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## The Concept of Miracle in Hume's Philosophy

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the definition of miracle and then to dwell on Hume's views on the term miracle. Controversy over the conception of miracle focuses primarily on whether a miracle must be, in some sense, contrary to natural law or be a violation of natural law. Hume's first argument regarding miracle attempts to show the impossibility of miracles and his second argues against the ability to know whether a miracle has ever occurred. Dwelling on the various definitions of miracle, this article will elaborate on Hume's ideas on miracle and criticisms leveled against them.

**Key words:** Miracle, D. Hume, Of Miracles, Natural law, Spinoza.

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## **The Concept of Miracle**

The word *miracle* originates from Old French, from the Latin word *miraculum* 'object of wonder,' from *mirari* 'to wonder,' from *mirus* 'wonderful'. The term is generally used by ordinary people for expressing the surprise felt when talking about the events which are extraordinary, because they do not conform to our knowledge of the world and its regularities; for example when someone survives a plane crash in a plane falling down from a few thousand meters, or when someone fully recovers from the final stage of cancer disease.

A common approach is to define a miracle as an interruption of the order or course of nature (Sherlock; 1843; 57). Some stable background is, in fact, presupposed by the use of the term, as William Adams (1767: 15) notes:

"An experienced uniformity in the course of nature hath been always thought necessary to the belief and use of miracles. These are indeed relative ideas. There must be an ordinary regular course of nature, before there can be anything extraordinary. A river must flow, before its stream can be interrupted."

However, this definition leaves us in need of a more precise conception of what is meant by "the order or course of nature". We might therefore try to tighten the definition by saying that a miracle is an event that exceeds the productive power of nature (Aquinas; 1905), where "nature" is construed broadly enough to include ourselves and any other creatures substantially like ourselves. Variations on this include the idea that a miracle is an event that would have happened only given the intervention of an agent not wholly bound by nature (Larmer; 1988; 9) and that a miracle is an event that would have happened only if there were a violation of the causal closure of the physical world (McGrew; 2013; 2).

Most often, however, the word "miracle" is used in a theological sense. It means that when describing an event as a miracle, we accept not only its extraordinariness but also the fact that it is the result of God's action. The very religious (theological) concept of miracle is still a matter of debate and of numerous discussions.

Indicated meaning “miracle” refers to its religious understanding. But we can distinguish the second one which could be described as a-religious understanding of that term, i.e., one which does not take into account God and acting of God or the religious importance of event. In both religious and non-religious sense of the word “miracle” we have the combination of words which require more detailed explanation. The situation is similar with respect to the dictionary definitions of the term “miracle”. Numerous and not always precisely defined expressions, such as: “an extraordinary phenomenon”, “exceptional”, “transcendental”, “mysterious”, “inexplicable”, “beyond the forces and abilities of nature”, and so on and so forth, all contain a wide range of problems concerning understanding the miracle. To provide an example, here are explanations given for the word "miracle" in 3 different resources;

(1) “... An unusual phenomenon ..., through which God shows something to people, and makes them full of admiration” (Leon Dufour; 1977; 201),

(2) “An event caused especially by God’s intervention, which is beyond the normal laws of nature and brings some religious message for the believers, both for the present and the future” (O’Collins, Farrugia; 1991; 55),

(3) “A marvel wrought by God, who as a Creator is able to interrupt the operation of ordinary natural laws. In popular speech, a miracle is an event in the physical world that cannot be explained by the known laws of nature” (New Standard Encyclopedia; 1998; 402).

Definitions of miracle made by various eminent philosophers and other leading figures also indicate diversity. According to John Macquarrie

"A miracle is an event that excites wonder. Certainly every event might be called a ‘miracle’...the word ‘miracle’ carries more than just this minimal sense. It is believed that God is in the event in some special way...and intends to achieve something special by the end of it" (Macquarrie; 1977; 247).

In chapter 6 of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Baruch Spinoza sets out to argue for the claim that nature cannot be contravened, but that she “preserves a fixed and immutable course,” in consequence of which a miracle is “a sheer absurdity.” (Spinoza; 1670/1862; 123, 128)

The notion that miracles break all laws of nature and science, and leave the viewer with no alternative explanation comes from Aquinas. Using its Latin etymology, Aquinas uses the

word 'miraculum' to show the 'wonder' of the situation : “*We wonder when we see an effect and do not know the cause*”.

Richard Swinburne (1970) suggested that a miracle might be defined as a non-repeatable counter-instance to a law of nature. If a putative law has broad scope, great explanatory power, and appealing simplicity, it may be more reasonable, Swinburne argues, to retain the law (defined as a regularity that virtually invariably holds) and to accept that the event in question is a non-repeatable counter-instance of that law than to throw out the law and create a vastly more complex law that accommodates the event.

In his work *God's Action in the World*, Maurice Wiles rejects the possibility that God directly intervenes in the world and therefore rejects the existence of miracles. Wiles accepts God as the sole creator of the world, yet believes He does not intervene in the world for a number of reasons. He believed we should not see God as playing an 'active role' but instead held the belief that God created the world as He wanted in its entirety; "the world as a whole [is] a single act of God" (Wiles; 1986; 29). Therefore, God would not undermine the natural laws that He created by intervening in the world. Wiles also argued that an Omni-benevolent God would not perform such trivial miracles as those which are normally observed: "...even so it would seem strange that no miraculous intervention prevented Auschwitz or Hiroshima, while the purposes apparently forwarded by some of the miracles acclaimed in traditional Christian faith seem trivial by comparison" (Wiles; 1986; 29).

James Keller states that "the claim that God has worked a miracle implies that God has singled out certain persons for some benefit which many others do not receive implies that God is unfair" (Keller; 1995; 55). British mathematician J. E. Littlewood suggested that individuals should statistically expect one-in-a-million events ("miracles") to happen to them at the rate of about one per month. By Littlewood's definition, seemingly miraculous events are actually commonplace.

Elbert Hubbard, American writer, publisher, artist, and philosopher, wrote "a miracle is an event described by those to whom it was told by people who did not see it (Hubbard; 1909). Stephen Evans stated 'obviously the miracles of a religion such as Christianity are not merely bizarre events or stunts. They have a function and a purpose, and usually that function is a revelatory one.'

Overall, whilst scholars agree on what a miracle is, there are many differences of opinion. Generally speaking though, a miracle must be brought about by God, it has to break the laws of nature in some way – there should be no natural, scientific explanation for what has happened, and it must happen for a reason – to fulfill God’s purposes.

### **Hume's View on Miracles and Arguments against it**

David Hume's definition of 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 imagine” (Hume; 1975; 114). This definition has been the focus of lively discussion ever since. Hume evidently means to denote something beyond mere changes in the regular course of nature, raising the bar higher for something to qualify as a miracle but also raising the potential epistemic significance of such an event if it could be authenticated. In other words, if Spinoza attacked the possibility of the *occurrence* of a miracle, Hume attacked the possibility of the *identification* of a miracle (Craig; 1986; 7).

Hume also explains miracle as follows: "there must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event. Otherwise the event would not merit that appellation." So "nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happened in the common course of nature" (Craig; 1986; 115).

Hume ends the first Part of his essay “Of Miracles” with a general maxim: The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), “That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish: And even in that case, there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior”.

Within this context, Hume's final argument can be summarized as;

- a) A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.
- b) Firm and unalterable experience has established these laws.
- c) A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence.
- d) Therefore, "the proof against miracles . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."

Hume's definition of a miracle is often criticized on various grounds. Sometimes the objection is made that miracles are not really violations or transgressions of natural laws. Since these laws are not prescriptive but descriptive, it is misleading to describe God's action in deviating from them on occasion as a violation of law. A useful point is being made here, and some people are no doubt misled by the connotations of the words "law" and "violation". However, what Hume and other philosophers mean by a violation of a natural law is simply an exception to the normal process of nature. This is quite consistent with a descriptive understanding of natural laws (Evans; 1985; 108).

Another objection to Humean definition argues that miracles are not really exceptions to the laws of nature. Natural laws describe what will occur given a particular set of initial conditions. When those conditions do not hold, the law is not applicable. When a miracle occurs, however, the initial condition will necessarily be different since God's special activity will be part of those conditions (Evans; 1985; 108). Therefore the law will not really be violated.

Hume's empiricism is not so radical as to require every individual to engage in such a process themselves in order to justify every single empirical proposition they believe. He says of "the testimony of men" that "there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life" (Hume; 1975). Hume has no problem using "the testimony of men" as a means to provide justification for belief in empirical propositions. However, he does not regard all testimonies as equally reliable. He subjects various testimonies to the scrutiny of probability. Here we quote at length:

"We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary with too violent asseverations... Suppose, for instance, that the fact, which the testimony endeavors to establish, partakes of the extraordinary and the marvelous: in that case the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual. The reason, why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any *connexion*, which we perceive *a priori*, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them. But when the fact attested is such a one as has seldom fallen under our observation, here is a contest of two opposite experiences; of which the one destroys the other, as far as its force goes, and the

superior can only operate on the mind by the force, which remains. The very same principle of experience, which gives us a certain degree of assurance in the testimony of a witness, gives us also, in this case, another degree of assurance against the fact, which they endeavor to establish; from which contradiction there necessarily arises a counterpoise, and mutual destruction of belief and authority.” (pp. 85, 86)

Hume proceeds to press this line of reasoning against all accounts of miracles. The ideas of extraordinary and marvelous as used by Hume are helpful in understanding what he means by miracles. Let us say for the sake of clarity that at least part of what appears to make an event a miracle in Hume’s thought has to do with is the extraordinary way in which an effect is produced from a cause that has never been observed by the particular individual that reads or hears an account of such an event. But as noted above, Hume appeals to the idea of “the laws of nature,” in explicating the concept of miracle as well. This notion inevitably brings more than just the individual knower into the situation. For all the difficulty faced in explicating the idea of “the laws of nature,” at the very least the explanation of such laws involves the empirical endeavors of a scientific community, not just a single individual. This involves the testimony of others, perhaps even testimony to extraordinary and marvelous phenomenon. So let us say that the idea of a miracle must extend beyond what is regularly observed by any one individual, and includes the regular experiences of a community of which an individual is a part. To this we would add another helpful statement by Hume, “There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation” (p. 87).

Remarkably, the discussion of Hume on miracles has not been confined to, or even principally concerned with, whether or not Hume was correct in his argument against justified beliefs in miracles — and/or the possibility of justified belief in miracles. Instead, philosophical discussion has focused on exegetical issues concerning exactly what Hume was arguing. There is, for example, still no generally accepted view on the fundamental points of whether his argument (Part I of his essay) against the justified belief in miracles on the basis of testimony is (i) meant as an *a priori* or *a posteriori* argument; (ii) if that argument can be, or is meant to be, generalized to include first-hand experience of an allegedly miraculous event; or indeed, (iii) if his argument, whether regarded as *a priori* or *a posteriori*, is meant to establish that one can never be justified in believing in a miracle on the basis of testimony. Hume does not appear to claim that miracles are impossible — only that justified belief in a

miracle on the basis of testimony (may be) impossible. His argument is basically epistemological. There are, however, grounds for supposing that a miracle is not even possible on Hume's account — at least not given his wider empiricist views.

Hume's position on miracles cannot be properly understood apart from his analysis of causation, *a posteriori* reasoning, and indeed the most fundamental element of his empiricism — his analysis of "impressions" and "ideas". In fact, Hume's position on miracles has never been properly understood because its connection to his views on causation has never been adequately examined. There is considerable controversy over what Hume's position actually was — let alone what his argument for that position is. One can offer one highly abbreviated interpretation (see Levine; 1989; 1-52).

To understand Hume on miracles the following question must be answered. Why did he think that one could justifiably believe that an extraordinary event had occurred, under certain circumstances, but that one could never justifiably believe a miracle had occurred? The proposed interpretation of Hume's analysis of miracles in relation to his analysis of causation and his wider empiricism yields the only plausible answer to this question. This interpretation also shows why it makes no substantial difference whether we interpret Hume's argument in Part I "Of Miracles" against the possibility of justified belief in testimony to the miraculous as an *a priori* argument or an *a posteriori* argument since the arguments essentially coalesce.

### **Impact of "Of Miracles"**

Hume's critique of the credibility of reported miracles provoked a tidal wave of responses, of which the most important are Adams (1767), Leland (1755), Douglas (1757), Price (1777), and Campbell (1762/1839). There is not yet anything approaching a comprehensive survey of these responses. For limited but still useful historical discussions of Hume and his influence, see Leland (1755; 47–135), Lechler (1841; 425 ff), Farrar (1862: 148 ff), Stephen (1876: 309 ff), Burns (1981: 131 ff), Craig (1985), Houston (1994: 49–82), Tweyman (1996), Earman (2000), and Beauchamp's introduction to the critical edition of Hume's *Enquiry* (Hume 1748/2000).

The Humean objection has also been vigorously contested as destructive not only of miracle stories but of common sense as well. The 19th century saw a proliferation of satires in



which Humean scruples about accepting testimony for extraordinary tales were applied to the events of secular history, with consequences that are equally disastrous and humorous. (Whately; 1819/1874, Hudson; 1857, Buel; 1894) Whately's satire, which is the most famous, "establishes" on the basis of many historical improbabilities that Napoleon never existed but was a mythic figure invented by the British government to enhance national unity. Each of these satires makes the same point. One may legitimately require more evidence for a miracle story than for a mundane story (Sherlock; 1729/1843; 55), but in exaggerating this sensible requirement into an insuperable epistemic barrier, Hume and his followers are applying a standard that cannot be applied without absurdity in any other field of historical investigation.

A curious feature of recent discussions is that Hume's critique has itself come under heavy fire and is now viewed in some quarters as requiring defense. For a range of views on the matter, see Levine (1989: 152 ff), who maintains that Part 1 contains an argument but that the argument is a failure, Johnson (1999), who argues that Part 1 is confused and unclear and that various attempts to clarify it have failed to elicit a compelling line of argument, Earman (2000), who argues that Part 1 is an "abject failure," and Fogelin (2003), who aims to rehabilitate Hume against the critiques of Johnson and Earman in particular (McGrew, 2013, 21-28).

### **Conclusion**

General arguments against miracle claims fall into two broad classes: those designed to show that miracles are impossible, and those designed to show that miracle claims could never be believable. Whereas even the definitions of *miracle* made by various eminent philosophers and other leading figures indicate diversity, the most significant attempt of questioning the concept of miracles and the idea of the laws of nature was the interpretation made by David Hume, who regarded them as nothing more than the psychologically felt regularity of the occurrence of the events, actually having no necessary connection with one another. Such an interpretation actually excludes the possibility of the events being the violation of the laws of nature, because each event which does not conform to the regularity postulated is, in fact, the same as other phenomena and it cannot be in conflict with them.

Hume's "Of miracles" is a rich, fascinating and insightful essay, though the lessons to be learned from it are not always quite those that Hume intended. Presented as a direct application of his theory of induction, its main weaknesses derive precisely from the

inadequacies of that theory, which emphasizes crude extrapolation from experience to the neglect of other considerations that are now often expressed in terms of “inference to the best explanation”.

The Humean objection to miracles has been vigorously contested as destructive not only of miracle stories, but of common sense as well. For the evidence for a miracle claim, being public and empirical is never strictly demonstrative, either as to the fact of the event or as to the supernatural cause of the event. It remains possible, though the facts in the case may in principle render it wildly improbable, that the testifier is either a deceiver or himself deceived; and so long as those possibilities exist, there will be logical space for other forms of evidence to bear on the conclusion. Arguments about miracles therefore take their place as one piece in a larger and more important puzzle.

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