

AYER: HUME A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

AMAZON SAYS

Hume is one of the greatest of all British philosophers, and even in his own lifetime was celebrated as one of the pivotal figures of the Enlightenment. A central theme of his philosophy is the conviction that questions traditionally thought of as completely independent of the scientific realm—questions about the mind, about morality, and about God, for example—are actually best explained using the experimental methods characteristic of the natural sciences. Hume's 'naturalist' approach to a wide variety of philosophical topics resulted in highly original theories about perception, self-identity, causation, morality, politics, and religion, all of which are discussed in this stimulating introduction by A J Ayer, himself one of the twentieth century's most important philosophers. Ayer also gives an account of Hume's fascinating life and character, and includes generous quotations from Hume's lucid and often witty writings.

THE BOOK INSPIRES THE FOLLOWING ANALYSIS

David Hume famously defined a miracle as a violation of the natural order which he says is uniform. Nature makes the dead stay dead but if Jesus rose from the dead that is a violation. That is a matter of debate.

GOD AND NATURAL LAW

Natural order or natural law means that things can be expected to do certain things not that anybody made it that way. Order can just happen. If there is no God then there is no power bigger than nature to change natural law. If there is a God he might not change it. If there is a God he might change or suspend it. Religion says there would be literally nothing without God so existence is a miracle. A miracle is an act of making something where there is nothing.

#AYER SAYS,

'Why did God issue just those natural laws and no others? If you say that he did it simply from his own good pleasure, and without any reason, you then find that there is something which is not subject to law, and so your train of natural law is interrupted. If you say, as more orthodox theologians do, that in all the laws which God issues he had a reason for giving those laws rather than others – the reason, of course, being to create the best universe, although you would never think it to look at it – if there was a reason for the laws which God gave, then God himself was subject to law, and therefore you do not get any advantage by introducing God as an intermediary.'

COMMENT: Ayer is right. The laws are not really laws if they are just random. And who made the law that controls God and makes him need to make the laws he wants. No one so that is just another random again. Atheists affirm that nature is just random law. No matter what you do, you end up with regularities not laws. God is only a cosmetic for the problem.

The theologians assume that law has to be orderly. Not necessarily for a law can be as messy as it wants to be.

A God can make a mess that is lawless if he wants to.

We want there to be a good reason for any law and for the law being solid rather than fluid and misty. But we are thinking of ourselves. A reason doesn't have to be a good one. It can be a reason without thinking of whether it is good or not. Who cares if a law is fixed for a bad reason as long as it does not keep changing and we know how to engage with it?

#AYER SAYS,

You can argue that God can be lawless. This means he can give a law that only looks orderly but is not, for you don't know the forces making it up or see the whole job. Or God can only make good natural laws but you have no way to guess if he is making good laws or the laws just seem good.

"On this argument, Hume's assertion that a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature calls into doubt the usefulness of identifying a miracle as a violation of law."

COMMENT: That would mean that a miracle is natural after all and is just a mess in nature.

Violation of nature can be a euphemism for absurd. If a miracle is absurd people including believers will say it is a violation

of nature and for that reason cannot be a real miracle. They say Hume took that attitude with all miracles. It is their own attitude when they are faced with a miracle they assume is absurd. For a Catholic, a miracle where Shiva appears and says destruction is holy is absurd. But that is their prejudice for the Hindu who follows Shiva might see Catholic miracles as absurd.

If a miracle is absurd if it is a violation of nature you should assume that still is one even if it is not obvious.

It is certainly absurd to invest it with any importance apart from being a weird unusual thing. There is nothing life changing or spiritual or religious about a black swan or a pink one. People changing their lives over a miracle does not make the miracle life-changing.

#AYER SAYS,

Finally, it is useful to make a distinction between the miraculous and the supernatural. Professor Lennox has made the point that, while the miraculous will always be supernatural, the supernatural will not always be miraculous. If you believe in a creator God, then the entire creation of the universe is a supernatural event; but it is not miraculous, because the whole process is held together by natural law.

COMMENT: He lists the supernatural examples as ghosts, poltergeists, spirits and spirit possession. He says they are supernatural but not miraculous. Some use the word paranormal. You can use miraculous then for acts of a God - eg that would be limited to things being made out of literally nothing. You can use supernatural as referring simply to something that is able to control and override nature. Or you can use the word paranormal for that. If you say supernatural and miraculous are different then you have no way of telling if Jesus appearing is a miracle or a supernatural event. Religion loses all credibility for depending on miracles.

What makes us think of miracle? Nature? Reason? The supernatural? Any combination? Notice then they are telling us what to think a miracle is. A miracle then becomes a matter of hearsay. Maybe the supernatural is implanting belief in miracle in us and it is unreliable or actually lying.

All you need is something untestable such as the paranormal to fake a miracle so seeing something and saying it is a miracle is always going too far. It is enough to see it as paranormal. You shouldn't want to be an accessory for a paranormal lie!

HOW UNIFORM IS NATURE?

Uniformity and absolute uniformity are not the same thing.

We are told that if nature is not uniform then miracles are possible. Is that true?

If nature is uniform and is a closed system then miracle claims are false. Natural anomalies make people think they witness them.

If nature is less uniform than we think then that still does not mean it allows for miracles - as in planned events to give a religious or spiritual message. Natural anomalies will be more likely then and will make people think they witness them. They will virtually replicate what a real miracle would look like.

If nature is uniform enough to let miracles happen that does not mean a miracle is a message from a God. Maybe the miracle of resurrection was to be Julius Caesar resurrecting to convert the world to peace and wisdom and harmony. But perhaps Jesus rose instead - the wrong man! If nature lets the miracle happen then the miracle is filtered and permitted by nature so there is no divine message. God would not make the effort!

If nature is less uniform than that so that Jesus can be the message and word of God rising for us we may think, "Its only one rare miracle and nature has not come apart" but what if we are speaking too soon? We are assuming something is not unfolding.

We conclude then that we should stop trusting nature if we admit miracles happen. If miracles do happen but lie then we should abandon faith in natural processes. We must remember that religion claims that miracles that lie are just lies or mistakes but that is assuming that a miracle only tells the truth or it is not a miracle at all! They say the evidence must show us if we should believe not preconceived ideas. They accuse sceptics of such ideas when they have them themselves.

HUME

David Hume seems to contradict himself by saying that he holds natural law might change and yet he says the reason miracles are false is that it does not change.

He contradicts himself as well by saying that experience can change. He says our experience is the sun will always rise but we have to admit we don't know if it will rise tomorrow for it might not. He cannot then say that our uniform experience refutes miracles for miracles contradict our experience. So if we say the dead stay dead for we experience that dead people stay dead that experience is subject to changing.

I would ask at this point, what if you have to choose between the two?

What is real always overrides what you experience. You experience a pink elephant but if it is not there then reality is what counts.

Thus refuting a miracle experience you have is the thing you must do. You must come and face the case against and deal with that. We are not saying you must not believe in miracles ever. Only the evidence can direct you that way. We are saying what you do if you are a sensible reliable person. We have proven that miracle witnesses who go about trying to get others to agree with them or who suggest that others should think about their claims are unreliable. This is not bias but fact.

Hume does not say that if nature changes it changes enough to replicate/fake/simulate what you would expect a miracle to be like. There is not necessarily any contradiction or challenge to nature in this. No it is the contrary. Its affirming. It makes a miracle no more special than a floor blooming.

A miracle being a change of nature would mean a new natural law has appeared so we are back where we started. Changing natural law does not allow for miracles but new laws.

EXCEPTION SHOWS THE RULE IS RIGHT?

Hume can be read as saying that generally speaking we should take nature as uninterrupted. But surely general allows exceptions? Not always.

Does the exception uphold the rule? This is an error. The exception breaks the rule. Period. Having to ignore a rule for a bigger one matters is not making an exception. It is making way for the rule that should matter.

Also people use "the exception maintains the rule and supports it" line when it suits them. Miracles are a convenient exception.

If you have to be in bed by 10pm but not at Christmas then this is not an exception to the rule. The rule is, "Bed at 10pm but not at Christmas." It is not really an exception. It is the rule.

If you have to be in bed by 10pm and you are allowed to stay up at Christmas this is breaking the rule and is not creating an exception. The rule is be in bed at 10 pm but no exception is mentioned.

An exception can never prove the rule. Prove is too strong of a word. The best you can do is, "I think it shows the rule is good." What is really happening is that you are seeing the rule is no good or too strict and you are not saying so. You become a fake. The exception at best strains and tests the rule.

How many exceptions prove the rule? People may say one but for miracle mongers that would mean only one miracle has happened in history or that we should think there has only been one. They don't accept such a suggestion. A Jesus who rose but whose other miracles are frauds or lies is not somebody we can be confident in so much that we think he did rise.

IS HUME IGNORING THE BIGGEST MIRACLE OF ALL?

The big bang can be seen as an absolute uniformity. It is a once off event that nobody has seen and will not be repeated. Some say that if miracles cannot happen for things are uniform then that could not have happened either.

COMMENT: How does that fit Hume's complaint that a miracle should not be believed when it cannot be repeated for checking? We can say we are just here and say that we will not consider the miracle explanation of the origin of all. Buddha said we are just here and we don't know why so why ask? A miracle is a non-explanation. We don't really know what it means to say something is magic or miracle.

BELIEF IN MIRACLES LEADS TO DISHONESTY

We observe in the universe that there is a law of cause and effect. A cause is what counts for something's existence. For example there is no flu without viruses.

Believers in an interventionist God never argue that miracles abolish natural law or soften it, or that it is unknown and perhaps undiscoverable natural laws at work for we don't know all the laws.

EVIDENCE

Is Hume saying nature does not allow miracles for it rolls on unchanged therefore miracles do not happen?

The miracle believer says the only way out of the circle is to admit that evidence says miracles seem possible. Is that a matter for history? Or philosophy? Or science? Believers say it is history for you can only go by what people testify to and the evidence they present. The reality is that you cannot tell anybody what to think of the evidence. You give it to them and let them draw their own conclusions. Miracles then do not justify setting up religions that get your children or pressure people to believe or prevent them making responsible and informed religious choices. They do not justify people becoming priests and preachers and popes who have not armed themselves with the evidence or thought much about it. They condemn it.

SCIENCE

It is said that an assertion that miracles should be believed not to happen for logic says we must not believe is putting the matter outside of science. The idea is that science is strictly about testing and then thinking and not just thinking and reasoning.

Inductive thinking is just thinking without being informed by the evidence and before you look at it.

Deductive reasoning is thinking about the evidence and what it points to and what it all implies and suggests. Each discovery is really a sum of discoveries actual and potential.

Ayer writes of the view that "scientists do not employ inductive reasoning. They advance hypotheses, submit them to the severest tests that they can devise, and adhere to them so long as they are not falsified."

He says this is not fully accurate. He says that nobody avoids inductive reasoning and it need not be a barrier to accuracy and the validity of tests. It does mean they take nothing for granted and keep challenging their inductive reasoning habits and conclusions. In God terms, the scientist if she believes almost against her will. That is still godless. Science is atheistic and anti-God. If it is not it is trying to be though it does not know it.

Another thought, if you think God shows himself by how he makes things then this reluctance means ultimately you call God, if there is one, a liar.

A CRITIC

A claim that nobody can test to show if it is false is no good. You have no way of showing it false. If you claim you have an invisible undetectable frog in your kitchen then that is as good as claiming that God has made you rule the world and people are blinded from seeing that and they think you are just Joan or John living in the humble caravan. It implies that anything goes and one pile of rubbish deserves as much respect as another.

Christian John Lennox says that Hume will not admit there is an observation that would prove his view that miracles are not believable to be false. Thus his sceptical view is non falsifiable. The problem is an idea seems best avoided if you have no way to show how it might be wrong.

First - Hume did outline when miracles would be a reasonable belief.

Second - saying that until his time nothing had met a sufficient standard is not the same as saying that nothing will never come up. The latter would be the non falsifiable view.

Third - making claims and protecting them from evidence is not the same as making a claim for which no evidence will be attainable. For example, saying God wants all to be healthy but then saying sickness does not refute God is protecting yourself from evidence. I said yourself. Its selfish. It is not the same thing as you saying you cannot live on the sun if you could go there though you cannot give evidence.

Fourth, the miracle claim may be falsifiable or non falsifiable only to the witness. I cannot know or be sure that Bernadette saw Our Lady even if she did. What is non falsifiable to you is not necessarily non falsifiable to me.

Fifth, Christians are doing what Hume is accused of. They say that belief in a creator gives you a satisfactory reason for trusting nature to work reliably so you can be sure that a miracle really happens for evidence says it does. So they are saying that there is no observation that proves their view that some miracles are believable is false. Suppose it is true that Hume was guilty of non-falsifiable scepticism. They are worse than Hume for clearly the person who looks at nature and makes judgements is not the same as somebody who assumes God and then makes judgements. Now where you had one non falsifiable you have two. To choose between them and Hume if it were an equal playing field would show they are still too narrow minded for they don't encourage or affirm those who agree with Hume.

Sixth, Lennox is talking about miracles. This is very general and is not about any specific miracle. It is about trying to say, "miracles are possible therefore they happen." Possibilities do not count. It is probabilities that matter. The reason is it should be, "miracles are possible therefore they might happen." But that is balanced by, "miracles are possible therefore they might not happen."

Seventh, the discussion should be about specific miracles. What if there is only one miracle? Or one that counts for investigating? Lennox wants to get you from, "miracles may happen" to "I believe Jesus rose."

Finally

The idea of miracle lacks credibility and only leads to gross errors. Hume was right and the implications of what he wrote are deeper than what he actually wrote!