

The Argument from Miracles

Defining Miracles

Miracles as a violation of nature - David Hume

- Miracles predate our modern concept of a law of nature
- Natural laws as necessarily true cannot be broken
- Natural laws as regular patterns - a break in the law demonstrates we are wrong about the pattern

Defining Miracles

Swinburne:

Laws of nature - regularity which is usually not broken

Miracles - non-repeatable counter-instances to the laws of nature

Mackie:

Laws of nature - describe the way in which the world works

Miracles - intervention from beyond the natural world

David Hume *Of Miracles*

‘no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle’

a proof of miracles cannot ‘be the foundation of a system of religion’

- Should we ask the question: proof to whom?

Hume's Argument

‘a wise man ... proportions his belief to the evidence’:

The formation of rational beliefs:

- Balance the evidence on both sides of the debate and come down on the strongest side
- Weigh up the experiments that support the conclusion against those that count against it

Testimony

The strength of the evidence is dependent on the source

The strength of testimony must be weighed in the evidential balance taking into account past experience

Testimony and Miracles

50 people, all of good character, tell us with confidence that they saw someone walk on water or raise from the dead

Hume's Argument

1. Miracles are violations of the law of nature
2. The laws of nature are established through the uniformity of our experience
3. We would need very strong evidence to outweigh the uniformity of our experience
4. '[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.'

Hume's Argument

‘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.’

Scepticism about Miracles

- (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.

Criticism of Hume's Argument

‘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’.

- Does this conform to our experiences?

Criticism of Hume's Argument

- We have limited experiences and rely on testimony
- Our understanding of the world is largely based on other people's testimony
- The stories we are brought up with inform our belief about what is possible

Grounds for Accepting Testimony

‘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.’

Our belief that there is a connection between testimony and reality is often grounded in testimony

Faith

‘I am the better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or 56 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.’

Miracles - Definition

Something positive and wonderful

Argument from Miracles

Does the definition of miracles pre-suppose the existence of God

Miracles as a violation of the laws of nature

Laws of nature are a generalization based on our experience, they are not necessarily true

Our reactions to the miraculous

- We often do not have a clear idea of what is consistent with the laws of nature
- Things may seem incredible but not be a breach of the laws of nature

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)

Violations of the laws of nature vs what cannot yet be explained by the laws of nature