

# Hume on Miracles

## Section X of *The Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*

### I

This section might be seen to present us with a contradiction in Hume's thought. Up to this point Hume has maintained that belief cannot be grounded in reason, but is on the contrary grounded in custom or instinct, and this is advantageous to the survival of the species. In this section, however, he offers rules for right thinking – that is, he is telling us how we *ought* to think, and not how we do *in fact* think. He is arguing that we *ought not* to believe in miracles, and he claims that this is because a miracle can never be proven.

Hume's argument against the possibility of a miracle is as follows. A miracle is by definition "a violation of the laws of nature". But the laws of nature are established incontrovertibly by all experience – by the constant conjunction of like causes with like effects. Thus, a miracle could never be established.

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.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, some people *do* believe in miracles, as Hume acknowledges, so the purpose of Hume's argument is not that the belief in the uniform laws of nature *are* universally accepted, but that they *ought* to be. Hume maintains that the "proof" in favour of the uniformity of nature is so strong, that no evidence whatsoever, no matter what authority offered it, could establish that a single miracle occurred.

It could be argued that in doing this Hume is breaching his own fact/value gap. The fact/value gap simply asserts that one cannot argue from a factual statement to an ethical statement, without the use of some purely ethical premise. Arguments which appear to do so are either fallacies, or tacitly assume an ethical first premise.

The statement, "You ought not to believe in a miracle" is an ethical statement. It morally exhorts you not to believe in something. Thus, there would appear to be the following argument.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hume *Enquires* Section X, Part I, Paragraph 90



Fact: A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature which have been established by unalterable experience.

Ought: One ought not to believe in a miracle<sup>2</sup>

This argument is further complicated by other ‘facts’ that Hume has established elsewhere in *The Enquiries*.

1. Through the paradox of induction it is not possible to prove to reason that the future will resemble the past, or to justify any inference from particular observation to general law.
2. Thus, we do not *know* (in a sense that means that we can prove it to reason) that a miracle cannot occur.
3. People in fact believe that the future will resemble the past, and that nature is uniform because they have been conditioned by the uniformity of nature to believe it. It is an instinctive belief.

Given (1) and (2) it is not possible for Hume to maintain that as a matter of reason, people who believe in a miracle are wrong. There is no argument that is capable of demonstrating to reason that a miracle cannot occur.

In what sense, then, is he using *ought* ?

It is possible to interpret his argument as follows: people do not in fact believe in miracles, because they are conditioned to believe in the uniformity of nature – that is instinctual with them. A violation of the laws of nature has never actually been witnessed. Some people *say* they believe in miracles, but that do not really believe in them. The fact that they say they believe in them requires some psychological explanation, but when put to the test no one does believe in one. (Like asking someone who believes that people can fly to jump out of the window.) When one is saying that one ought not to believe in a miracle, one is saying that one ought not to indulge in fantasies; one ought to face up to one’s beliefs as they really are. This is also not an argument from fact to value. Superstition is injurious to progress. Although there is no objective sense in which progress is better than non-progress, as a human being with moral feelings Hume feels obliged to exhort people to abandon superstition and face reality.

... there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves...<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> In truth, Hume never uses the word *ought* in his essay on miracles. He tells us what a “wise man” would do. However, the implication is clearly that we *ought not* to believe in a miracle, for that is the entire purpose of the essay.



Interpreted thus, Hume's doctrine on miracles is consistent and coherent. However, it assumes what it has to prove, and is strictly circular. It assumes (1) that people cannot with their reason question their beliefs; and (2) that in fact, no miracle ever has occurred.

Hume's system of belief is a closed system. If you enter that system, then *clearly* there are no grounds for belief in a miracle. Nature is in fact uniform, and a miracle can never have actually happened.

Hume's system of thought may recommend itself as an *entire* explanation of existence. Indeed, if his system is capable of explaining the origin of everything that we can claim to know, then to import other notions will seem to be unnecessary. Therefore, we cannot evaluate Hume's doctrine on miracles in isolation of an evaluation of his system as a whole.

To accept Hume's entire system, you have to accept the following. (Note, we use some terms that Hume would not have used; however, Hume anticipated theories such as the theory of Natural Selection, so it is appropriate to clarify Hume's thinking by using those terms.)

1. Man is a mechanism for processing information; all information derives from sense experience.
2. Although it cannot be proven, man in fact lives in a real world of material objects and their properties that operate according to uniform laws of nature.
3. Man has evolved through the process of natural selection, and his instincts are genetically and environmentally conditioned. His moral feelings have also been selected by natural processes to adapt him to living in relation to nature and in relation to other men in society.
4. Man is instinctually conditioned to believe that he lives in a real world that is uniform.

If you accept this account of man, then Hume's views on miracles is consistent with them.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hume *Enquires* Section X, Part I, Paragraph 92



## II

In the second part of this section of *The Enquiries* Hume goes on to explain why in fact some people do believe in miracles, how such beliefs originate, and why there is no miracle sufficiently attested to in history that could prove that it occurred. He claims that behind every report of a miracle there is some kind of fraud.

But it is nothing strange, I hope, that men should lie in all ages.<sup>4</sup>

Someone is simply lying, and the motive for this is self-interest and self-aggrandizement.

But what greater temptation than to appear a missionary, a prophet, an ambassador from heaven? Who would not encounter many dangers and difficulties, in order to attain so sublime a character?<sup>5</sup>

Then credulous people go on to accept the lie and grotesquely exaggerate it. In addition, some miracles may be just unusual natural events – “violations of the usual course of nature”. That is, what someone might take as a miracle could be a freak event brought about by hidden causes, but entire consistent with the uniformity of nature.

Hume is open to the challenge: how does he know, from evidence alone, that a given “violation of the usual course of nature” can be accounted for by causes as yet undiscovered. Alternatively, how does he know that a report of a miracle is the product of a fraud?

Once again, his argument is strictly circular. If you accept the Humean account of human nature, then his conclusion, *that the belief in miracles, such as exists, must be based on lies*, follows naturally; but there is nothing in what he says about the propensity of human beings to lie that proves in itself that all reports of miracles must be lies. Nor does it prove that *all* testimony of miracles are lies if, in fact, *some* are shown to be lies.

## III

Throughout his work Hume claims that his work is not an attack on Protestant Christianity (although he liberally attacks Catholicism).

I am the better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised

---

<sup>4</sup> Hume *Enquires* Section X, Part I, Paragraph 94

<sup>5</sup> Hume *Enquires* Section X, Part I, Paragraph 97



enemies to the *Christian Religion*, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason. Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure.<sup>6</sup>

However, his attack on miracles is clearly of relevance to whether we accept the testimony of the bible or not. Hume states at the end of his section on miracles that religion should be based on faith and not on reason. However, this appears to be insincere.

So that, upon the whole, we may conclude that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

There is a clear tension between saying that we can believe in a miracle on grounds of faith, whilst maintaining that such a belief contradicts “the principles of understanding” and all our instincts. He writes

But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country.

However, in the Bible we read of how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

On his arrival Jesus found that Lazarus had already been four days in the tomb. ... Jesus again sighed deeply; then he went over to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone placed against it. Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the dead man’s sister, said to him, ‘Sir, by now there will be a stench; he has been there four days.’ Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you have faith you will see the glory of God?’ So they removed the stone.

Then Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank thee; thou hast heard me. I knew already that thou always hearest me, but I spoke for the sake of the people standing round, tht they might believe that thou didst send me.’

---

<sup>6</sup> Hume *Enquires* Section X, Part I, Paragraph 100



Then he raised his voice in a great cry: 'Lazarus, come forth.' The dead man came out, his hands and feet swathed in linen bands, his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said, 'Loose him; let him go.'<sup>7</sup>

The belief in the existence of God is based either on a rational proof of his existence (a "deistic proof") or on religious experience (a "theistic proof"). For the religious experience to demonstrate the need for a being (God) that is not a natural force of nature – in other words, to demonstrate that Hume's closed system of belief is not sufficient to account for human experience – the religious experience must transcend the laws of nature in some sense. In other words, all religious belief requires some notion of the miraculous, whether within oneself in finding faith, or in the testimony of prophets as to some violation of the laws of nature on a given occasion. If this is correct, then Hume is also right to conclude

... that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one.

---

<sup>7</sup> The Gospel according to St. John, Chapter 11 verses 17 - 44

