

## How Christians Distort Philosopher David Hume's thoughts on miracles

### HOW CHRISTIANS UNDERSTAND HUME

Norman Geisler in his *Naturalism & The Supernatural* spells out what anti-miracle philosopher David Hume worked out.

(1) A miracle by definition is a violation of (or exception to) a law of nature [as in repeatable norm as in how the dead stay dead for example]

(2) But the laws of nature are built upon the highest degree of probability

(3) Hence, a miracle by definition (as an exception) is based on the lowest degree of probability.

(4) Now the wise man should always base his belief on the highest degree of probability

(5) Therefore, the wise man should never believe in miracles.

Both atheists and Christians believe in natural law as in repeatable norms. The only difference is the former think they are brute facts while Christians hold God set them up.

The debate is about whether Hume is right to use the incredible evidence that things have repeatable norms against a rare event, the rare event in this case being miracle. If he is wrong then the events should be treated in a case by case manner.

And what about the evidence that rare bizarre things do happen? So Hume should be weighing evidence for miracles one by one instead of making a sweeping assumption that the evidence for natural regularity rules them out.

### THE MAIN POINTS:

Hume is accused of saying there is never a good reason to believe that a miracle was a real occurrence and not a lie or a mistake. He in fact did not say that. He was clear there could be good reasons even very good reasons but as human nature is proven to be tricky the reasons will never be good enough. This is not bias or an outright rejection of miracles. It is a problem with human nature not miracles.

We assume that the sun will rise tomorrow though we don't know for sure if it will. We assume that nature works in a consistent way. For example, cars don't come to life. We need not say that miracles are impossible. We need only say we reject them for we don't need them.

We need not say that miracles are not true. Even if miracles are believable that still does not make it sensible to believe. Lots of rubbish can seem believable. We need only say we can't and shouldn't believe.

If Hume is saying a miracle is so unlikely that it is reasonable to disbelieve in it even if it is in fact real, then what is wrong with that? Is he defining faith in miracles in such a way that you cannot believe? No for we all agree that we can disbelieve in real things if we don't have the grounds to believe so miracles should be the top of the list.

### FROM DAVID HUME'S 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 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 be, 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 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...

[He assumes that the apostles, despite what they said, did not observe Jesus being alive again after death. Should he be dealing with why their observation was wrong instead of dismissing it? I would say that by observing he meant

professionally documented observation - eg notes taken during the appearances and seeking out crosschecking.]

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 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 till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

In the foregoing reasoning we have supposed, that the testimony, upon which a miracle is founded, may possibly amount to an entire proof, and that the falsehood of that testimony would be a real prodigy: But it is easy to shew, that we have been a great deal too liberal in our concession, and that there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence.

From David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, L. A. Selby Bigge, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), pp. 114-16.

MY RESPONSE:

Hume agreed with the Christian and miracle-believer understanding of a miracle as something very unlikely but which may still happen. God does it as a sign that there is more to life than just nature. There is something bigger than nature out there. He may call a miracle a violation of nature but does not use that definition as part of his argument. He can call a miracle what he wants but the argument still works. It is about a miracle being so odd and unlikely that we are entitled to disbelieve in it. Even many natural events are so odd that we are entitled to disbelieve until we see proof. If we are entitled then then we are more entitled when the event is reported as a miracle.

Hume is talking only about miracles that are testified to by other people. He is not telling you to disbelieve in a miracle you see with your own eyes and that stands all tests as an event without a natural explanation.

I would add that we must remember that the percentage of people who report a miracle is tiny tiny but the number who believe without seeing is huge. Even if somebody has seen a miracle that does not mean that it is healthy or wise for others to believe them.

What if somebody said, "Nature has changed temporarily because X is a reliable witness and has said it. The tree talked to him." That is not a logical statement. We can even feel it. Also, there are times when testimony no matter how honest and good and sincere the witness to a miracle or anything can still be dismissed as unconvincing.

He did say, "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 endeavours to establish" so his problem is not that miracles are untrue but that no testimony to them as far as he knows is good enough but he admits that good enough evidence is a possibility. That is only observing that no miracle has good enough evidence - it is not defining miracles in such a way that nobody can believe in them.

We see that Hume did not define miracles in such a way to make them look ridiculous nor did he deny that a miracle could be verified. He just said that so far he knew of nothing miraculous that met a high standard of evidence and could be considered believable.

CIRCULAR REASONING?

Christians say that Hume is trying to justify a belief in the falsity or unbelievability of miracles already presumed to be correct! In other words Hume would write, "A miracle is impossible therefore miracles do not happen. A miracle by definition is unbelievable therefore nobody should believe in a miracle." As long as he is open to examining evidence and going where it leads that is not true. The miracle according to Hume should not and cannot be believed in even if it really does happen unless the evidence is remarkably good so that demands research and investigation.

He has supposedly made up his mind and is trying to use logic to hide this and to pretend to be open-minded. His argument is that no testimony as far as he knows is enough to establish a miracle. He hints that such testimony might be out there. Nothing biased here. But he is accused of bias by the Christians. They slander him because he simply urged people to consider the evidence for miracles better. If the testimony for miracles falls short of being convincing there is nothing biased or unfair about saying so.

For Hume a miracle can be believable in itself but other things make that believability a small thing. There is nothing

wrong with something being believable as a unit but as a part of something bigger that believability is swallowed up. For example, it seems credible that a priest made a communion wafer bleed but what if you check his other miracles and find he has been faking? Thus Hume did not make a miracle unbelievable by definition.

The Christians say Hume was assuming that the evidence and testimony for miracles is never good enough and they say that would be fair enough if he looked at the evidence first but he didn't. But he did - he said that he had never encountered a miracle event that if the witnesses were mistaken or wrong that their being so would be more miraculous than the event itself. Believers themselves say there are no such events so no contest there!

Christians say that Hume is to blame for the modern tendency to disbelieve or in miracles against the evidence in their favour. There is nothing wrong with that tendency if the evidence is not good enough. The Christians scholars oppose the tendency and thus end up exaggerating how good the evidence is for say the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is because Hume is behind our modern scepticism that Christians have to try and destroy any serious consideration of his treatment of miracles. It is about ideology and agenda. Religion doesn't want to be reasonable. So it attacks his commonsense. It's preference is to misrepresent and distort Hume.

Hume challenged belief in the supernatural but not necessarily the supernatural. Hume's view was reasonable. He said that if there is evidence for a miracle being real, that because a miracle is so improbable we are still entitled to be sceptical. The true sceptic neither believes or disbelieves. He was not saying that miracles don't happen. He was only saying we cannot be criticised for not believing. Try and feel nice about that - he was trying to be your friend!

## RELIGION USES CIRCULAR REASONING

When religion accuses Hume of saying, "There is no evidence for any miracle for a miracle is a violation of nature and not possible" it itself argues, "There is evidence for miracles for miracles can happen even if they do not. Miracles can happen for they are exceptions to natural law. Natural law is not that fixed." So if both are assuming and we have to make a choice then who do we go with? Perhaps it does not matter which means that religion should not matter and should not be acting as if it does. It is safer to deny that nature changes even if it does for it is more important to believe nature never changes than that a statue can walk or a man can rise from the dead.

Religion says that a miracle is not a violation of an iron law. It says God set up the laws of nature but intended to make exceptions. There is no violation in the sense that God had to arrest natural law and make it change. He is in control. He would not be God and atheism would be true if he isn't. If God had to set up his laws and then break them then that is bad planning. He would not be all knowing or all powerful. He would not be a real God but an idol.

So religion denies there is a violation. It assumes there is no violation.

If it is saying that Hume talks nonsense because he has defined a miracle wrong, we must remember that Hume based his argument not on a miracle being a violation but on it being improbable. Hume called it a violation for it tries to look like one. What else would you be expected to think if somebody told you that their statue of a leprechaun tells them where to look for gold?

If Hume is assuming a violation then religion is doing far more assuming by assuming it is not! It is against how the event looks.

Hume is criticised for allegedly assuming miracles are too improbable to be believed. But they assume that miracles are not violations of nature. It is an uncharitable double-standard! If they can make their assumptions why can't Hume make his?

If miracles are violations then they refute God - an incompetent being is not much of a God. It is for Christian philosophers to decide that if miracles are violations and happen, does God having no role make them more improbable or less? If they are improbable because there is a God then they are far more improbable than Hume envisaged. Believers in God should scorn them more then sceptics should!

## UNFAIR DEFINITION OF MIRACLE AS VIOLATION OF NATURE?

So did Hume define miracles as impossible violations of nature?

Hume defined a miracle as a violation of natural law. It is said that this makes miracles ridiculous and impossible. God would not have to violate natural law. And the laws would not violate themselves. He could do exceptions to the law not violations of it.

Hume never said a miracle was impossible because by definition it was a violation. He only said that there was not yet enough evidence that one had ever happened.

In physics and in science, no amount of personal testimony - no matter how reliable the witnesses are - is enough for science to accept that something is the natural law. They don't believe the facts of science because of the personal testimony from other scientists. They only believe because they can test and work out what the law is by doing experiments for themselves. So unbelief in natural law is fine in science but just means you have to do the experiment for yourself. You have to see and discover for yourself. No other and no lesser standard of proof is acceptable for scientific explanations of the world. To attack Hume is really to attack science and truth.

## VIOLATION OF NATURE IS NOT A RIGID CONCEPT FOR HUME

Hume defined a miracle as a violation of nature.

Christians say he was defining a miracle in such a way as to make it look stupid. In other words, he was trying to argue that as a miracle is a violation of nature and violations of nature don't happen then miracles don't happen. But his argument is not about a miracle being a violation - it is about a miracle being very unlikely to be true. A miracle by definition has to be something that needs tremendously good evidence.

Also, Hume talks of laws of nature, meaning not literal laws but its just an expression about how the universe works. Laws of nature to Hume mean how the universe works according to our experience and experimentation. It is not true that Hume was saying natural law is unchangeable and iron-clad so miracles would be impossible. He says a miracle is not a violation of iron law but a violation of how we should see the law.

Some Christians say that Hume contradicts himself by not defining nature as rigid and then saying miracles cannot happen. They are totally wrong. He never meant iron rigidity.

## HUME NEVER DEFINED A MIRACLE AS UNBELIEVABLE

Did Hume simply assume miracles can't happen? Did he also assume they are therefore unbelievable? That implies that a miracle is being defined as an unbelievable event. Hume is accused of that but if he is guilty why didn't he write, "A miracle is an event that cannot be believed in"? He wrote no such and did lay out when and why we can believe.

Christians claim that Hume argues that miracles are by definition unbelievable. This is not true. The quote from him that allegedly proves it is true goes, "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. 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." He said we can believe if it is a bigger miracle for the evidence for a miracle to be wrong. The assumption is that if miracle x is more supernatural than miracle y then choose y. Choose the least miraculous thing. He did however believe that a miracle is by definition hard to believe which is why evidence is so important. A miracle being hard to believe is not the same as a miracle being unbelievable.

Hume does not say that miracles are impossible. He says they could be possible. He only says nobody can be expected to believe they happen for the evidence is never be good enough. He is merely voicing the fact that there has to be a line drawn somewhere in relation to what testimony and evidence point to. Everybody has a line. There are things we cannot believe even if there is testimony and evidence. He indicates that if miracles and magic are not among those things then nothing is. He says what kind of evidence is needed so the fact that no miracle he knows of today is backed up properly does not mean that a properly attested and authenticated miracle might happen tomorrow.

## HOW UNIFORM IS NATURE?

Is nature so uniform that if a miracle happens we are extremely unlikely to notice it or find it? Obviously yes. You can suggest somebody rose from the dead in the past but nobody noticed for it was away back 5 million years BC or on another world. Thus it is very hard to believe a witness to a miracle.

Some say that Hume apparently assumed that nature is totally uniform or so uniform that the chance of us seeing a miracle even if they do happen is impossible or almost impossible. They argue that he is guessing this and cannot know how uniform or otherwise nature is. They say he would need to be there at every event in the universe no matter how small or otherwise to know that. But he is not saying he knows it. He is merely saying it makes sense to assume nature is uniform and acts like it follows laws. Better to assume that than the alternative.

Believers say that he should assume nature is uniform but not always thus allowing for miracles. But why assume miracles? Why not assume that nature is sometimes disordered or does the opposite of what it usually does? If you assume that the oak tree loses its leaves by the end of October, that does not mean that any leaf that is still there in November is there by a miracle.

The ludicrous Christian book Gunning for God argues that nature might not be uniform thus miracles happen which is totally illogical. Even if it is not uniform, it still does not back up the notion of supernatural intervention or allow for it. Supernatural intervention if possible, will happen whether nature is uniform or not. If nature is not uniform then it follows that if a dead man really rises from the dead then its somehow within nature's power to raise him so there is no need to assume there is a God to do it.

## NOT ALL CHRISTIANS RUBBISH HUME

“One point on which Hume was surely correct is that we ought to have a powerful bias against the miraculous” quote from Stephen A Davis in Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Fiction. Even Christians agree. But then they turn around and turn books that could have been selective with the facts into evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. The gospels do not get the dismissal or neutrality that other similar books would get. The gospels do not even claim to be using the testimony of eyewitnesses. Even if there are many miracles we should believe in, the resurrection is not one of them.

## NO EVIDENCE GOOD ENOUGH?

Did Hume simply assume that no evidence is good enough for miracles?

Religion says that Hume was guilty of saying that no evidence would please him enough before he could believe in a miracle. What else can it say? It is accusing him of being unfair. It says he should look at the evidence before saying that.

He was only saying he has seen no evidence that would suffice. Nothing wrong with that. Hume was not ignoring evidence. He was saying that testimony to a miracle is evidence for it but it is not enough to disprove the thesis that a mistake has been made or a lie been told. He did not oppose evidence for miracles only that the evidence compels you to think a miracle really happened.

He said that evidence says nature works as if it has laws. He was saying the evidence for miracles is overwhelmed by that evidence.

HIS ARGUMENT WAS ABOUT EVIDENCE SO HE ASSUMES SUPERNATURAL INTERFERENCE WITH OR PLANTING OF EVIDENCE DOES NOT HAPPEN. IF IT DOES YOU CAN NEVER TRUST EVIDENCE. THUS IT IS SLANDER FOR RELIGION TO SAY HE ARBITRARILY REJECTED THE EVIDENCE FOR MIRACLES. HE ARGUED AS HE DID TO GIVE THE SEARCH FOR EVIDENCE FOR THE MIRACULOUS OR NON-MIRACULOUS SOME INTEGRITY.

Hume was not denying the existence of evidence for miracles that is good enough. Religion says there is such evidence. He was open to that evidence. Religion slanders him by claiming he was saying there is no such thing as evidence that is good enough to indicate a miracle. He was not dismissing evidence for the miraculous arbitrarily or unfairly. He was being fair. It is religion that is unfair.

## METHODOLOGY

Some say Hume was not on about evidences for miracles at all. He was on about methodology in the treatment of evidence. We have to make presumptions before we can work with evidence. One presumption is that the magical does not happen. We could be wrong. But we need the presumption. Without it we will be all over the place and make others as bad as ourselves.

It is false to claim that Hume was saying that evidences for miracles are no good. He says that if they are good then they are not good enough.

Some say the problem with Hume is that he considers the evidence for miracles on its own. He isolates it from other facts and factors and possibilities that can cast light on it.

What they want goes something like this. They say Hume should have reasoned that all things come from nothing which implies a creator. The creator created natural law and so he can suspend or alter it. This does not prove he ever suspends it or alter it but maybe he does.

So we are told that the gist of all that reasoning is that belief in miracles is not illogical. But this is not the gist at all. All things coming from nothing does not in itself prove a creator. Also, if the creator can suspend natural laws, we have no reason to assume that he does. He might have a reason we don't know of that makes doing miracles illogical. After all he is the smart one and our intelligence is limited. Also, if miracles are logical that still does not mean they happen or have happened.

The believers in God say that the problem with Hume is that he has made up his mind that there is no God outside of nature, no supernatural God, who can do miracles. They say he assumes there is nothing but nature. They say that if he is right that there is nothing but nature then we can indeed believe that it is more likely that a lie has been told or a mistake made when a miracle seems to have happened. We can say the miracle claim is rubbish.

This is not true - Hume's problem is that a miracle is hard to believe by definition so it needs exceptional evidence and human testimony alone however good is not good enough. This does not deny that miracles might have happened.