

David Hume & His Definitive Refutation of Miracles Believability

Nature works in a predictable way - a cause and effect way. You don't cook porridge for it to turn into custard. If it did that would be a supernatural event - a miracle. Religion has miracles such as the Virgin Mary having a baby without a sperm.

David Hume said that we perceive that nature works a certain way. We argue by induction how we expect nature to work. We all know from our own induction and that of others that the sun will rise tomorrow. If somebody comes along and that person is the top person for being right in the world and says different we have the majority induction against his. So we can rationally ignore what he says. He would be talking about a miracle, he supposedly has miracle knowledge, for it is against our experience of how things work. The common induction and his are not equally important. His is inferior in value. Thus it is better to surmise that the miracle is a mistake in some way and not real.

And his testimony is undermined by other common inductions. Those are:

that honest people can suddenly lie sometimes for insane or trivial reasons

if you verify that the supernatural happens then you have no way of telling if it is at work a little or a lot so you never know if the coffee you made actually supernaturally ceased to exist and the coffee you have is another one - a replica

that supernatural claims can be made easily when they cannot be tested

that people make mistakes

that people can have illusions

that people seem to have their own truth

that people have false memories

that evidence can conflict or seem to.

And if nature changes so that a statue seems to bleed you never know if the statue really bled for you don't know what miracle caused you to see the change - was it a miracle vision in your head or a miraculously implanted false memory? A miracle then is not important enough to believe for you can only guess what the miracle was. The miracle and what is seen during it are two totally separate things. Several pieces of evidence for who Jack the Ripper was mean nothing if you don't know which piece is relevant. Same principle.

Evidence is what you get when you assume there is no supernatural interference. Evidence against a murderer would be no good if ghosts or gods or angels could tamper with it. Evidence for the supernatural is by default impossible and is self-contradictory.

The Christians say all should believe in miracles if the evidence is good enough. But that is contradictory when evidence is presuming miracles don't happen and no supernatural tampering has taken place!

A miracle by definition should be hard to believe so you need sufficient evidence. The Church says, "If we refuse to believe trustworthy miracle tales we must ask ourselves if we should believe any testimony to anything!" That is ultimately the only argument for belief in miracles there is. There are things we cannot be expected to believe without hard evidence regardless of how good the testimony is. If miracles and magic don't fall into that category then nothing does. If we cannot be expected to believe in them, people must not promote belief in them. It demeans us.

All Hume said was that testimony is not enough to establish a miracle. He did not say miracles were impossible but that we cannot be sensible if we believe in them and the reason is that you have only the word of alleged eyewitnesses. The implication is that believing in one miracle is irrational but believing in many is far far worse!

Hume & the Ice and the Prince

We take it that x is a law of nature. So if we follow Hume we conclude that a miracle that suspends or contradicts that law is unlikely to be true though possibly true. The reason is that nature works in a regular way. It works like it has laws.

Religion along with the rest of the world says that science decides that something is a law of nature. Then it can happen that science finds things that contradict this law. Then science will revise or modify or even scrap its view of the law. Religion says that Hume's logic about nature working as if it were regular, forbids science to change its view about what is or isn't a natural law just as it forbids belief in miracles. But science is not saying that a natural law is not a law. It is merely saying it has made mistakes in identifying what is a natural law. It would be crazy to say that if science used to think lightning was caused by mirrors and had to revise this view that science should be open to miracles. Science correcting its own scientific errors about natural law has nothing to do with proving that natural laws allow for miracles. It's not the same. The fact that errors can be made about what is a natural law only shows that there are such things as natural laws.

Science verifies that there are general laws. It is the more specific laws that it may get wrong. If it makes mistakes about these laws, it will discover them by finding that the specific laws do not really fit the general or overall laws. Science then revising and changing is demanded by Hume's thinking - it is not excluded.

Hume stated that if the Queen died and rose again he would consider a far-fetched natural explanation such as a conspiracy to be correct. Miracle claims even if true force this suspicion on all involved. They violate the argument that faith should be harmless on the mundane and human level. They sow the seeds of sectarianism.

If you say it is a miracle, it follows that the next view in line is the conspiracy view. If it's not a miracle then it's a conspiracy. Even if you accept the miracle view, you are still giving indirect support to the conspiracy view. You are taking a step towards accusing. You are partly ready to accuse.

Hume thinks that a magical explanation would be the worst explanation and even more far-fetched. Notice he does not say it's an impossible explanation but only an unlikely one.

Christians have started saying that anybody who does not allow for the possibility that the evidence can establish the credibility of anything be it a spaceship from another solar system landing in Jerusalem or whatever is being unfair. They want us to allow for the possibility that the evidence for the miraculous resurrection of Jesus means he really did miraculously rise. Evidence can mislead. But asserting that it's possible Jesus really rose is not the same as believing that he did and is thin. It is really agnosticism. It will mean that maybe Jesus did not die on the cross at all but came around in the tomb and found himself miraculously healed except for the scars in his hands and feet and side and only thought he rose again. The possibilities are endless. Belief in the miraculous means you might have evidence (hypothetically) for a miracle but you cannot know or believe what exactly the miracle was. I would not trust a person who claims that sceptics of miracles are ignoring the evidence for them when this person claims to know exactly what the miracle was. Pity Hume didn't use this argument!

Hume said that a miracle is a violation of past experience. This experience tells us that princes do not turn into toads. A miracle is an event that violates this experience. Thus it is always more likely that past experience is right and that a miracle claim is wrong or based on error. Is it the case then that a prince in scorching India who has never seen ice and does not believe in it though he has heard of it is actually right not to believe? It would seem to many that the prince is being logical but he is wrong. They would see logic as misleading unless you admit that it is not all about what you have experienced. But in fact we know from experience that we have no reason to question most of what others say they experienced. This seems to open the door to miracles for people say they have experienced them.

Hume tried to deal with the problem of a prince in a tropical land who has never seen ice. He said if we never see miracles then we are validated in believing that they do not happen. The same would seem to be true of the prince and the ice. The prince would seem to be validated by not believing in ice.

Hume said that the existence of ice can be sufficiently verified because it is part of normal human experience. He means the prince can go to a land where there is winter or get enough testimony to its existence. Hume here is acknowledging the principle that it is rational to try and believe only what you have evidence for but as belief is not certainty it can be wrong.

Incredibly the Christians seize on the point about the prince seeking sufficient evidence to argue, "If Hume really believes that enough testimony will do, he has to admit that enough testimony to the resurrection of Jesus may exist and be enough to make it sensible to believe in the resurrection".

It would only apply to the resurrection if the resurrection was not supernatural. There is a world of difference between talking about a man rising by God's power from the dead and some natural mystery in a far away land. One is supernatural and one is not. Simple.

Hume does admit that there could be enough evidence for the resurrection but it has not been found. He merely says that there isn't enough evidence for the resurrection as there would be for the ice.

There are hard facts that show that ice exists. There are no such facts for the resurrection - all you have is testimony not hard facts. If the prince is gullible to believe in the ice even if it does exist, he is far more gullible if he believes in the resurrection of Christ.

The prince knows that nature can do things he has never seen so it is perfectly rational for him to take those who have seen the ice at their word. He knows that he had to believe as a child that the chicken becomes edible when boiled though he never looked in the pot. It is incorrect that he was being asked to believe in the ice against his past experience for his past experience says it could be possible.

The ice problem is a natural problem but the resurrection goes into the supernatural. The Christians' point is irrelevant - it is the natural we are talking about and they are on about the supernatural.

It never occurred to Hume to state that if the prince sees water taking different forms such as fluid and steam then it is natural to suppose it can turn into ice too. So the prince does not need to go to a country in winter or get enough testimony. Christians like this thought because they work out an analogy from it. Here it is, "We may suppose that water can turn to ice without evidence that it can just because we see it becoming fluid and steam and getting hot and cold. Then surely we can suppose that as water is not alive turns into life so what was alive can live again as in the resurrection of Jesus." They are confusing the supernatural and the natural. It is as silly as saying the amazing beauty of a butterfly proves that Mary is miraculously appearing or may be appearing at Medjugorje. It is as silly as saying that if you trust your wife and you find 100 dollars has vanished from your wallet and only she could have taken it you may conclude that it just miraculously dematerialised! Life cannot go on if we start making assumptions like that. It shows no respect for people or life. And Christians like to be selective in who gets respect - the Hindu miracle worker will be dismissed as a hoaxer or a witch while the Christian one is a saint.

The Christians cannot deal with any of the evidence against the rationality of believing in miracles. And they know it.

Hume was right. The induction that men stay dead overrides any induction that Jesus rose. This bit is hypothetical: "We would settle for saying both inductions could be equal so we don't know which one to choose. We do know. Choose the best fit for your experience."

Restrict the meaning of miracle to an event that just happens and has no apparent natural cause. That gets Hume out of objections such as that a prince who does not see ice should not believe in it. It is not the same thing - the objection is deliberately off topic.

It is irrational and superstitious to believe in miracles.