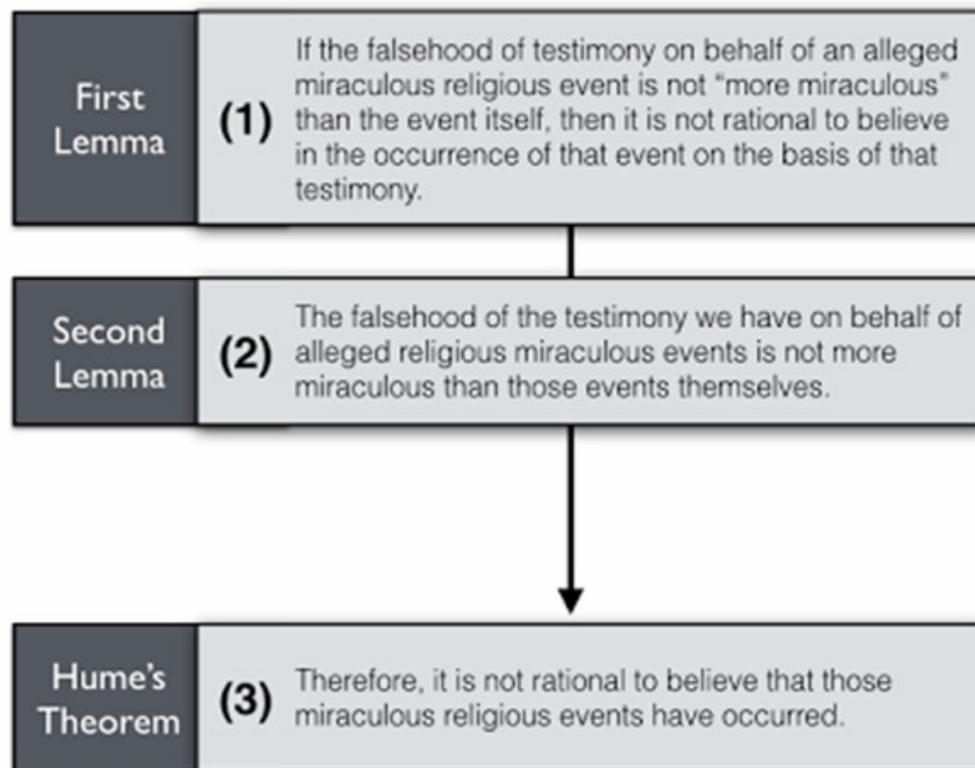


Review of the The Everlasting Check: Hume on Miracles



THE LOGIC BEHIND HUME'S THOUGHT:

Explanation: Science is more than just lab experiments - any kind of open-minded testing counts as science. It is always human testimony that says if a strange event is a miracle. What if science examined a wafer that turned into human flesh? It will not know that a wafer supposedly changed. Somebody has to tell it. If people are recovering from incurable illnesses, science will show this. Unless somebody says it is a miracle of Jesus nobody will even call it a miracle at all. Science will regard the how as irrelevant and put it down to a mystery so it will not matter if it is told if it is a miracle or not. Science cannot test a miracle claim. It can only test the before and after and it is usually only the after that is tested. Hearsay and testimony is not enough to establish that a brick floated in mid-air as a fluke of nature so how could testimony be enough to establish that the brick floated by magic or a miracle? The latter is a bigger thing and if we have the right to assume testimonies are false just because they are bizarre then we definitely have this right most with supernatural claims. Flukes of nature can happen but we have no way of being sure the supernatural happens. This is a paraphrase of what Hume was trying to convey.

THE CHOICE

If you want to try to believe in a miracle you may have this choice:

Accepting the miracle testimony as true

Accepting that the testimony is the miracle.

Two different miracles. If you have to make a choice then which one?

Accepting that the testimony is the miracle is the one to choose for it is the obvious one to assume. Why say a statue really came to life because x said so and not say that it is a miracle that x said it and it seems supernatural how it cannot be refuted?

PROS OF THE BOOK

Pros: takes care to show what Hume meant by a miracle. He said a miracle is a violation of nature but in fact he meant that it looks like a violation of what we expect of nature. George quotes Hume saying a man with a clean bill of health dying just like that is not a miracle for we know things like that happen. But a dead man returning to life is not observed in the same way which is why if it happens it is a miracle. Hume is weighing evidence against evidence. So George paraphrases

Hume's thought as "The conflict is not with a law of nature but with a well-confirmed statement for such a law." Or "To say an event has violated a law would just be to say that it has violated statement for which we have a considerable degree of evidence."

My thought: Critics have said Hume is guilty of saying a miracle is what which cannot happen for nature cannot be violated. This is not true for Hume makes his case about evidence and does not say natural law is that iron. And if he did say that it would be a mere assumption. It can be argued that we have to assume something so even if we just guess it that is fine.

Pros: Points out how Hume showed that we have no proof that a miracle is all about being seen. A feather might levitate all by itself without any wind or natural force and nobody might know or notice. Hume pointed out that not all miracles are equally miraculous.

My point; he seems to mean that not all miracles are equally impressive. That is true. But we must be careful. Christians say miracles are acts wherein God simply makes something from nothing there and then. He makes the miracle from nothing or if you like the miracle is an act of creation. Thus there is as much miracle in cold milk boiling up in a second as there is in a man rising from the dead. If something comes from nothing then to do one thing is literally as easy as to do the other.

Pros: Shows that Hume has no problem with saying miracles happen it is just that the standard for assessing them is poor and irrational. Hume for example says that we should believe the testimony for a miracle if the testimony being wrong would be as big of a miracle or a bigger one as the reported miracle. "Hume does believe that one can imagine circumstances in which one would be justified in judging that a miracle had occurred." "The evidence against the miracle is just the evidence in favour of the confirmed lawlike claim with which it conflicts." As Locke would put it, "The two foundations of credibility, viz. Common Observation in like cases, and particular Testimonies in that particular instance." A person can testify that he alone knows the moon is now cheese but that contradicts everybody else's observation. That is why even if he is right we cannot believe for we don't have enough to believe him.

Pros: Points out that evidence and testimony are no good for confirming anything if the witnesses are too anxious to use the miracle tales to further an religious agenda or faith propaganda. George writes, "It is clear, then, that the testimonial evidence in favour of a miracle of a religious nature is far weaker than the evidence in favor of the lawlike claim with which the alleged miraculous event conflicts. Hence, the falsehood of testimony on behalf of an alleged miraculous event of a religious nature is not 'more miraculous' than the event itself."

My thought: That is a very good point. Even if testimony gave some hope of establishing that something magical happened it is no good if there is a propaganda motivation. Pious fraud is quite common and we must remember that Christians can feel forced to promote their religion at all costs for they feel it is better than letting non-believers go to Hell for not believing. Fear is largely the message of the Bible and most of what Jesus said was scaremongering. Hume explicitly declared that a miracle claim cannot make a sensible foundation for a religion. Thus the miracle of the resurrection is a bad foundation for Christianity. Thus the miracle of the Quran is a bad foundation for Islam. It is not a good sign when most religions and most religious people have a scary idea of the divine and are keen to honour its immorality and call it good.

Hume also wrote elsewhere that he hardly ever met a man who loved anybody as much as he loved himself. Hume said that wanting others to be reasonably happy is a natural instinct. He said that it is "rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself." But he added it is also as "rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not over-balance all the selfish."

If so, then miracle claims that are voiced in honour of God are not about him at all or rarely are even if they could be. You would need strong evidence out of respect for God before you can declare that a miracle involving somebody else speaks something of God. And if nature helps us to be good what do we need God and religion and miracles for? Real goodness keeps to the point. The unbeliever cares about refuting miracles because the unbeliever does not like the human cost of such beliefs. It is not just about their silliness.

Pros: George shows that Hume did not fuse ideas of God being able to change nature with miracles: "He does not intend, as some readers have supposed, to make the notion of divine causation part of the concept miracle."

My thought is that Hume is equating miracle and magic. He ignores the alleged distinction which is that a miracle is an act of a creator God who creates an event out of nothing that does not fit in with what we expect of nature while magic is the same thing except that witches or spirits do it not God. In both cases you do not really know how the event is done but only that it is done. It is really just about show for we are still left guessing about the origin.

Pros: if the lawlike claim we all accept is that dead men stay dead then it is no longer a lawlike claim if Jesus' resurrection really is known to have happened. George writes, "One can no longer view Jesus' resurrection as miracle, since there is no

longer a – general claim with which it conflicts.” In other words, if dead men do not necessarily stay dead then there is no miracle about Jesus rising - his staying dead would be as much entitled to be called a miracle.

My thought: Religion says that everything is a miracle in the sense that there is something when there should be nothing. So we already have the problem of calling Jesus' resurrection a miracle. The only hope is to say that it makes no sense for it is impossible for a man to rise and yet it happened. A miracle is about show thus it is demeaning to the idea of a sensible God. It contradicts the doctrine that a real miracle from God is an "I love you and want you to be guided to my truth".

George shows how some go as far as to say that dead men stay dead but dead men who are born of virgins can live. That is an obvious cop-out but it is demanded by belief in miracles. What else can the believers say? Why are they not saying, "It is true that only holy men do miracles but a sinful man born of a virgin can do them?" They do not believe their own nonsense.

Pros: George deals with three objections to Hume's argument that the lawlike claims come from his experience which is why he can dismiss the resurrection of Jesus for he never experienced Jesus' return from the grave.

One criticism is that Hume makes mistakes about the general lawlike claims he thinks are true.

Another is that he regards his experiences of how regular nature is as proof that miracles don't happen. But his experiences cannot be proof.

The last is that he is contradicting himself for he rejects induction or guessing as being any good and yet it is by induction he learns miracles are too silly for believing in and that experience refutes them. Induction can be wrong and he is offering his induction experiences to support certain things as possible laws of nature. It cannot both support and not support.

It is not true that Hume regarded his perception of natural law as proof and as infallible. He regarded it is as enough.

And as for induction, if he contradicted himself on induction it does not affect his arguments against believing in miracle testimonies. As George says, "either past experience does furnish us with a proof of certain lawlike claims, or it does not."

My thought regarding the induction is that the argument has nothing to do with it. We are not guilty of induction when we are forced to take one view - that the argument is right. Hume used the argument as a reason for not believing miracle tales. Believers use it as a reason for believing a miracle has happened. So the induction thing is irrelevant.

Pros: George deals with how Hume sees a person who believes in a natural event that is not in her or his past experience – like the prince who believes in ice though he cannot see it – as rational but the person who believes testimony to religious miracles as irrational. He asks if the two are just as irrational as each other. George says that Hume observes that to tell an Indian prince that there is solid water is not asking him to believe in a miracle but to tell him there is solid water but just not in India or that the water cannot become solid when the temperature is warm like it is in India. So the prince is taught natural laws that explain how water can go solid.

My thought: If both the prince believing in ice and the person who hears of a miracle and believes are irrational it is still the case that the prince is less irrational than the believer in miracle. A person who has a far fetched natural but possible explanation for what a magician does is wiser than one who just simply assumes it is supernatural. Indeed the latter is just a conduit for laziness.

Pros: George brings up our assumption that the future will always be the same as the past. He says Hume has no problem with this assumption that nature will work the same way tomorrow as it did yesterday. George points out though that it is a circular argument for there is no reason why tomorrow has to be in any way similar to yesterday.

Pros: George shows how Hume knew that only experience not testimony gives credence to a miracle but "the only basis for this credit is experience, which then properly weighed actually favours the evidence against the testimony. The justification thereby undercuts itself."

In other words, you need to see a miracle yourself to be reasonably sure it is a miracle. It is up to the person saying a miracle has happened to first and foremost consider and thoroughly refute all possible objections and put forward and deal with all evidences against. Then and only then can the evidence for the miracle be discussed.

Pros: George gives us Hume's Theorem: "It is not rational to believe on the basis of testimony that a miracle of a religious nature has occurred." He warns us that Hume thinks that miracles are not necessarily religious – there can be ones like a litre of petrol lasting for ten years in a care that is constantly on the road. But George thinks the theorem is best directed at religious miracles as in acts done by God or a spirit. The weaker evidence can never destroy the stronger is another good way to understand the reasoning behind the theorem. George says theorem is only a name but it is not strictly speaking a

rigid dogmatic theorem. It does not need to be proven 100% to be able to refute all miracle claims.

Pros: Hume uses the arguments of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Tillotson to attack “all kinds of superstitious delusions.” Tillotson's arguments were however directed only against the Roman Catholic superstition of transubstantiation. Tillotson reasoned thus,

The ultimate evidence in favour of miracles is their being observed by eyewitnesses

The testimony of these witnesses is not as strong evidence for the miracle being real as what they have seen and heard. In other words, if you see a miracle you cannot expect those who take your word for it to think it is true as much as you do.

Therefore the evidence that bread and wine really turn into Jesus is weaker than what observation tells us for we cannot observe this change.

We do observe that the supposedly changed bread and wine are not flesh and not blood.

This observation refutes any evidence that the bread and wine change “weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger.”

It is concluded that it makes no sense to think that bread and wine really turn into Jesus.

Tillotson said that miracles done to back up transubstantiation are no good for they try to dismantle the clear evidence of the senses that the miracle has not happened. “If we be not certain of what we see, we can be certain of nothing.”

George adds that the belief in transubstantiation needs evidence and undermines it so it is self-undermining. Tillotson pointed out, “What can be more vain than to pretend, that a man may be assured that such a Doctrine is revealed by God, and consequently true, which if it may be true, a man can have no assurance at all of any Divine Revelation?”

Tillotson's reasoning could be applied to miracles other than magically transforming bread and wine. Here is one example I like using the alleged power of water baptism to turn a baby from an anti-God into a child of God and set her free from sin so she can in theory live a perfect life.

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The testimony of these witnesses is not as strong evidence for the miracle being real as what they have seen and heard. In other words, if you see a miracle you cannot expect those who take your word for it to think it is true as much as you do.

Therefore the evidence that baptism really changes a baby from a sinner into a good person is weaker than what observation tells us for we cannot observe this change.

We do observe that the supposedly changed baby grows up the same as an unbaptised person and is no better or worse.

This observation refutes any evidence that the baptism remakes a child for “weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger.”

It is concluded that it makes no sense to think that baptism really turns a child from an ordinary sinful rebel against God into a potentially sainted person who will be better than she would be if she were not baptised.

Pro: For Hume “the difference between a marvelous event and a miraculous one is ... a matter of degree: as the evidence in favour of a lawlike statement increases, a violation of it moves from being merely extraordinary, to marvellous, and finally to miraculous.”

So the odder the claim the less you can just take it for granted as being true.

Pro: Hume treated believers claiming confirmation for their beliefs from miracle stories “as completely on a par with those made by the scientist or the historian.”

Pros: I love the Wittgenstein quote about the problems of philosophy which he says “are not empirical problems. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known.” It inspires one to hope that believers in miracles only think they believe.

CONS:

Cons: George rejects Frazer's view that the ancients really did think their rituals and prayers kept the universe going. Frazer said that spells to bring rain seemed to work to the ancients for rain had to come anyway. George says this accuses them of being too stupid. George thinks rites to cause the sun to rise were not about literally trying to get the sun to come up but to

express the wish that the sun would come up and to celebrate and anticipate that. It was symbolism.

But the fact of the matter is that there were religions and priests casting spells all over the world so there was no way to test what would happen if rites to cause the sun to come up were discontinued. So you can hold that the ancients thought the rites worked and avoid calling them stupid.

And what if they were not stupid but suffering from a common mental problem where they had an illogical approach to reality?

There is no such thing as anybody having a mental illness. Mental illness is an umbrella term for mental illnesses. Each person has mental problems for complicated reasons some of which are stand alone problems which add to a bigger one. Religious faith can be a mental illness and let most believers act reasonably normal but if the person gets loads of problems the religious faith can be the trigger that puts them over the boundary and they end up needing urgent help.

Another example given by George of an odd religious idea is how the Jews opposed the eating of pork. It may have started off with realising that pig meat was infectious but that does not explain how the Jews didn't realise it needed to be cooked properly. So the argument is that they banned pig meat for they thought God banned it.

Is that really any saner than thinking the eating of pig meat brought bad luck? To argue that God bans walking under ladders is no different from saying it is unlucky.

Cons: George rejects the Humean notion that a believer in a miracle is irrational for depending on mere testimony because:

The person has a different way of being reasonable.

Or their own understanding of reason that works for them.

Wittgenstein says calling them unreasonable implies they are being rebuked. He says they should be described as not-reasonable. That is fine as long as they don't claim to be being reasonable. He is evidently saying that believers may think it makes sense to get information from the Holy Spirit. So what they believe may be independent of any logical argument but is still reasonable in the sense that reason tells us to heed testimony for it cannot tell us everything. George mentions how smart rational people believe the creation account in Genesis. But smart rational people think they believe things that they may not believe. They just have not taken the time to analyse themselves. And many of the smart rational people are on the payroll of the Church.

Cons: we would consider a statue coming to life and talking to us for thirty seconds a great miracle. But what if we see an intelligent design behind seemingly random and non-supernatural things that happen in our lives?

My thought: But people who think that way do not always see the intelligent design as a good thing. George should not see people as rational who see a pattern for that idea can be bad for many people. Plus the patterns most believers look for are not about them but about other people. It is warped to tell yourself that the fleeting moments of happiness your dying child gets are part of God's loving plan for it implies the good has triumphed over the bad when it is actually getting worse.

It is irrational to see a pattern as a God's work for no matter what kind of universe you have patterns have to be expected.

No matter what method you use to work out things that you consider to be true, in some cases at least all you have is experience. You can experience something that nothing else can support. All you have to go on is the experience.

Cons: Should show how Hume wrote lots of things that could if developed give further refutations of the goodness and rationality of believing in miracles. For example, Hume said that reason, our thinking power, is just about telling what seems true apart from what seems false and that "reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." This terrifying blunt statement seems to say that we have to reason anyway even if reason is programmed by our passions. That is what he means by the ought. He cannot mean it really is a good thing to have feelings programming and colouring what you think. Thinking and feeling should be separate faculties. He argued that feeling miracles happen is not a reason for believing so he sees the control of reason by the passions as an evil we have to live with. One way to deal with it is to say that the passion of love of truth is what keeps reason on the right track so in that way reason being controlled by a need or passion need not be a bad thing but in fact a good thing. But if we put that aside it is clear that feeling that a miracle has happened means it happened

FINALLY

David Hume has laid the rationality of miracle supporters to rest. One reason the testimony to a miracle is not enough to warrant accepting the testimony is that there is no reality check. You cannot look to see if the person is right. There is more to it than that. There is a psychological/personal issue. It opens the door too much for a person to lie to themselves or

believe the miracle not because it is true but because they want it to be true. Without a reality check a person can believe or want to believe anything. The testimony to a miracle is accepted not because it is true but because it might be true and there is no way of knowing. Thus it is clear that even if a believer says they don't claim to be depending on evidence or good logic when they embrace a miracle doctrine, such as the resurrection of Jesus, as true they are lying. They are really in fact saying that something being possible makes it believable. It does not. It needs to be proven or probable. Possible is not enough. They are indeed using bad logic.

Miracles are superstitious and based on a bad attitude and by its fruits you know it. If miracles are attempts to override evidence that miracles do not happen then people of integrity cannot condone or enable belief in them. Many miracle accounts do indeed try to argue, "Okay this prophet or holy place has a lot of critics but rather than answer the critics point by point we have the miracle to answer them." Such an attitude leads to obviously fake miracle sites such as Achill Ireland home getting away with it. No religion looks credible as a revelation from God without miracles. They might not make the religion credible but they help it to look credible. They are cosmetic. Could you imagine Christianity being as strong if it were merely a religion of wise proverbs and Jesus was just a preacher? To dismantle the believability of miracles is to dismantle religion.