

Hume on Violations of the Laws of Nature

“I should not believe such a story were it told me by Cato.”

— Common Roman proverb

Introduction

Humans by our very nature rely on the testimony of others to go about our lives. You rely on the testimony of engineers that your car’s engine will not explode when you turn the ignition; professors that they will teach you in an unbiased, good faith manner; and police officers to uphold law. On this topic, Hume writes, “we may observe that there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life than that which is derived from the testimony of men and the reports of eyewitnesses” (Hume, 1748, p. 120). In a 2014 study, participants were told that a certain proportion (20, 50, or 80%) of a testimony they were about to hear was going to be a lie, and researchers found that participants were, even when told that what they were hearing included lies, biased towards believing things to be true (Street & Richardson, 2014). This intuitively makes sense. After all, humans are social creatures; disputing claims often creates unnecessary conflict.

This predisposition towards belief explains the proliferation of miracle stories and perhaps the whole of the Christian religion, as “the authority either of [Christian] Scripture or of [Christian] tradition is founded merely in the testimony of the Apostles who were eyewitnesses to those miracles of our Savior” (Hume, 1748, p. 118). It seems, at least according to Hume, much of religion is based on these shared miracle stories that are unfounded at best. We of course risk begging the question by assuming that reports of miracles are false from the outset, which leads us to our guiding question: is Hume’s definition of a miracle helpful? On page 124, Hume (1748) establishes his argument for why miracles cannot be used as evidence for claims, and why a miracle cannot occur; his argument is functionally: a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, and the laws of nature cannot be broken, so miracles cannot happen. A consequence of this line of reasoning is the immediate denial of any miracle one claims to have experienced. This paper aims to deconstruct this argument; we will show that it is vacuous in nature and unhelpful in arguments pertaining to the philosophy of religion.

Hume’s Argument

What follows is Hume’s argument in its entirety.

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. Why is it more than

probable that all men must die, that lead cannot of itself remain suspended in the air, that fire consumes wood and is extinguished by water, unless it is that these events are found agreeable to the laws of nature and there is required a violation of these laws or, in other words, a miracle to prevent them? Nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happen in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die all of 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 observe in any age or country. 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.

(Hume, 1748, p. 124-125)

Problems with Hume's Argument

The first sentence houses the definition Hume has for miracles: violations of the laws of nature. This definition, however, is problematic. Hume further claims, “nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happen in the common course of nature” (Hume, 1748, p. 125). **There are seemingly plenty of examples of violations of human nature that would not be considered a miracle, and there are similarly plenty of what may be considered miracles that are not inherently violations of the laws of nature.** For the former, imagine if an omnipotent god were to turn the water on Jupiter's moon Europa into wine for *one picosecond* (one trillionth of a second), too fast for anyone or anything to observe this. This would most certainly constitute a violation of the laws of nature, but would anyone really call this a miracle? Indeed, it seems miracles have some *experiential* aspect to them. For the latter, imagine any number of provable events that people have called miracles. An unlikely terminal illness cure, coincidentally meeting the love of your life on the bus, perhaps even getting an A on a philosophy paper you wrote the night before it was due. All of these are most certainly not violations of the laws of nature but could be described as miracles. Sulmasy (2007) proposes a strong alternative definition, which considers one's personal experience, stating, among other things, that a miracle, “must have been affirmed as a miracle by the community of believers to whom the message of the miracle must be addressed, at least indirectly” (p. 1).

Hume (1748) continues, “Why is it more than probable that all men must die, that lead cannot of itself remain suspended in the air, that fire consumes wood and is extinguished by water, unless it is that these events are found agreeable to the laws of nature and there is required a violation of these laws or, in other words, a miracle to prevent them?” (p. 124-125). In response, I ask: for the first discoverers of magnetism, would they not have thought that it was some form of miracle? Indeed, the ancient Greeks certainly thought that magnets were some

form of divinity (Curd, 2023). Of course, in contemporary times we now know magnets are a natural property of some metals. Experience like this leads humanity to the conclusion that any new, unexplainable ‘violations of the laws of nature’ that are observed are never miracles: they are just things that *science cannot explain yet*. Miracles are thus impossible and an empty, useless category.

Finally, Hume concludes his argument by writing, “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” (Hume, 1748, p. 125). If a definition rules out the existence of the experiences it was supposed to analyze, it is shutting down discourse before it even began. Hume is saying that any evidence for a miracle is inferior to the fact that a law of nature cannot be broken. Say an entire town were to be engulfed in flames, and all that it left is a single catholic church. Is this not a miracle? This is surely not against the laws of nature.

Conclusion

Hume writes, “Nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happen in the common course of nature” (Hume, 1748, p. 125). Everything happens in the common course of nature. Even unexplainable things. Therefore, nothing is a miracle. If Hume were to be confronted with this, he would most certainly agree, as this is the crux of his argument. However, this does not stop people from claiming that they experienced a miracle. Looking at religion from a psychological perspective, these experiences people are having ought not to be ignored. Many religious psychologists would agree; this is exactly what William James argues in his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902). I believe a miracle *should* be subjective: even if many believe they have experienced one, I should not be compelled to agree. A more inclusive definition of miracles would certainly aid discourse around religion and lead to more understanding to what people have gone through, something important in both the philosophy and psychology of religion.

References

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