable. Hume contends that there exist uniform laws of nature. These laws are derived from uniform experience. A miracle, on the other hand, provides a contradiction to the uniform experience. Hume notes, however, that laws do not guarantee conformity, leaving the possibility of miracles. Hume uses the example of the resurrection of a dead person. He states that through experience we know that no person has

⁶ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, pp. 117-118

⁷ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 119

⁸ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 119

⁹ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 122

¹⁰ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 117

risen from the dead. If a person were to rise from the dead, this would constitute a miracle. Recognizing the improbability of a miracle, Hume invokes "the hidden variable thesis," which means miracles, as violations of natural law, are less probable than any set of natural events required to explain the known facts.

Essentially, there must be some other variable operating that is within the realm of the law of nature that would explain an apparent contradiction to our law of nature. In the aforementioned example, the apparent resurrection of a dead person might result because the person was not really dead, various nerves in the body were still operating, resulting in motion, or the person who reported this miracle was lying. Thus, Hume's explanation of the laws of nature, and the improbability of miracles, is rooted in his empiricism. They are based on prior experiences, which allow us to form the laws of nature. These uniform experiences also permit Hume to discredit the possibility of miracles. Hume defines miracles as violations of the laws of nature, derived from our experience over time. If the definition of a miracle is further expanded to represent an occurrence that was just improbable (without any violation of any laws of nature), then the power of Hume's argument would be diminished. Bertrand Russell was reportedly once asked what he would say to God if he were to find himself confronted by the Almighty about why he had not believed in God's existence. He said that he would tell God "Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence!"¹¹ But perhaps, if God failed to give Russell enough evidence, it was not God's fault. We are inclined to suppose that God could satisfy Russell by performing a spectacular miracle for Russell's benefit. But if the reasoning in David Hume's epistemological argument against belief in miracles is correct, then no matter how hard God tries, God cannot give Russell an evidentially justified belief in Himself by performing miracles. According to Hume, no matter what miracles God performs, it is always more reasonable to believe that the event in question has a natural cause and is not miraculous. Hence, if Russell needs a miracle to believe reasonably in God, then Russell is out of luck. Russell cannot complain about God's failure to provide evidence, since none would be sufficient. Also, God cannot complain about Russell's failure to believe. Hume's argument is actually directed against testimony-based belief in the miraculous, although others have extended the argument to the case of miracles directly experienced.¹² It proceeds by two steps. The first step is an argument for the claim that the antecedent probability of an event's occurrence diminishes the credibility of testimony to it. That is, we must not only consider the credibility of the testifier, but also the antecedent probability of that which is testified to. The second step in Hume's argument is a defense of his claim that the miraculous nature of a purported event makes its antecedent probability as small as could possibly be imagined; that any combination of natural events, however antecedently improbable, is antecedently more probable than a scenario involving supernatural intervention. If this argument is successful, then Hume has successfully impugned the rationality of anyone (including millions of Christians who believe in the resurrection of Jesus) who believes that a miracle has occurred.

¹¹ Wesley Salmon, "Religion and Science: A New Look at Hume's Dialogues," in *Philosophical Studies* 33 (1978), p. 176.

¹² Michael Root "Miracles and the Uniformity of Nature" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (October 1989), pp. 338-339.

In recent years, several attempts have been made to bring considerations based on Bayes' theorem to bear on Hume's essay. But while Bayesian theory explains clearly how one goes from an antecedent probability to a subsequent probability, Bayesian theory is not so clear on how one establishes prior probabilities in the first place. Some Bayesians have attempted to defend a view that says that prior probabilities can and must be based on the frequency with which event-types occur in experience. But this theory of prior probabilities is fraught with difficulties. Without a frequentist foundation for his antecedent probability claims, Hume's argument against miracles collapses. Hume's argument against miracles makes its case against miracles on the grounds: 1) that one must consider the antecedent probability of the event reported as well as the credibility of the reporter, and 2) that miracles, as violations natural law, are less probable than any set of natural events required to explain the known facts. The first of these principles is elucidated by Hume as follows:

When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should have really 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 the testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.¹³

Physicists do not believe the facts of physics merely because of personal testimony from other physicists; rather, they believe because they can do the experiment for themselves. Furthermore, if one does not believe, one can do the experiment and see for oneself. No lesser standard of proof is acceptable for scientific explanations of the world. Whenever someone asks if miracles are probable (or believable) they are invariably asking whether there is a God, and that is the crux of the problem. Hume at the start of his inquiry dismisses God as a criterion for support. Hume says we should judge miracles only on the basis of natural evidence - what we find occurring in nature as repeatable. The less common an instance, the less rational it is to believe. The miracles of the Bible are not a legalistic claim (did Judas really sell Jesus out?) but a natural claim (did Jesus violate the laws of buoyancy and walk on the water?). Personal testimony is sufficient for the law, in most cases, but it is insufficient for any kind of description of physical reality.

Prosecutors prefer DNA when they can get it, and only replicability can stand for that, and miracles, by definition, are not replicable. Attempts to consider David Hume's work on miracles from a Bayesian¹⁴ perspective have focused on the issue of whether Hume can rightly be considered proto-Bayesian, how exactly to interpret him in terms of the calculus of

¹³ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 116.

¹⁴ Treating probability as a logic, Thomas Bayes defined the following: $Pr(A|B)=Pr(B|A)Pr(A)/Pr(B)$. For example, the probability that the weather was bad given that our friends played soccer can be calculated as: $Pr(\text{play soccer in the rain})Pr(\text{rain})/Pr(\text{play soccer})$. On-line. URL: <http://www.gamcthorv.nct/Dictionarv/BavcsTheorcm.html>. Bayesianism is the philosophical tenet that the mathematical theory of probability applies to the degree of plausibility of statements, or to the degree of belief of rational agents in the truth of statements; when used with Bayes theorem, it then becomes Bayesian inference.

probability, and hence how to judge whether his arguments are valid or not. There has been some further discussion of whether testimony for miracles can provide evidence of the existence of God. An important point for further consideration is the impact on the argument of multiple testimony, understood either in the sense of several independent testimonies for a single miracle or of independent testimonies for a number of miracles.¹⁵ In a work written by Mackie,¹⁶ there is reference to the strong evidential force of two independent testimonies for a single miracle, and Earman¹⁷ has provided some analysis of this from the perspective of the probability calculus. Also, Sorensen¹⁸ has noted the possibility that combined testimony for many miracles, may yield a high probability that at least one has occurred. However this latter claim has been dismissed by Schlesinger¹⁹ on the grounds that the occurrence of one miracle is not independent of the occurrence of any other. Both Schlesinger and Swinburne have argued that testimony for miracles provides for the existence of God. This position has also been challenged by Otte,²⁰ but the main issue here is that miracles do happen, but the reality of their occurrence must be understood within a certain frame of reference. Once we miss the specific framework within which the occurrence of miracles is posited, then the whole argument and discussion becomes very ambiguous. The consequence of this would be to direct arguments against Hume, for what he did not imply. The Humean argument for his thesis on miracles relies on the premise that in determining the credibility of testimony to any extraordinary event (miraculous or merely anomalous), "the evidence, resulting from testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual."²¹ Ironically, both advocates and critics of Hume's "diminution principle" have invoked a Bayesian model of conditional probabilities in evaluating his theory of testimony.

While this fashionable approach is consistent with Hume's focus on epistemic probability, or probability relative to evidence, it seems to be the case that both sides of the debate assume without argument that all epistemic gradation of probability should be evaluated using a Pascalian model of probability (that is, probability based on the mathematical calculus of chance, of which Bayesianism is one form).²² Bayes' theorem isolates three factors: the prior probability of the hypothesis (in this case, that a miracle has occurred) given background knowledge, the probability of the evidence (in this case testimony) given both the hypothesis and background knowledge, and the probability of the evidence given background knowledge alone. So, to apply Bayes' theorem to a piece of testimonial evidence, we need to ask 1) how antecedently probably the event testified to is, 2) how likely it would be for this piece of testimony to be put forward given the fact that the hypothesis is true, and 3) how likely this piece of testimony would be regardless of whether the hypothesis is true or not. An antecedently

¹⁵ Rodney D. Holder, 'Hume on Miracles: Bayesian Interpretation, Multiple Testimony, and the Existence of God,' *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, (1998): Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 49-65.

¹⁶ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1982), p. 30.

¹⁷ John Earman 'Bayes, Hume, and Miracles', *Faith and Philosophy*, (1993): 10, pp. 293-310.

¹⁸ Roy A. Sorensen, 'Hume's Skepticism about Miracles', *Analysis*, (1983): 43, p. 60.

¹⁹ George N. Schlesinger, 'The Credibility of Extraordinary Events' *Analysis*, (1991): 51, pp. 120-26. Also (cf. Schlesinger, 'Miracles and Probabilities', *Nous*, (1987), 21, pp. 219-32

²⁰ Richard Otte, 'Schlesinger and Miracles' *Faith and Philosophy*, (1993): 10, pp. 93-8

²¹ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 113

²² Dorothy Coleman, "Baconian Probability and Hume's Theory of Testimony" *Hume Studies*, (2001): 27, pp. 195-226.

improbable event can be strongly supported by testimonial evidence if it is highly probable that the event would not be testified to if it did not occur and would be testified to if it did occur. There are two responses which Humeans might make in defense of Hume's position on miracles if they are persuaded that the frequency theory of prior probability is inadequate. One is to challenge the coherence of the employment of probabilistic reasoning on the part of persons committed to the possibility of evidence for miracles. It might be suggested that, in virtue of our custom-and-habit imposed commitment to a law-governed universe, persons are committed to a Humean view of miracles, even though, incoherently, they may treat miracles at times as if they were epistemic possibilities or even actualities. Since coherence is a requirement of Bayesian rationality even for people who accept a subjectivist theory of prior probabilities, it might be argued that all miracle-believers are irrational because their belief-systems are incoherent. But it is not clear why it is incoherent to suppose that the vast majority of events, but not absolutely every, event has a natural cause. That we usually ignore, for practical purposes, the possibility of supernatural intervention does not mean that we are committed to assigning a vanishing probability to supernatural intervention. Some possibilities are sufficiently remote as to make it unreasonable to try to do anything about them, but not so remote as to require us to disbelieve strong testimony to these possibilities. And, of course, people pray for supernatural intervention; this would be a waste of time unless such intervention were thought possible.

Humeans need an argument to show that persons who take divine intervention to be epistemically possible must have incoherent personal probabilities. Such an argument, to my knowledge, has not been provided by Hume or by anyone else. Michael Root offers an argument in support of Hume that, in essence, makes a charge of self-referential incoherence against those who employ testimony to support belief in miracles. According to the view Root attributes to Hume, testimony owes its force to the "principle of the uniformity" of Nature. If we are to make an inference from the truthfulness of past testimony to the truthfulness of present or future testimony, we need to assume that nature is uniformly lawful; that what goes on in the future will resemble what went on in the past. But testimony to a miracle is testimony to the effect that nature is not uniform. Thus, if nature is uniform, then testimony to the miraculous is false, but if nature is not uniform, then testimony is not a reliable source of information, and therefore it fails to justify belief. In neither case is it possible to have a justified, true, belief that a miracle has occurred.²³ But, perhaps there is something inherent in supernatural hypotheses that make it the case that they are empirically empty. Keith Parsons, in criticizing attempts to provide scientific support for theistic beliefs, writes:

Science is unavoidably naturalistic, or atheistic if you prefer. Science operates in terms of scrutable, independently testable entities that operate in accordance with knowable regularities. Supernatural beings, on the other hand, are essentially mysterious; claims made on their behalf are not independently checkable, and there are no "laws of super nature" governing their behavior. Furthermore, "explanations" in terms of supernatural entities are inevitably post hoc and untestable. In other words, proponents of supernaturalistic theories can

²³ Michael Root "Miracles and the Uniformity of Nature," pp. 337-338.

glibly account for things we already know, but become strangely silent when asked to predict something new, something that would allow their theory to be tested.²⁴

Even though the locus of discussions of miracles is historical rather than scientific, if it is the case that supernaturalist hypotheses are inevitably untestable, this would mean that supernaturalist claims cannot be genuinely supported by evidence. One cannot, of course, generate deterministic laws governing divine conduct, but one cannot generate such laws concerning the behavior of subatomic particles, either. One can, of course, form probabilistic expectations concerning the conduct of subatomic particles, but, as we have noted, one can generate probabilistic expectations concerning divine conduct as well. The "laws" of supernature that Christians or other theists are inclined to postulate may not be as detailed as the laws scientists hope to discover in nature, but they leave theistic claims open to confirmation and disconfirmation. Secondly, someone who postulates a miraculous account of something may try to claim that by admitting a miracle in the background, we render a number of natural events more open to naturalistic explanation. It is a mistake to think that just because a theory involves commitment to the supernatural, that the supernatural content is all that there is to the theory. A supernaturalist theory can have a naturalistic "trail" of evidence. Those who believe that Jesus was raised from the dead believe that Jesus' body will not be found. If it is found (or if it had been found in the first century), traditional Christian belief will be faced with a devastating disconfirmation. If believers choose (or had chosen) to maintain their belief somehow in the face of this kind of counter-evidence, this would perhaps show their irrationality, but would not show the untestability of their belief per se.

The foundations of modern secular and atheist agnosticism are traceable to the Sophists and to Socrates in the 5th century BCE; not, of course, the "Socrates" of Plato's Republic, the would-be founding father of an ideal totalitarian state, but the shadowy historical Socrates supposedly hailed by the oracle of Apollo's Delphi as the wisest of men, who knew what, and how much, he did not know. But, the most important and immediate source of such agnostic ideas was surely Hume, while Hume's successor Kant may well be seen as the prime philosophical inspirer of religious reactions against them. Agnosticism is the view or belief that the existence of God, of the divine or the supernatural is unknown or unknowable. Thus, human reason is incapable of providing sufficient rational grounds to justify either the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist. Agnosticism, (from Greek *agnōstos*, "unknowable"), strictly speaking, is the doctrine that humans cannot know of the existence of anything beyond the phenomena of their experience. The term has come to be equated in popular parlance with skepticism about religious questions in general and in particular with the rejection of traditional Christian beliefs under the impact of modern scientific thought. In the section "Of Miracles," Hume takes his stand on the agnostic principle: "A wise man...proportions his belief to the evidence." He then argues that no attempt to appeal to the alleged occurrence of miracles, conceived as authoritative endorsements by a power beyond and greater than nature, can succeed in establishing the truth of a claim to constitute special divine revelation. Hume's

²⁴ Keith Parsons, "Is there a Case for Christian Theism?" in J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist: The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990) p. 189.

distinctive contribution here is methodological: the contention that the principles and presuppositions upon which the critical historian must rely, in first interpreting the remains of the past as historical evidence and in then building up from this evidence his account of what actually happened, are such as to make it impossible for him “to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion.”

Hume’s critique, attempts, in the manner of Locke and later Kant, to determine the limits of man’s possible knowledge. Two sections of the *Enquiry* refer directly to these limits: “Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State” and “Of Miracles.” In the first, Hume starts from his basic empiricist claims: that, generally, “matters of fact and real existence” cannot be known a priori (prior to and apart from experience); and that, particularly, one cannot know a priori that anything or kind of thing either must be or cannot be the cause of any other thing or kind of thing. These considerations dispose of all the classical arguments for the existence of God other than the argument from design, that the structure and order of the universe and its constituents imply a design and a designer. But here, Hume urges, argument from experience can find no purchase because both the supposed effect, the universe as a whole, and the putative cause, God, are essentially unique and incomparable. In this two-phase attack, Hume challenged what was in his day, and long remained the standard framework for systematic Christian apologetics. Indeed, the contrary contentions, of the possibilities, both of developing a positive natural theology and of establishing the authenticity of a supposed revelation by discovering endorsing miracles, were defined as essential and constitutive dogmas of Roman Catholicism by decrees of the First Vatican Council of 1869–70. In view of the future history of Western thought, it must be emphasized that Hume’s position, like Kant’s, was (officially) that knowledge in this area is practically impossible. Skeptical propaedeutics to faith are now out of fashion. But the same challenge applies to all of the various responses to Kant’s famous invitation: “I have found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*). The way of religious discovery may indeed be mystical experience, personal encounter with the divine Thou, or whatever else. But there is, and can be, no substitute for a man’s having some sound grounds for identifying his experience not only as really mystical, but also as an experience of the real God; and for holding his faith in some putative revelation, not only to be real religious faith but also to be faith in a genuine revelation of the Real.

5. Related Themes (Causality and Induction) In Hume’s Discourse “On Miracles”

Hume advances two radical empiricist definitions of “cause.” The first definition mentions a de facto regularity in the succession of events, while the second mentions a sort of subjective necessitation in the mind of the observer determining it to expect an event type-B, upon observing of an event type-A. None of these definitions mentions an objective necessitation between the event which is the cause, and the one which is the effect.²⁵ Hume excludes terms like “force,” “power,” “energy,” “necessary connection,” etc., from his definition of cause. In the *Treatise On Human Nature*, Hume defines a cause to be “an object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all objects resembling the former are placed in like relations

²⁵ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, pp. 76-77

of precedency and contiguity to those objects, they resemble the latter."²⁶ Hume says that the traditional²⁷ view of causation confuses a mental habit with an "alleged" real relation. For Hume, causation is rooted in belief. A "belief is a lively idea associated with a present impression. We see cause A and effect B in "constant conjunction", so we believe that B always follows A, and ascribe an additional "necessary relation" independent of our senses and our ideas. We extend the usefulness of the factual information that comes from the senses by making inferences based on a belief in "cause and effect." Hume rejects the Aristotelian fourfold division of cause: efficient, final, material and formal. He believes there is only one sort of cause, and the notion of a cause he has is that of one event following another in accordance with a rule or regularity. In speaking about cause, Hume says:

[A] 11 causes are of the same kind, and that in particular there is not foundation for that distinction, which we sometimes make betwixt...efficient causes, and material, formal, exemplary and final causes...[0]ur idea of efficiency is derived from the constant conjunction of two objects [events].²⁸

Hume's formulation of the principle of causality is co-extensive with what he refers to as the maxim of the uniformity of nature. He claims that we cannot know the principle of causality or the uniformity maxim by mere intuition, and its denial is not a self-contradiction. Consequently, to say that some new object or event does not have a cause (i.e. does not follow upon another cause according to a rule), is not an incoherent assertion. Any attempt to use induction to establish the principle of causality (or the uniformity of nature maxim), is question begging, for all induction presupposes that principle. Hence, the principle of causality and the uniformity of nature maxim have no rational justification, although it is "natural" for us to form our expectations in accordance with them.²⁹ David Hume attacks efficient causality in the following words:

When we look towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequent of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other. The impulse of one billiard-ball is attended with motion in the second. This is the whole that appears to the outward senses. The mind feels no sentiment or inward impression from this

²⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects & Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Vol. 1. (London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1882), p. 170

²⁷ The traditional view of causation has three elements. In addition to the cause and effect, there is a third element: a necessary, real relation between the cause and the effect that is contributed by reason. Also the supposedly Humean position has three basic assertions: that there is nothing more to causality than the regular sequence of phenomena, that such a regular sequence cannot give a necessary connection, and that, consequently, we can have no certain knowledge of causal relations.

²⁸ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects & Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, p. 171

²⁹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects & Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, pp. 78-82. "Hume's eight rules for identifying cause and effects involves the notion of contiguity, but this notion of contiguity (that cause and effect must be contiguous in space and time), is dropped in the Enquiry.

succession of objects; consequently, there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, anything which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connection.³⁰

For Hume, the constant conjunction, [contiguity]³¹ and regularity between events and things is all that we can know of causation, and all that our idea of causation can amount to. Such a lean conception robs causation of all its force and some later Humeans like Bertrand Russell have dismissed the notion of causation altogether as something akin to superstition. Now, the process of induction is based upon the laws of causation. Hume's notion of causation leaves out the notion of objective necessity, but simply emphasizes regularity. Hume has a nominalist bent, which excludes essences. The problem of justifying induction still stares us in the face. Hume's view seems to be that we (as well as other animals) have an instinct-like belief that the future will resemble the past based on the development of habits in our nervous system, a belief that we cannot eliminate but which we cannot prove to be true by any kind of argument, deductive or inductive, just as is the case with regard to our belief in the reality of the external world. So, if Hume's view on miracles is dependent upon his analysis of causation, but inconsistent with that analysis, then assuming the correctness of the analysis, his argument against the credibility of testimony to the miraculous would not be sound. Alternatively, if his view on miracles is dependent upon his analysis of causation, and that analysis is unsound, then his view on miracles will also be unsound.³² Regarding the possibility of miracles, Hume assumed that Almighty God can never change the regularities of natural processes, that He is a prisoner of His law (or that He does not exist). But if a Creator does exist, it stands to reason He could change the regularities of the natural process. He says that, even after we have experienced the operations of cause and effect, our conclusions from that experience are not founded on (a priori) reasoning, or any process of the understanding. From available indications, he claims that there is no known connection between the sensible qualities and the secret powers and consequently, that the mind is not led to form such a conclusion concerning their constant and regular conjunction, by anything which it knows of their nature. Hume explains that humans do not know the 'necessary connection' between objects and thus do not know the relationship between cause and effect.

This quite simply is the problem of causation - that until we know 'what exists' and the 'necessary connections' between these things that exist, then it is impossible for humanity to have certainty of knowledge. This then leads to the problem of induction, for if we do not know the a priori cause of events then we have no principles from which to logically deduce our conclusions. We are left simply observing that one event follows another and seems connected, but we do not know how or why, thus we must depend upon repeated observation (induction) to determine the laws of nature (the current state of modern physics) and hence tacitly assuming (without reason) that the future is like the past. Miracles are not just purposeless and bizarre scientific oddities, but occur in such a way that purpose is attached to them by virtue of when and why they occur. So, they occur within a significant historical-religious context. Miracles,

³⁰ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 63

³² Michael P. Levine, *Hume and the Problem of Miracles: A Solution*, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p. 3

given their divine agency, are rationally inexplicable by scientific laws.³³ By Hume's rule of induction, experience confers a probability on a presumptive law. Hence, the probability of a miracle is flatly zero. We are more likely to accept the testimony of one person known for honesty and integrity over the evidence of five known liars. The quality of the evidence is what counts. Arguments against miracles based upon the workings of nature typically reveal an underlying philosophy of naturalism. Hume's argument was against proving a miracle, not against the reality of miracles per se. His main point is that we cannot know whether a miracle occurred because our knowledge is gleaned from evidences, and the preponderance of evidence is always for natural law and against miracles. So, apart from the weakness of evidence found in any reported miracle, Hume adds that there has not been a miraculous event with a sufficient number of witnesses. He questions the integrity of mankind and how we can trust the testimony of men because men can sometimes be delirious or deceptive. He raises questions such as: who is qualified? Or who has the authority to say who qualifies to provide proof to support a miracle? Finding no answer to these questions, he reduces belief and witnessing to miracles to a natural "passion of surprise" in man, and wonder arising from miracles because. He asserts: "even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events, of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at a second hand or by rebound; and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others."³⁴ This passion for surprise and wonder inherent in human nature is capitalized on and exploited by religious people who indulge in telling fantastic stories of miraculous occurrences to promote the cause of their religious beliefs. This implies that "a religionist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no reality; he may know his narrative to be false, and yet persevere in it, with the best intention in the world for the sake of promoting so holy a cause." His claim that religious people are usually prepared to tell lies in order to propagate their religion may be true but not in all cases. Some religious people may be prepared to do that, but it would be false to say all religious people are dishonest and are prepared to tell lies as a means of propagating their faith.

Contrary to Hume's argument from barbarism, critics have argued with facts that reports of miracles come from just about every nation. Different cultures and societies have reports of miracles and prodigies, even till this present time when the human society has developed with scientific knowledge, as such belief in miracles is not something due to ignorance as Hume thought. Also, in the most civilized and most learned societies today, like those of America and Europe, there are reports of miraculous cures performed by preachers, evangelists or prophets. These miraculous cures are reported to occur during public prayers, sermons or 'fellowship' gathering, American preachers and evangelists conducts 'miracle crusades' during which miracles are reported to occur. Hume's third reason in discrediting the belief in miracle is the problem of rival miracles. Miracles are 'contrary facts'. Different religions claim that miracles performed by members of their faith shows that their belief system is true, but they cannot all be true at the same time so they cancel each other out. However, critics have argued that the fact that two or more different religions report miracles which are contradictory may mean that

³³ Francis J. Bekwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles, A Critical Analysis*, (New York: University Press of America, 1989), pp. 7-8.

³⁴ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, Richard Taylor (ed.) *The Empiricist* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday Garden City, 1961), p. 394.

they cannot both be true but does not mean, as Hume claims, that they cancel each other out—that is, that they are both necessarily untrue. We may be even more inclined in such an instance to question the evidence and the testimony but we cannot rule out the possibility that one is true. Another possible conclusion to come to is that the miracles in question did both (or all), in fact, occur and that their precise significance is still a matter for theological debate within and between the respective traditions which they are claimed to uphold. In summary, the thrust of Hume's argument is really that miracles may not be strictly speaking, impossible, but they are impossible to prove and much more unlikely to have happened than to have happened. Although the traditional conception of miracles as 'acts or interventions of God which is not contrary to nature, but only to our knowledge of nature' might seem irreconcilable with our modern understanding of science, for science proceeds on the assumption that whatever events occur in the world can be accounted for in terms of other events that also belong to the world, nonetheless the interlocking relationship between the immanent and transcendental realms, cannot be ignored. Contrary to Hume's argument, matters of religion are not simply faith-based. They are also reason-based (ratiocinative), since we relate with an intelligent, rational supernatural divine being (God). Faith and reason are complementary, not orthogonal to each other.

6. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has shown that Hume's arguments seek to show not that a miracle is impossible but that due to the poor quality of human testimony we would be foolish to base religious beliefs upon them. If we cannot know necessary causation, then we may find it difficult to rule out the miraculous. And if we rule out the miraculous, then we must be able to do so on the basis of knowing the necessary causation between events. Hume's theory of induction, seems to disallow his rejection of accounts to the miraculous. Or rather, the account should, again by his own principles, be based solely on the reliability of witnesses, since we cannot in an a priori way, rule out as impossible (and hence a break in "laws of nature") any given reported prodigy/miracle. We might, of course, choose to reject the miraculous explanation, but we may not, however, discount the event reported itself. David Hume's canons of testimonial evidence, the distinctions made between the logic of ordinary testimony and the logic of miracle testimony, all reflect his strong empiricist tendency and the attempt to dislodge any available framework, upon which testimony to miracles might achieve a high probability of occurrence. St. Thomas Aquinas says "those things are properly called miracles which are done by divine agency beyond the order commonly observed in nature" (*praeter ordinem communiter observatum in rebus*).³⁵ For him, the existence of an effect does not follow the existence of its cause, but is simultaneous with its *per se* cause. He establishes the "principle of causality" by arguing that a thing cannot change itself because to change is itself is to acquire an act that it lacks, and it cannot give itself what it does not have. Therefore, everything that changes is necessarily dependent for its new actuality on a cause other than itself. If God exists, then He serves as the transcendent cause to produce events in the universe which are incapable of being produced by causes within the universe (that is to say, events which are naturally impossible), for it is to such a personal, transcendent God that the orthodox defenders of

³⁵ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, chapters 98-103.

miracles appeal. Miracles, unlike some other events are not events which are logically impossible in the way that it is logically impossible for a circle to be a square. Over the ages, this phenomenon has been understood as a deviation from the usual course of natural events and was interpreted to serve religious purposes. Hume, however identified deviation from nature's course with violations of natural law and argued that just as a uniform past experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle. If Hume were right we would be forced to reject a large number of scientific developments which have taken place over the last few centuries on the basis that they were not in keeping with natural law. Given a God who conserves the world in being, moment by moment, who is omnipotent, and free to act as He wills, the orthodox thinkers seem to be justified in asserting that miracles are really possible. Surely a Humean does not want to rule out all testimony about natural prodigies.

However, in so doing, he must then be at least theoretically willing to admit evidence purporting to support the working of a supernatural agent. A prodigy, wonder or miracle might lead the Humean to claim that some other natural force, whose regular operation is as yet not noticed, was operative in specific cases. As such, they do not necessarily prove God to have been at work. Likewise, a believer is not committed to claiming that all events for which he cannot provide a natural explanation are ipso facto miracles. They might simply be natural prodigies. They might be the work of unknown natural forces. They might be the work of intelligent spiritual forces (e.g. demons or angels) which, being works of singular intelligent agents, do not admit of regularity or prediction, but which are also strictly speaking natural, and not supernatural. Finally, they may be the work of God. Now, in a Thomistic framework, the believer is able to distinguish a true miracle only by the light of faith. That is, it is the believer's share (however limited) in God's light, which enables him/her to perceive, however dimly, the causal work of God. Nonetheless, the unbeliever can always "hold out" for an as yet undiscovered natural agency sufficient to explain the miracle. A miracle therefore, is a supernaturally (divinely) caused event - an event (ordinarily) different from what would have occurred in the normal ("natural") course of events. It involves the introduction of a higher law into the regularities observed in the created order. Unlike the Humean position, I would prefer the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of causality, which makes provisions for supernatural supervenience, in nature.

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