

How Christians Distort Philosopher David Hume's thoughts on miracles

HOW CHRISTIANS UNDERSTAND HUME

Norman Geisler in his *Naturalism & The Supernatural* spells out what supposedly 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. Clearly the first even if they affirm that events against nature happen they are not miracles in the Bible sense of acts of God.

Anyway 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. The only way to confute him is to argue that evidence is evidence and good solid evidence for a miracle is grounds for belief in a miracle.

If he is wrong then the events should be treated in a case by case manner. Hume should be weighing evidence for miracle one by one instead of making a sweeping assumption that the evidence for natural regularity rules them out.

At this point, if it is about evidence then Christians should be ready to affirm any strongly attested miracle that outweighs that for their favourite miracle, the resurrection of Jesus. It still manages to rule out the vast majority of miracles as real.

Note that Hume is not saying miracles are impossible. He is saying that the evidence is the problem for it cannot defeat the evidence that nature is regular. This is like the argument that if the dead stay dead then one exception Jesus is not likely enough to be believed.

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.

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!

