

Miracles

In this section of the module we will be focusing on a single text: David Hume's chapter 'Of Miracles' in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [Document 25]. This chapter has played a crucial role in all subsequent philosophical discussion of miracles. While many think there is much to be criticized in Hume's discussion, few would deny that he presents a challenge to belief in miracles that must be taken seriously.

Hume's conclusion

Before looking at Hume's argument I would like briefly to consider the conclusion. I would like you, then, to read paragraph 35 (running from the bottom of p 87 to the top of p 88) and the first sentence of the following paragraph. When you have done so, make a note, in your own words, of the conclusion that Hume draws from his argument. In particular, does Hume claim to have established that miracles cannot, or do not, happen?

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He doesn't, it seems to me, make either of those claims. The strongest claim that he seems to make is that a miracle can never be *proved* to have happened. Indeed, it is possible that the claim that he is making is even weaker than that. I have two points in mind there. First, he writes: 'no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle'. His claim may, then, simply be that *testimony* - the reports of others - can never furnish me with proof that a miracle has occurred; and that, perhaps, leaves open the possibility that if I did, myself, witness a miracle that could provide me with adequate grounds for believing that a miracle has occurred. Second, to his denial that a miracle can ever be proved to have occurred he adds: 'so as to be the foundation of a system of religion'. Now it is possible that we should read these words as some form of qualification of his claim. Can you see what I mean?

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Imagine that we are confronted with an atheist or agnostic whom we are trying to convert to, say, Christianity. We can ask: could we offer such a person strong grounds for thinking that a miracle has occurred, and so for thinking that there is truth in our system of religion? It is clear, I take it, that Hume is denying this possibility. He is insisting that one cannot give grounds for religious belief by proving that miracles have occurred: a proof of miracles cannot 'be the foundation of a system of religion'. One might, however, think that that is a very different matter from offering *someone who already has religious belief* grounds for thinking that a miracle has occurred.

Consider an analogy. Suppose that someone is sceptical about my claim that 50 people were killed in violence in the Middle East over the weekend. Most people would accept as pretty decisive grounds for thinking that this is so the fact that the major newspapers report that this has happened. Suppose, however, that we are confronted with someone who insists that all of the media in this country are controlled by a dictator who, for his own political ends, systematically feeds the

people wholly fabricated stories. Such a person will be quite unmoved by our observation that 50 deaths are reported in all the papers. We might add that, given his background beliefs, he is *right* to be unmoved by this.

The example might suggest an idea that could be articulated in this way. When it is suggested that certain evidence does or does not provide proof that something happened, we always need to ask: *proof to whom?* Whether it provides proof may depend on where the person to whom we are offering the evidence already stands. Thus, it is possible that, while no appeal to evidence for the occurrence of miracles could provide strong grounds for the belief that there is a God, *given* religious belief the same evidence might provide adequate grounds for the conviction that a miracle has occurred: someone who already has religious belief might be rationally convinced by such evidence. Whether or not Hume means to leave open this possibility, it is one to which we will have to return.

Hume's argument

Evidence and testimony

We must turn now to Hume's argument. Please read Part I of this chapter: pages 72-7. As you do so, make a note of what you take to be the decisive steps in this argument, and ask yourself what we should make of them. I will then offer my own brief commentary.

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Hume's first point is that 'a wise man ... proportions his belief to the evidence': when trying to decide whether something has happened he balances the evidence on both sides and comes down on the stronger. Hume suggests that what is involved here is essentially a matter of weighing the number of 'experiments' that *support* the conclusion against the number that count *against* it. Suppose, for example, that I am wondering whether the school bus was on time this morning. It seems reasonable to suppose that – at least in the absence of any other relevant factors, such as bad weather or a report from my child who had to travel on it – the rational way to reach a conclusion is by balancing the number of occasions on which it has arrived on time in the past against the number on which it has not: if, in my experience, it has been on time on 100 days, and late only once, that is pretty strong grounds for thinking it was probably on time today.

You might suspect that I have deliberately chosen an example that seems to fit Hume's picture of how we go about forming rational beliefs. You would be right! On the face of it there are many cases that do not seem to conform to Hume's model of simply counting up the number of pieces of supporting evidence and weighing that against the number of pieces of opposing evidence. For example, suppose, again, that I am wondering whether this morning's bus was on time. In my experience, four days out of five it has been late; but my daughter tells me that it was on time today, and I believe her. On the face of it, there is, here, no considering 'which side is supported by the greater number of experiments'. I take her word for it, even though in my own

experience the balance of cases, considered on its own, would support the belief that the bus was late.

Hume, however, suggests that in this case too there is, in effect, a weighing of numbers of ‘experiments’ on both sides. Please now re-read paragraph 5, on p 74, picking out the key thought and, if you have not already done so, summarising it in your own words.

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Hume’s key idea here is articulated in this sentence: ‘It will be sufficient to observe, that our assurance in any argument of this kind is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses’. He is suggesting that I only believe – or, perhaps, only *reasonably* believe – what another tells me because in my past experience there has generally been a conformity between what people have said and how things actually are. I have found that, generally, when someone has told me that it is raining it is indeed raining, when someone has told me that the ball is in the kitchen the ball is indeed in the kitchen, and so on. Of course, I have not found this to be universally so. Nevertheless, it is because, and only because, there has generally been such conformity that it is reasonable for me now to accept someone else’s word that a certain thing has happened.

Now this allows Hume to argue that, despite initial appearances, there is in such cases a weighing of ‘experiments’ on both sides in much the way he has suggested. We might think of it like this. In my experience, 9 times out of 10 if someone says a certain thing happened it did indeed happen: so the fact that my daughter says the bus was on time today is, considered on its own, strong grounds for believing that it was. Also, in my experience, the bus is late 4 times out of 5; and that, considered on its own, is pretty strong grounds for believing that it was late today. I must, then, weigh the grounds for against the grounds against; and, given the figures in this case, the upshot is that it is reasonable to believe that the bus was on time today.

That, of course, is still a very schematic and simplified example. Hume will insist that in practice we do not, and should not, work with a simple, standard figure for the reliability of testimony. In the following paragraphs he touches on some of the complications. For example, it is a matter of common experience that some people are more reliable than others, that when people *want* something to be so they are more prone to believe, and so say, that it is, that when people speak with hesitation what they say is less likely to be true, and so on. All of this, however, is, Hume suggests, just refinement to the basic principle that testimony must be weighed in the evidential balance, on the basis of its experienced reliability in the past.

Miracles and testimony

It is against this background that Hume asks us to consider a case in which one is told of a miracle. He asks us to imagine a case in which the testimony, considered in its own terms, is of the very highest quality: let us suppose that 50 people, all of good character, tell me with quiet confidence that, together, they saw a man walk on water

or rise from the dead. Other things being equal, that is strong grounds for my believing that what they say happened did happen. But, of course, in this case other things are *not* equal. As we might equally put this: while I certainly have strong grounds for thinking that this thing did happen, I also have strong grounds for thinking that it did not. I would like you now to summarise, in your own words, what, in Hume's view, those grounds are.

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'A miracle' Hume writes 'is a violation of the laws of nature'. And a law of nature, Hume suggests, is something that we have consistently found to happen in all of our experience. We only call something – for example, that unsupported bodies near the surface of the Earth fall – 'a law of nature' if it is something that we have uniformly found in our experience to be so. But that means that there is always an extremely powerful evidential case – as powerful as such cases can be – *against* the suggestion that a law of nature has been violated. We could only reasonably believe that a particular claimed miracle occurred if there was a still more powerful evidential case in support of the view that it did. As Hume expresses the matter: '[N]o 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 endeavours to establish.'

Given all of this, does it follow immediately that I can never have adequate grounds to believe that a miracle has occurred on the basis of what others tell me?

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I don't think – and nor, it is clear, does Hume – it follows *immediately*. For example, one cannot argue: 'The case against is always of the strongest possible kind: completely consistent experience. So no matter how consistently reliable I have found, in general, the reports of witnesses of an event to be, the evidence on this side can never be *stronger than* the evidence on the other.' One cannot argue like that, for we must, one might think, take into account, not simply how *consistent* has been my experience on either side, but also how *much* experience I have had on either side. If my experience of a particular phenomenon – for example, things falling – has been consistent but limited, it could, perhaps, be outweighed by equally consistent but more extensive testimony on the other: perhaps by *thousands* of people whom I have always found to be utterly reliable swearing that the man simply rose up into the air.

Scepticism about miracle reports

I do not know if it strikes you that anything of that form really is a serious possibility in the case of any purported miracle. You will not be surprised to learn that Hume does not. Please now read Part II of his discussion.

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The main thrust of Hume's argument here is straightforward. He offers a variety of grounds for judging that we never have anything like the strength of testimonial

evidence that would be needed to balance the consistent experiential case against the occurrence of a particular claimed miracle. His main points are, very briefly:

- (i) In practice there are never a sufficient number of witnesses of good-sense, education and learning.
- (ii) We have a good deal of evidence that people are extremely credulous when it comes to reports of extraordinary events. Surprise and wonder are such agreeable emotions, people will be inclined to believe whatever gives rise to them. And once religion gets into the picture people will believe just about anything.
- (iii) We have plenty of evidence that it is among ignorant and barbarous nations that such stories get passed on most easily.
- (iv) For every miracle story in one religion, there are many others in other religions. Since not all of these religions can be true – for they contradict each other – not all miracle stories can be true. In that sense, testimonial evidence for a miracle in Islam contradicts testimonial evidence for a miracle in Christianity; and so each dramatically weakens the force of the other.

You may think those arguments a mixed bag. There is, however, no need for us to examine them in detail. For if Hume's argument in Part I of this paper is sound, the task of Part II is readily accomplished. We all have a good bit of evidence for the claim that people are, for one reason or another, not always totally reliable in their reports of things they have (or claim to have) witnessed. Given the terms Hume has set up in Part I, that, by itself, is almost certainly sufficient to imply that testimonial evidence for, say, a case of levitation is always going to be outweighed by my direct experiential evidence of unsupported bodies falling. If there are further doubts, of the general kind Hume raises, surrounding reports of wondrous and unusual events – and I, myself, certainly find some of his points very convincing – that can only strengthen what is already a very powerful case.

Doubts about Hume's argument

I want to raise two general doubts about Hume's whole approach to this issue. The first is a doubt about his understanding of the place that testimony has – or should have – in my attempts to come to a reasonable belief about something that has happened; the second, a doubt about his understanding of what it would be for something to be a miracle.

My experience of the workings of the world

Hume's central thought might be presented in this way: 'When someone tells me of a miracle that she says she observed – say, a dead man returning to life, or someone walking on water – I have to balance, on the one side, my uniform experience that these things don't happen against, on the other, my general, but rather mixed, experience that if someone says something is so it is. Given the character of my experience on either side of the case, it is clear that I can never be in a position to believe that a miracle has occurred on the basis of what I am told by another'. I would like you to make a note of any difficulties that you see in the above reference to 'my uniform experience that these things don't happen'.

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A difficulty that strikes me particularly forcefully is this. I am asked to balance my experience of uniformities in nature against my experience of the reliability of testimony. But my *personal* experience of the workings of the world is, in fact, severely restricted. For example, I have, myself, had extremely little direct contact with human corpses. In the contact that I have had with them I have not myself checked closely that what I was confronted with was a corpse: I have relied on the assurances of others that the person really was dead. And while it is true that none of those that I have observed subsequently got up and walked around, it has to be added that I didn't hang around for long: my confidence here is again dependent on the assurances of others. My *direct* experience in this area is, then, so limited it might, it seems, be readily outweighed by a number of people telling me that they witnessed a man rise from the dead.

I am, of course, convinced that it is a pretty safe rule of thumb that corpses do not come back to life.¹ But my basis for this judgement is largely *what others have told me*. Now this point is a general one. My own, first hand, experience of the workings of nature is very limited. My picture of the kinds of thing that can and cannot happen is dependent, to quite a high degree, on things that others have told me, and on assumptions that others make in my conversation with them. (You might think here of your assumption that virgin births are not to be expected in the normal course of events.) Testimony, then, plays a crucial role on *both* sides of any argument for and against the occurrence of an extraordinary event: I have to balance the fact that this man told me he witnessed a woman levitating against my deep assumption – derived in part from others – that this kind of thing just cannot happen. If we present the issue, as Hume does, in terms of my balancing my personal experience of uniformities in nature against my experience of the reliability of testimony we are *misrepresenting* it.

While we all have a rich picture of how the world works - of the kinds of thing that can or cannot happen - that picture is derived, in large measure, from what others have told us. It is important to remember here the way in which, from our earliest years, we take in from others ideas about how things go: ideas about what can be expected to happen, about the relative likelihood of particular kinds of event, and about what is just out of the question. Such ideas are built into the way that events are reported to us and into the way we may ourselves be corrected ('Don't be silly Johnny. Pigs can't fly.') But also, and just as important, they are built into the many different kinds of stories – narratives that stand outside the practical needs of the moment - that are, for most of us, a pervasive feature of our early experience. It is difficult to envisage an upbringing in which such stories have no place; but equally, there is no single set of stories that must have that place in any childhood. For example, while for many in western society the Gospel narratives have a more or less central place in their early upbringing, for others – perhaps an increasing number – they have very little place.

¹ You may be wondering whether it is not part of the definition of 'dead' that the person does not recover: so that if someone who appeared to be dead got up and walked around we would deny that he had really been dead. There is, I think, an important point there; but it is one that I must leave you to reflect on yourself.

That, of course, is a particularly pertinent example. One of the things that mark off one who has religious belief from one who does not is the place that particular authorities – such as the Bible or the parish priest – have in his life. For the Christian, the Bible may play a crucial role in conditioning his understanding of *the kinds of thing that can happen*. One who has read the Gospels, and taken them in in a certain spirit, has a picture of the world within which, for example, faith can itself be a source of healing. One who is not already a believer, and so who has a quite different relation to the Gospel narratives, may have a picture of the world within which that kind of thing is simply not to be taken as a serious possibility.

Suppose now that we ask: ‘How is it rational to respond to a report of a healing at Lourdes? Is it rational to treat this report as grounds for accepting that an illness was cured in a way that defies medical explanation?’ Perhaps the answer to that question will have to be of the form: that depends on the picture of what is possible that you bring to such a report. And that picture is, inevitably, strongly conditioned by those whose words have, as one might put it, authority for you. If you are starting from a position within which medical science is the sole authority on questions to do with healing, you have little choice but to judge that the report is too fantastic to be believed. But if your understanding of what is and is not possible is partially conditioned by other authorities – by, for example, the Bible – the case may meet the standard set by Hume for the acceptance of a miracle report: that is, that ‘the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish’ (p 77). For if you take the Gospel narratives in a certain way you will accept that this kind of thing *does* sometimes happen; and so that it is *not* obvious that one who reports such an event must have got it wrong.

But that raises the question: can anything helpful be said about whose words *should* have authority for you? We can approach this question through a consideration of Hume’s discussion of why I should trust anything that *anyone* says to me.

My grounds for accepting testimony and memory

Consider what Hume says about our grounds for trusting what others tell us: ‘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.’ (75) Do you find any problem with this suggestion?

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The problem, or at least one problem, lies with the word ‘*we*’. How do *I* know that *we* – that is, people in general – find a conformity between testimony and reality. If I have any basis for my confidence that *others* generally find that what people tell them is true, that basis must, it seems, include the fact that these others *tell me they have found this*. That is to say, the basis Hume offers each of us for thinking that what people say is generally reliable *presupposes* the reliability of what others have told me. (The situation here is roughly the reverse of that of the man who believed that all Cretans are liars on the basis of the fact that one of them had told him they were.)

The following passage from Hume’s discussion contains similar problems:

‘Were not the memory tenacious to a certain degree; had not men commonly an inclination to truth and a principle of probity; were they not sensible to shame, when detected in a falsehood: Were not these, I say, discovered by *experience* to be qualities, inherent in human nature, we should never repose the least confidence in human testimony.’ [5]

The passage contains the same troublesome ‘we’. But there is a further problem, of a different, but related, form. Can you see what I mean?

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Hume suggests that it is discovered by experience that, among other things, memory is ‘tenacious to a certain degree’. What experience shows him (us) that? Presumably his experience of people, including himself, claiming to remember things, which we have independent grounds for thinking did happen as they remember them. But this process *presupposes* the reliability of memory. While it does so in more ways than one, we can note, simply, that my recognition that my (our) experience of past claimed memories has had that feature is itself dependent on memory.²

The lesson to be drawn in the case of memory is, I think, this. If it is insisted that I need some *reason* for trusting my own memory, I am never going to get going at all. An *ungrounded* trust in my own memory impressions is essential to my having *any* picture of the past. Certainly there are particular instances in which my memory of some event is challenged, and I may have to respond to the challenge. I may give grounds for thinking that in this case I can be trusted: I was close to the event, completely sober, and so on. However, these grounds clearly themselves involve appeals to memory. (‘I was close to the event’, and so on.)

The attempt to give a reason *in general* for taking memory to be reliable seems doomed to circularity. It is not, I think, quite so easy to show that the attempt to give such reasons for taking testimony to be reliable is similarly doomed. I believe, however, that it *is* doomed. One way to try to bring this out is to notice just how little in my judgements about how things are is completely independent of what others have told me. Consider, for example, this case. People tell me that there is a huge range of mountains running from north to south down South America. Then I go there myself and actually see these mountains. Is that not a case in which I have directly confirmed what before I have only had on the word of others? Is it not, then, a case of the kind that Hume needs: one that gives additional support to my general readiness to trust what others tell me? What do you think?

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² Well, couldn’t I have written down every occasion in which I have found someone’s memory accurately to represent something that has happened; and so now appeal to my written record rather than to my own memory? The answer is, I think: yes and no. ‘No’, because memory is apparently involved – in ways that I will leave it to you to explore – in my acceptance of this written record as a guide to what I have experienced in the past.

I think it is not that at all. The reason is this: my conviction, when I get there, that I am in South America looking at the reported range of mountains is itself dependent in a variety of ways on things that I have been told by others: most obviously, it is dependent on my trusting the people who have, in their different ways, informed me that the plane that I boarded in London took me to South America. My seeing the mountains that, let us suppose, Jones told me about may give me additional grounds (if I need them) for trusting what *Jones* says. But it can hardly give me additional grounds for trusting what *people* – people in general – say, since my conviction that I am seeing those mountains is itself dependent on my trust in what people have told me.

The point that I have tried to make with that example applies, I think, more widely than one might initially suppose. You might think here of ‘confirming directly’ what someone has told you about her nationality, the age of a building, the weather in Blackpool, or the comparative price of butter in Tesco’s and Somerfield’s.

Hume suggests that my experience of testimony, and its correspondence with fact, can provide me with *grounds* for taking what others tell me as a guide to how things are. Against this I have suggested that I simply have not had, and perhaps could not have, the necessary experience of a general correspondence between what people tell me and the facts about which they are speaking. *I have no general grounds for my readiness to accept the testimony of others.*

Faith

The upshot of the last two sections is, from a certain point of view, rather discouraging. First, it seems that virtually all of my beliefs about the workings of the world are dependent in crucial ways on what others tell me. And second, it seems that it may not be possible to justify the trust that I place in what others tell me by appeal to my experience of their reliability: my experience of a general conformity between what others say and how things actually are. (This second point is, in a way, a particular instance of the first.) The inevitable conclusion seems to be that my whole system of beliefs is dependent on an ungrounded trust in the testimony of others: is grounded, as one might put this, in faith.

How far one sees this as, so to speak, a philosophical tragedy is likely to depend on more general pictures that one has of the relation between the individual and society. If one holds up as an ideal an image of an intellectually self-sufficient individual who can justify for herself her whole picture of the world, the conclusion I have been pointing to will have to be resisted at all costs. Things will, however, look very different if one pictures an individual human being as *essentially* a member of a community: a community that has a *common* stock of knowledge on which the individual can draw. We cannot, unfortunately, pursue these different images further here.

Towards the end of his essay Hume writes:

I am the better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered,
as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or

disguised enemies to the *Christian Religion*, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason. Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure. (89)

There is, perhaps, more than a touch of irony – or possibly disingenuousness – in Hume’s comment there. Be that as it may, one of the aims of my discussion of testimony was to ‘confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to our reliance on human testimony, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason.’ We might add: ‘Our reliance on testimony is founded on *Faith*, not on reason’. Hume stresses elsewhere in his philosophical writings just how much that is basic to human life cannot be supported by reason. For example, he argues that no *reason* can be given for our expectation that nature will continue to operate in the future as it has in the past, or for the idea that there is a world of mind-independent objects. These features of our thought are, he argues, grounded in what he calls ‘custom’, or ‘the imagination’. And confronted with a sceptic who says ‘In that case we might as well give up thinking in these ways’, Hume replies, in effect: ‘We can’t. So stop moaning and get on with living’.

While we cannot justify our general reliance on what others tell us, we cannot, either, give it up. That is not to say that we cannot be critical in our acceptance of testimony. We sometimes have grounds for judging a particular person, or a particular kind of person, to be unreliable. But those grounds are themselves likely to involve, at some point, an appeal to what others have told us. For example, I don’t take seriously people who tell me they were once abducted by aliens; but my not doing so is dependent on the fact that the people I mix with, and the authorities that I trust, tell me that this is out of the question – or, like me, they simply do not take such talk seriously. I am in a similar position with people who assure us that the world was created out of nothing around 6000 years ago, and with those who say that there was no systematic attempt to exterminate the Jews during World War II. I do not take these people seriously, and would have some concern for my sanity if I found myself momentarily wondering whether they might not, after all, be right. But if I were asked for my reasons for not taking such suggestions seriously I would, if I tried to respond, find myself pretty rapidly pushed back to an appeal to authorities whom I trust. And if asked to give reasons for that trust – for my reliance on those who play a central role in giving me my picture of the world – I would quickly run out of things to say.

I cannot give any *general* grounds for trusting what others tell me. With that, there may be limits to the grounds that I can offer for trusting one authority rather than another where they come into conflict. Suppose that a certain Gospel story is quite inconsistent with what modern science tells us is possible. Some may say ‘So much for the Gospels’; others may say ‘So much for modern science’. The different responses reflect commitments to different sources of authority. Now I do not at all mean to suggest that we can never give grounds for preferring one source of authority to another. I do, however, want to suggest that if someone insists that the scientists are the only authorities to be taken seriously when considering questions of what is, and what is not, possible, there is room for a serious question: what is the basis for *that* claim? Our consideration of Hume’s discussion of our grounds for accepting what *anyone* tells us, suggests, I think, that this may be a tallish order.

But we need to turn now to another aspect of the relation between science and miracles. I have been assuming that, in some sense or other, science can leave no place for miracles. I am not, however, at all sure that that is an assumption that should be accepted.

Miracles and laws of nature 1

Hume assumes that a miracle is, as he puts it, ‘a violation of the laws of nature’ (76). He tends to speak as if he takes this to be a *definition* of the term ‘miracle’: so that any violation of a law of nature would count as a miracle, and only a violation of a law of nature would count as a miracle. We need to consider both halves of this: both the ‘any’ and the ‘only’. I would like you now to consider the first: should we agree that its being a violation of a law of nature is *enough* for something to count as a miracle?

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There are, I think, a number of reasons why one might have doubts about that. One thing you might have focused on is the fact that there are apparent violations of laws of nature that few, if any, are tempted to speak of as miracles. When strange things start happening in an old house – books rising into the air, vases flying across rooms and smashing into walls – we are much more likely to speak of ‘hauntings’, ‘poltergeists’, or, perhaps, ‘devilry’ than of miracles. Perhaps, then, we need to add to our definition: only something that is in some way *wonderful* can count as a ‘miracle’.

Another point that you might have made here is this: something counts as a ‘miracle’ only if it was brought about by God. It is, we might argue, not sufficient that what happened was a violation of a law of nature – nor even, perhaps, that it was a wonderful violation of the laws of nature. Certainly the fact that an event was both wonderful and a violation of a law of nature is reason to think it was a miracle. But it is reason to think it was a miracle because it is reason to think that it was brought about by God; and *that* is what is required by the definition for it to be a miracle.

There is another possible worry about Hume’s definition of the term ‘miracle’: one that relates directly to the phrase ‘violation of a law of nature’. We speak of ‘laws of nature’ and also ‘laws of the land’. The use of the same word here – ‘laws’ – is striking. The laws of the land are a set of stipulations about how people are to behave. One who violates such a law is one who fails to behave as the law requires. By contrast, one might have thought, a ‘law of nature’ is not a stipulation about how things are to behave. A statement of a law of nature is not a statement - addressed, for example, to unsupported bodies - of the form: ‘Fall or you’re for it!’ Now it is not easy to say exactly what *is* the force of the claim that something is a law of nature. Hume suggests that a law of nature is simply a statement of what always happens. To say that it is a law of nature that unsupported bodies near the surface of the Earth fall is simply to say that this is an exceptionless generalization. There is much debate about whether Hume’s suggestion can be accepted. In our immediate context, however, it raises an obvious concern. Can you see what I have in mind?

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My concern was that Hume may have explained the terms ‘miracle’ and ‘law of nature’ in such a way that the possibility of miracles has been excluded *by definition*. For, confronted with an apparent ‘violation’ of a law of nature, are we not, by his definitions, forced to conclude that what we thought was a law of nature was not really so at all. If, for example, an unsupported body near the surface of the Earth does not, on a particular occasion, fall then we have no choice but to revise our view that this was a law of nature. The suggestion that this really is a law of nature, and that the levitation was a miracle, is not, given the meaning of the phrase ‘law of nature’, an option.³

There are, quite independently, serious doubts about whether Hume’s understanding of the idea of a ‘law of nature’ is adequate. In particular, many hold that the key idea is not ‘Things always happen this way’, but, rather, ‘There is some *necessity* that compels things to happen this way’. Today it is, perhaps, most common – at least in certain circles – to think of the necessity as deriving in some way from the inherent qualities of the bodies involved. Many have, however, thought of the necessity as deriving in some way from God. And perhaps the term ‘laws of nature’ – with its analogy with ‘laws of the land’ – has its roots, in part, in such an idea: God lays down requirements for the behaviour of created bodies in something like the way in which the legal system lays down requirements for the behaviour of the citizens of a country.⁴

But a proper discussion of the idea of a ‘law of nature’ would open up large issues of a kind that would take us away from our immediate concerns. At least I think they would be issues of that kind: for I have doubts about whether this talk about ‘violations of the laws of nature’ is really what is needed in a discussion of miracles.

Miracles and laws of nature 2

I asked earlier: should we agree that its being a violation of a law of nature is *enough* for something to count as a miracle? I want now to turn to the question: should we accept Hume’s view that only a violation of a law of nature could count as a miracle? I would like you to pause for a second, and to see if you can think of five laws of nature.

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³ Suppose that somebody argued like this: ‘The point you have just made is that, given what a law of nature is, miracles are impossible. But that is the whole point of calling something a miracle. A miracle is, by definition, something that happens that is impossible. In supposing that your point above would create some kind of difficulty for the idea of a miracle you are simply failing to take seriously what a miracle *is*.’ I leave it to you to decide what would be the correct response to such an argument.

⁴ And if He lays down the requirements there is, presumably, no difficulty in the idea that he should, on occasion, violate them. Equally, however, we might, with these ideas, move towards the suggestion that *everything* that happens is a direct manifestation of God’s will: everything in nature is, in that sense, a miracle as surely as is Jesus’ raising of Lazarus.

My own list is a pretty dismal affair! I have vague recollections of Newton's laws of motion from school Physics many years ago. But I strongly suspect that none of those is any longer recognised as a law of nature. (My wife hazarded: 'What goes up must come down' – but I suspect that even that has gone the way of Newton.) My guess is that ' $E=mc^2$ ', or 'Nothing can travel faster than the speed of light', would be better bets. But it has to be said that, quite apart from the fact that my grasp on what these statements mean is very fragile, I cannot list many of them. What is more, if *these* are the kind of thing relevant to miracle identification it may be that not many of us, even if we know the laws, are ever likely to be in a good position to judge that something we have observed was a miracle. (A rabbit shooting across the lawn at a *quite phenomenal* speed?)

I can imagine the following protest:

As you have just presented matters, one would need a PhD in Physics and a well-equipped research laboratory in order to have any grounds for taking an unusual event to be a miracle. But what that shows is that you have presented matters *wrongly*. The fact is that all of us – including those who have taken themselves to have witnessed miraculous events – have a very good idea of how the world works. They know, for example, that, in the normal course of things, people can't levitate or walk on water, and that life-long cripples don't spontaneously get up and walk around. Whether or not 'Unsupported bodies near the surface of the Earth fall' or 'Human beings can't walk on water' are 'laws of nature' in quite the sense that you have imposed on the discussion, they are certainly regularities that are deeply entrenched in our experience and understanding of the world. We *know* that people cannot levitate or walk on water; and if someone does, that is a violation of a 'law of nature' – or whatever you want to call it – in the relevant sense.

I have a great deal of sympathy with that protest. If we go down this path, we must, however, be prepared to recognise that our sense, at an everyday level, of what can or cannot happen – and so of what might constitute a miracle - may come apart from what is possible within the physicist's picture. While walking on water might count as a miracle on the everyday test, modern physics, I understand, informs us that, while such an occurrence is quite astonishingly unlikely in the natural course of events, it is not, in fact, utterly impossible. (Something to do with the random motions of particles that make up a body, and so the possibility of a freak arrangement – all the particles in a certain volume of water shooting towards the surface at the same time - that would issue in utterly bizarre happenings at the level of everyday experience.)

It is, perhaps, likely that most of those who have taken themselves to have witnessed a miracle did not operate with a sharp distinction between the everyday sense of what can or cannot happen and a scientific notion of 'the laws of nature'.⁵ But we do have this distinction, and it may be important in thinking about miracles to decide which of these two is relevant to the judgement that something that occurred was a miracle.

⁵ Perhaps – I know too little of these things to be sure – it is only in the last 100 years or so that these have started to come apart in quite the dramatic ways illustrated in my previous paragraph.

In thinking about this, it may be helpful to consider some particular cases.

When evening came, the boat was far out on the lake, and he was alone on the land. He could see they were worn out with rowing, for the wind was against them; and about the fourth watch of the night he came towards them, walking on the lake. He was going to pass them by, but when they saw him walking on the lake they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they had all seen him and were terrified. But he at once spoke to them, and said, "Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid." Then he got into the boat with them, and the wind dropped.

Mark 6:47-51

Imagine a contemporary version of an incident of this kind. You are walking by a lake when your attention is caught by the screams of two young children far out from the shore who are evidently in trouble. Then you see what, for the life of you, seems to be a woman walking out across the water, lifting the children under her arms, and carrying them back to safety. I guess that people would react in different ways to such an experience. One might doubt his sanity, going home uneasy and slightly depressed, and not mentioning the incident to anyone. Another might be, as they say, gobsmacked - 'Darndest thing I ever saw!' (to use Ben Tilghman's graphic phrase) – and do a nice conversational turn with it for a week or two. Another again might insist that there must have been some trickery - a series of stepping stones just below the surface for example – and refuse to abandon the claim that it *must* have been some such way however the evidence turns out. Yet another, of a scientific temperament, might bring a load of equipment down to the lake to check for specific gravity and so on; and perhaps wonder whether he might not be on the edge of a major revision in scientific theory.

It is not, I think, clear how we might demonstrate of any of those reactions that it is just wrong. I would like, however, to focus on two further possible reactions. Suppose that somebody said: 'It was a miracle'. And a scientist replied: 'You have no grounds for that claim. It is much more likely that the atoms that make up the water behaved in the – theoretically possible, though quite astonishingly improbable – way that would be required for this to happen: a huge number coincidentally shooting towards the surface at just the time and place needed to support the next fall of her foot.' How would *you* react to this scientist's response?

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I stressed the '*you*' there in order to indicate that I am not sure that there is a single – correct – reply. One question one might ask is: How exactly is one supposed to balance the likelihood of a divine intervention against the likelihood of such a conjunction of atomic motions? A rather different reply would be this: 'Why on earth should it be supposed that all of the atoms moving in this way at just the time and place needed in order for the children to be saved would not in itself be a miracle?'

It is important here to distinguish between: (i) an event that involves a violation of the laws of nature, and (ii) an event that cannot be explained in terms of the laws of nature. Our scientist told us that atoms moving simultaneously in just the direction

needed for walking on water does not involve any violation of a law of nature. But that is not at all to say that it can be *explained in terms of* the laws of nature. No doubt the motion, at that instant, of each of the atoms involved can be explained in such terms. But that is not to say that *their all moving that way simultaneously* can be so explained.

Consider another example. While clearing out your desk you come across a letter from a friend with whom you have had no contact for five years, and decide, on the spur of the moment, to phone her. The line is engaged. As soon as you put the phone down it starts ringing. It is her on the line: she has run into a problem and you were the only one she could think of who might be able to help. It was an extraordinary coincidence we say. (Though some say other things.) That is to say: there is no explanation of our both trying to phone at the same time. But there is no reason to suppose that there was any violation of a law of nature.

We are unlikely to talk of ‘miracles’ there. But now consider this example from a paper entitled ‘The Miraculous’ by R.F. Holland:

A child riding his toy motor-car strays on to an unguarded railway crossing near his house and a wheel of his car gets stuck down the side of one of the rails. An express train is due to pass with the signals in its favour and a curve in the track makes it impossible for the driver to stop his train in time to avoid any obstruction he might encounter on the crossing. The mother coming out of the house to look for her child sees him on the crossing and hears the train approaching. She runs forward shouting and waving. The little boy remains seated in his car looking downward, engrossed in the task of pedalling it free. The brakes of the train are applied and it comes to rest a few feet from the child. The mother thanks God for the miracle; which she never ceases to think of as such although, as she in due course learns, there was nothing supernatural about the manner in which the brakes of the train came to be applied. The driver had fainted, for a reason that had nothing to do with the presence of the child on the line, and the brakes were applied automatically as his hand ceased to exert pressure on the control lever.

(R.F. Holland, ‘The Miraculous’, in *Against Empiricism* 169-70)

Perhaps a first thing to note about this example is this. If personally involved in a situation of this kind, a great many people would speak of it, without hesitation or awkwardness, as a ‘miracle’. Closely linked with that, we can, as Holland asks us to, readily imagine the mother uttering, in a heartfelt way, the words ‘Thank God’: we can readily imagine this whether or not there are other – significant – marks of religious belief in her life. Now it will be said, at this point, that many people use such words loosely, or lightly: the fact that she calls it a ‘miracle’ does not show that she seriously believes that it *is* a miracle; or, at any rate, that she believes this in the serious sense that must be our concern in a discussion in the philosophy of religion.

Now I think that is certainly right. But we need to ask: what do we need to add to the case in order for us to be able to say that she seriously judges this to have been a miracle – in the rich, religious, sense that is our concern here? How one answers this

question will, I think, depend on one's more general views concerning how we should understand the relation between miracles and religious belief.

I distinguished earlier two ways in which one might think of this relation. First, one might hope to *give grounds for religious belief* by proving that a miracle has occurred: as Hume puts it, one might hope, that a proof of a miracle could 'be the foundation of a system of religion'. Now if *that* is what one has in mind one is likely to feel that anything less than a 'violation of a law of nature' is hardly going to provide what is needed. A modern, scientifically minded, atheist or agnostic is not likely to feel the need for fundamental revision in his belief system if presented with anything less than pretty firm proof of such a violation. We might add that, for reasons of just the kind that Hume presents, it may be extremely difficult to present him with anything that he need take as such proof. (We might also add that, at various points in the Gospels, Jesus expresses strong hostility to any proposal to try to convert non-believers by performing a miracle.)

Alternatively, one might suppose that, while no appeal to evidence for the occurrence of miracles could provide grounds for the belief that there is a God, *given religious belief* the same evidence might provide adequate grounds for the conviction that a miracle has occurred: someone who already has religious belief might be rationally convinced by such evidence. *Starting* from the point of view of religious belief, Hume's arguments against the possibility of a rational conviction that a miracle has occurred may lose much of their bite. For someone who starts from this point of view may start with a different conception of *the kinds of thing that can happen*: a conception that is condition, not solely by her own experience of the workings of the world, or by what scientists tell us about the 'laws of nature', but also, for example, by the Gospel narratives of the life and works of Jesus.

I asked of the mother in the example presented by Holland: what do we need to add to the case in order for us to be able to say that she seriously judges this to have been a miracle – in the rich, religious, sense that is our concern here? The answer, I think, is of the following form: we can say that she judges this to be a miracle – in the rich, religious sense – in so far as her words 'It was a miracle' fit, in a certain way, into the religious life that she already lives. One example of the kind of 'fitting' that I have in mind here would be that in her prayers she thanks God for what has happened. Another, more difficult to pin down, might be that all her thinking about her child is now conditioned by a sense that it is only, as she puts it, 'by the grace of God' that she is still alive: to flesh out what, in her life, her thinking in this way comes to would require detailed, and sensitive, characterisation of her attitude towards, and feelings about, her child.

We might summarise the tentative conclusion of my discussion in this way. Hume has shown that there cannot be a rational belief that miracle has occurred in a way such that the belief can serve as 'the foundation of a system of religion'. He has *not* shown that within a religious life there is no place for a reasonable belief that a miracle has occurred. When we appreciate this, we may come to think that the task for philosophy is, not so much to assess whether it can be rational to believe that a miracle has occurred, but more – at least in the first instance - to characterise what is involved in seriously judging that miracle has occurred. Hume may have shown us that one picture of the relation between miracles and religious belief – that in which the first

serves as a ground for the second - will not do. The task of philosophy may be to explore – in a way on which I have no more than touched – other ways in which a belief that a miracle has occurred may connect with the life of a religious believer: ‘connect with it’, not by way of *underpinning* that life, but through the way in which it *fits into* and is an *aspect of* that life.

Further reading

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993) ch 10 [This is included in this module as **Document 25**]

Gareth Moore, *Believing in God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), ch 7 [This is included in this module as **Document 29**]

Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Macmillan, 1970)

Richard Swinburne (ed), *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1989)

R.F. Holland, ‘The Miraculous’, in Swinburne (ed)

Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1982) ch 10

J.A. Cover, ‘Miracles and Christian Theism’, in Michael J. Murray (ed), *Reason for the Hope Within* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999)