Hume's philosophy of religion

- Miracles
- Argument from design

Hume's philosophy of religion (1): miracles (*EHU* section 10)

In *EHU* 10 and 11, Hume turns his attention to the philosophy of religion. In *EHU* 10 Hume discusses miracles, and in particular the question of whether or not belief in miracles is ever justified. Miracles often play a key role in religious thought. For example, in Hume's time, the view that the miracles described in the New Testament established not only the truth of Christianity, but also the fact that all other religions were false, was widely held – by Christians of course! (see Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p.205). What this indicates is that if Hume were to give a negative answer to the question, 'Is belief in miracles justified?', he would be taking up a very radical position indeed.

What are miracles?

First: what exactly is a miracle? We can all give examples, such as levitation, resurrection after death, water turning into wine, and the immediate cure from a disease such as polio. (This is the representative list given by Swinburne; see Davies, p.195.) But what about a general definition? Hume defines a miracle as 'a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent' (*EHU* 10:23n). The fundamental idea at work in Hume's definition is also at work in many of the more contemporary definitions. For example, Swinburne ('Miracles', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 18, 1968) defines a miracle as 'a violation of a law of nature by a god, that is, a very powerful rational being who is not a material object (viz., is invisible and intangible)'. And Mackie (*Miracle of Theism*, 1982) suggests that a miracle is

> a violation of a law of nature [by] divine or supernatural intervention … The laws of nature describe the ways in which the world – including, of course, human beings – works when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it.

The fundamental shared idea, then, is that a miracle is a transgression or a violation of a law of nature by God (or by a god).

Two aspects of Hume's definition need to be clarified. First, for Hume, a *law of nature is a universal causal regularity*. Secondly, Hume draws a distinction between (1) miracles and (2) the

marvellous and the extraordinary (see, e.g., *EHU* 10.8). Marvellous or extraordinary events are certainly unusual, but they do not violate any laws of nature. Of course, they may violate our *expectations*, given what we *believe* the laws of nature to be. So such events might demonstrate that our understanding of the laws of nature is imperfect. But since these kinds of events do not actually provide exceptions to genuine laws of nature, they do not, by Hume's definition, count as miracles.

Is Hume's definition adequate?

There are some worries that need to be aired about Hume's definition of a miracle. First, someone might argue that it is essential to an event being a miracle that that event is of religious significance. But even if this were correct, it might still be true that violating a law of nature is *necessary* for an event to be a miracle, and that would be enough for Hume's subsequent argument. Secondly, someone might hold that God is actually omnipresent in the universe (He is everywhere at all times) and that He serves (among other things) to conserve the being of the universe. If this is right, then it might seem odd to speak of a miracle as a case of God *intervening* in the world, as that would suggest that God is, under normal circumstances, positioned *outside* the world. Nevertheless, what the idea of God *intervening* is supposed to capture is the thought that miracles occur when God causally disrupts the usual ways in which the universe unfolds, and that thought does seem to be at the core of what we mean by a miracle. Thirdly, some theologians have argued that we should not think of miracles as occurring in the natural order at all, since God, the cause of miracles, transcends the natural order. But this is surely a difficult position to sustain. As Beauchamp observes in his introduction to *EHU* (p.45), 'if God parted the Red Sea to assist in the exodus from Egypt, it is hard to explain how the Red Sea is not part of the natural order even if God is not part of the natural order'. All in all, Hume's definition seems to hold up quite well.

Hume's sceptical argument (part 1)

Now that we have a better grip on what miracles are, we can re-ask the crucial question: should we believe in them? At the heart of Hume's discussion is the following fact: for almost all of us, the evidence for the occurrence of miracles comes entirely from the *testimony* of others (ultimately from the reports of supposed eye-witnesses and spectators). The key issue, then, is how credible such evidence really is. With that in mind, here is what we might call Hume's *in principle* position. (For a similar, although not identical, formulation, see p.46 of Beauchamp's introduction to *EHU*.)

1. Evidence is based on the frequency with which events are found to be conjoined in experience, and thus may be stronger (given a high frequency of observed conjoinings) or weaker (given a low frequency of observed conjoinings) (*EHU* 10:3).
2. The wise person proportions belief according to the evidence (*EHU* 10:4).
3. Where past experience is uniform (two events have always been observed to be conjoined), we have a *proof* that when an event of the first kind occurs, an event of the second kind will follow (*EHU* 10:4).
4. In other cases there will be an 'opposition of experiments and observations'. However, the evidence for one expected outcome will typically be greater than the evidence for another. Under such circumstances, we have less than a proof. We should believe that the better supported of the two possible outcomes will occur, but only with an appropriate degree of *probability* (*EHU* 10:4).
5. The credibility of the testimony of others depends on our experience 'of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses' (*EHU* 10:5).
6. The evidence of human testimony may amount to a proof or a probability (*EHU* 10:6).
7. We speak of a law of nature only when our experience has been of an exceptionless regularity in nature (*EHU* 10:12).
8. Therefore whenever we have a law of nature we always have a full proof (*EHU* 10:12).
9. A miracle is a violation of a law of nature (*EHU* 10:12).
10. Therefore we have a full proof *against* the occurrence of any miracle (*EHU* 10:12). Miracles are, as Mackie (*Miracle of Theism*) puts it, 'maximally improbable'.
11. Hume brings this part of his argument to a close by concluding that

> no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish: And even in that case, there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains after deducting the inferior (*EHU* 10:13).

We can unpack Hume's conclusion here as containing the following two claims: (1) testimonial evidence is sufficient to establish a miracle only if the falsity of the testimony would be more unlikely than a violation of a law of nature; (2) the law of nature will be supported by a full proof, so even if the miracle-supporting testimonial evidence were to triumph, our belief in the miracle must be tempered, following the necessary comparative calculations (the 'mutual destruction of arguments').

It seems that Hume's general position, at the end of EHU 10 part 1, is that, *in principle*, there may be sufficient evidence to prove a miracle, although such a case will always be *extremely* difficult to make. Turning to *EHU* 10 part 2, however, we find Hume treading a more radical line. First he suggests that once one examines the nature of the actual testimonial evidence for miracles, it emerges that none of that evidence has ever amounted to a proof. Thus he states that 'there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence' (*EHU* 10:15). And later in the section, Hume goes even further, when he claims that 'no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof' (*EHU* 10:35). Because the testimonial evidence for miracles falls so far short of credibility, Hume concludes that no such evidence can provide a secure foundation for any system of religion (*EHU* 10:35).

Hume's sceptical argument (part 2)

What are the arguments that Hume musters in support of this more radical line? First, he argues that no miracle has ever been testified to by a sufficient number of witnesses who meet the following conditions: (a) they are sensible and educated enough not to be deluding themselves; (b) their integrity is beyond doubt; (c) they would have too much to lose if they were discovered to be lying; and (d) their testimonies were delivered in a public context, among educated people who would surely spot any deceit (*EHU* 10:15). Moreover, Hume claims, religious fanatics are particularly unreliable, since they may be prone to imagine miracles where there are none, or they may lie (with the best of intentions) so as to promote their holy cause, or they may be inclined to deceive others in order to stoke the fires of their vanity (*EHU* 10:17).

Secondly, Hume argues that human beings rather enjoy the 'agreeable emotion' of surprise and wonder. This leads us to believe in the occurrence of miraculous events, even though our inductive inferences from what we have observed in the past will militate against any such belief (*EHU* 10.16). Hume thinks that the pernicious effect of this penchant for the surprising and the wonderful is especially powerful in the case of miracles, because of the religious aspect of supposed miraculous events. Moreover, he predicts that we are more likely to give in to the attraction in cases where the reporting individual is an eloquent speaker (see *EHU* 10:17/18/19).

Thirdly, Hume observes that reports of miracles abound chiefly among 'ignorant and barbarous nations', or among educated societies which have encountered such reports while in contact with such nations. To explain why such educated societies might believe the reports of such ill-educated, unsophisticated, and thus unreliable witnesses, Hume suggests that educated people are inclined to suspend their good sense when they enter the strange spiritual worlds of primitive cultures (*EHU* 10.20).

Hume's fourth argument is of a different character, in that its aim is not to cast doubt on the reliability of the testimonial evidence for miracles. Here, Hume makes use of the fact that different religions cite different miracles as support for their unique claims. (The idea here is that the miracles described in the Christian scriptures, such as the bringing back of Lazarus from the dead, support certain distinctive aspects of Christianity.) Hume suggests that to the extent that a particular miracle supports one religion, it tells against all other religions. (In a way, this is a generalisation of the thought, mentioned earlier, that the miracles described in the New Testament support not only the truth of Christianity, but also the claim that all other religions are false.) However, Hume argues, if, by supporting one religion, a particular miracle tells against any the truth of some competing religion, then it also tells against the occurrence of the miracles upon which that second religion is based. This conflict, he thinks, results in a kind of cancelling-out effect between the evidence for miracles in different religions (*EHU* 10.24).

It is worth noting an extra point which Hume makes against the idea that we have knowledge of miracles, a point which is partly hidden away in *EHU* 10.38. Hume suggests that although 'the Being, to whom the miracle is ascribed, be, in this case, the Almighty, it [i.e. the miracle] does not, upon that account, become a whit more probable; since it is impossible for us to know the attributes or actions of such a Being, otherwise than from the experience which we have of his productions, in the usual course of nature'. Hume's point is this. We cannot ever experience a constant conjunction between a volition of God and some causal outcome in nature, since we cannot experience God's volitions directly. Therefore we are never in a position to claim that God is the cause of any event in nature, such as a miracle.

Critical remarks

Perhaps the most that arguments 1-3 establish is that testimonies of miracles need to be carefully investigated on a case by case basis. Of course, if the negative evidence kept piling up (if, for example, it kept turning out that those who promoted, or who claimed to witness, the occurrence of miracles were self-interested confidence tricksters, deluded fanatics, or gullible lovers of mystery) then, by induction, that result would tend to cast a more general doubt on the credibility of all such testimonies.

It has been suggested (e.g., by Swinburne, 'The Concept of Miracle'; see also Davies, p.205) that Hume's fourth argument (the cancelling-out argument) bites only where the two miracles in question (one from each of two religions) are not only different but, in some sense, *mutually exclusive*. There seems to be no reason to think that such a dramatic clash will always exist.