



The Question of Miracles: the contemporary influence of David Hume

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Fundamental question: what is the nature of God's relationship to the world?

Christian claim: God is Creator and Upholder. Therefore he is responsible for the structures of the universe and the regularities that govern their behaviour. The heart of Christianity is the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ – these do not fit into the regular patterns of nature and are rejected by many on the basis of arguments going back to David Hume.

Historical context: the Enlightenment (Age of Reason)

The clockwork universe of Newton (1687 *Principia Mathematica*) and Laplace – used as evidence that God exists BUT also that he does not intervene in its working – Deism.

Benedict de Spinoza (*Tractatus theologico-politicus* 1670): 1) nothing happens contrary to unchangeable order of nature since they flow from necessity of divine nature. 2) miracles break the laws of nature and spoil the evidence for the existence of God!

Hume (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*)

'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 as can be imagined ... It is no miracle that a man,

seemingly in good health, should die on a sudden: because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed, in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation.'

A. Argument from the uniformity of nature:

§ Miracles are violations of the laws of nature

§ These laws have been established by 'firm and unalterable' experience

§ Therefore, the argument against miracle is as good as any argument from experience can be

B. Argument from the uniformity of experience:

§ Unusual, yet frequently observed, events are not miracles – like a healthy person suddenly dropping dead

§ A resurrection would be a miracle because it has never been observed anywhere at any time

§ There is uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise it would not be called miraculous

The argument from the uniformity of nature

Hume's inconsistency: Hume elsewhere denies the uniformity of nature claiming that just because the sun has been observed to rise in the morning for thousands of years, that does not mean that we can be sure that it will rise tomorrow (*An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 4.1 p.15). If this is so Hume cannot rule out miracle – indeed he has undermined the very concept of a law of nature upon which science depends. Hume's denial of causality also undermines his argument: 'all events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem conjoined, but never connected.'

Are miracles 'violations of the laws of nature'

Argument 1. Hume says that accounts of miracles 'are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations' (*op.cit.* p.79).

Fallacy. In order to recognise some event as a

miracle, there must be some perceived regularity to which that event is an apparent exception! You cannot recognise something which is abnormal, if you do not know what is normal. Example: 1) virgin conception of Jesus; 2) conception of John the Baptist.

Argument 2. Now that we know the laws of nature, belief in miracles is impossible.

Fallacy. The danger of confusion between legal and scientific use of word law. Why it is inaccurate and misleading to say that miracles 'violate' the laws of nature. It is rather, that God feeds new events into the system from time to time. There is no alteration to or suspension of the laws themselves.

'If God annihilates or creates or deflects a unit of matter, He has created a new situation at that point. Immediately all nature domiciles this new situation, makes it at home in her realm, adapts all other events to it. It finds itself conforming to all the laws. If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any laws. The laws at once take over. Nature is ready. Pregnancy follows, according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born' (C.S Lewis, *Miracles*. p.63).

Hume's argument from the uniformity of experience

Miracles are exceptions to what normally happens. What does Hume mean by 'uniform experience'? It is one thing to say 'Experience shows that such and such normally happens, but there may be exceptions, although none has been observed, that is, the experience we have had has been uniform'. It is an entirely different thing to say, as Hume seems to: 'This is what we normally experience, and we must always experience it, for there can be and are no exceptions'.

The problem: how does he know? In order to know that experience against miracles is absolutely uniform, he would need to have total access to every event in the universe at all times and places, which is, self-evidently, impossible. Therefore, Hume cannot know that miracles have never occurred. He is simply assuming what he wants to prove – that nature is uniform, and no

miracles have taken place!

The only real alternative to Hume's circular argument is to be open to the possibility that miracles have occurred. That is a historical question, and not a philosophical one, and depends on witness and evidence. But Hume does not appear willing to consider the question of whether there is any valid historical evidence that a miracle or miracles have taken place. He simply denies it, claiming that experience against miracles is 'firm and unalterable'. But, we repeat, his claim has no substance unless he has demonstrated that all reports of miracles are false. He singularly fails even to attempt to do this, so there is simply no way in which he can know the answer.

In particular, he simply says that no resurrection has ever been observed, without making the slightest attempt to discuss the actual historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

Hume's criteria for evidence, and the credibility of witnesses

a) that 'a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence' (*op.cit.* p.73).

b) 'No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavours to establish... 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 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' (*op.cit.* p.77).

Hume's criteria applied:

1. To the contention that the disciples were guilty of fraud

'Easter is not primarily a comfort, but a challenge. Its message is either the supreme fact in history or else a gigantic hoax... If it is true, then it is the

supreme fact of history; and to fail to adjust one's life to its implications means irreparable loss. But if it is not true, if Christ be not risen, then the whole of Christianity is a fraud, foisted on the world by a company of consummate liars, or, at best, deluded simpletons. St. Paul himself realised this when he wrote: *If Christ be not risen, then our preaching is meaningless, and your faith worthless. More, we are found to be false witnesses.*' (Sir Norman Anderson *The Evidence for the Resurrection* (Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, 1990, p.1).

2. To the cause of the rise of Christianity

'If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole the size and shape of the Resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with? ... the birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church... remain an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the Church itself' (C.F.D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, London, SCM, 1967, pp. 3,13).

Hume's bottom line:

§ The laws of nature describe regularities.

§ Miracles are singularities, exceptions to the regular course of nature and so are exceedingly rare.

§ Evidence for what is regular and repeatable must always be more than evidence for what is singular and unrepeatable.

§ The wise man bases his belief on the weight of evidence.

§ Therefore no wise man can ever believe in a miracle.

Anthony Flew on 3). He claims that: 'The proposition reporting the (alleged) occurrence of the miracle will be singular, particular and in the past tense' and deduces that, since in any case, propositions of this sort cannot be tested directly, the evidence for them will always be immeasurably weaker in logical strength, than the evidence for general and repeatable propositions (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p.252). But what about singularities that scientists accept – like the Big Bang?!

Further defects in Hume's view: 1) It does not

appear to be falsifiable in the sense that neither Hume (nor Flew) appear to be able to conceive of an observation which would prove it false. 2) One cannot simply judge the likelihood of the occurrence of the resurrection of Jesus on the basis of the observed very high probability of dead people remaining dead. What they should have done (but did not do) was to weigh the probability of the resurrection of Jesus against the probability of the tomb of Jesus being empty **on any other hypothesis** than the resurrection. 3) The rejection of ideas not conformable with experience would lead, not only to the rejection of the resurrection but of key ideas in physics – eg the counterintuitive nature of quantum mechanics.

The real issue: miracles threaten the foundations of naturalism. Hume and Flew's axiom is that nature is all that there is and that there is nothing and no one outside nature that could from time to time intervene in nature. This is their concept of the uniformity of nature and it is simply a belief, not a consequence of scientific investigation.

The Christian view: 'If all that exists in Nature, the great mindless interlocking event, if our own deepest convictions are merely the by-products of an irrational process, then clearly there is not the slightest ground for supposing that our sense of fitness and our consequent faith in uniformity tell us anything about a reality external to ourselves. Our convictions are simply a fact about us – like the colour of our hair. If Naturalism is true we have no reason to trust our conviction that Nature is uniform. It can be trusted only if quite a different metaphysic is true. If the deepest thing in reality, the Fact which is the source of all other facthood, is a thing in some degree like ourselves – if it is a Rational Spirit and we derive our rational spirituality from It – then indeed our conviction can be trusted. Our repugnance to disorder is derived from Nature's Creator and ours' (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, p.109).

Hume's criteria for witnesses applied to the resurrection of Christ

1. The number and variety of witnesses

The inadequacy of hallucination theories

2. The consistency of the testimony

'True, the discovery of the empty tomb is differently described by the various Gospels, but if we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to any other ancient literary sources, then the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was, indeed, found empty.' (Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels*, Charles Scribner & Sons, New York, 1977, p.176).

3. The possible bias of witnesses

4. The attitude of the witnesses

Note: 'Uniform experience' shows that resurrection *by means of a natural mechanism* is extremely improbable, and we may rule it out. But Christians do not claim that Jesus rose by some natural mechanism. They claim something totally different – that God raised Him from the dead. And if there is a God, why should that be judged impossible?

Bertrand Russell on Hume

'Hume's philosophy, whether true or false, represents the bankruptcy of eighteenth-century reasonableness. He starts out like Locke, with the intention of being sensible and empirical, taking nothing on trust, but seeking whatever instruction is to be obtained from experience and observation. But having a better intellect than Locke's, a great acuteness in analysis, and a smaller capacity for accepting comfortable inconsistencies, he arrives at the disastrous conclusion that from experience and observation nothing is to be learnt. There is no such thing as a rational belief. 'If we believe that fire warms, or water refreshes, 'tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise.' We cannot help believing, but no belief can be grounded in reason ... The growth of unreason throughout the nineteenth century and what has passed of the twentieth is a natural sequel to Hume's destruction of empiricism.' (Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London, George Allen and Unwin, pp.645-646).