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THE SEEDS OF THEIR OWN DESTRUCTION: DAVID HUME'S FATALLY FLAWED ARGUMENTS AGAINST MIRACLE REPORTS

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SYNOPSIS

The radically skeptical philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) argues in his two-part essay “Of Miracles” that belief in reports of a miracle such as Jesus’ resurrection is always unreasonable. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that the main arguments Hume puts forth in “Of Miracles” are themselves unreasonable and, ultimately, unsound.

In its first part “Of Miracles” offers a philosophical argument against miracle reports: a miracle “violates” the laws of nature that collective human understanding and experience strongly support, which makes the possibility of a miracle’s occurrence extremely improbable. This improbability weighs against any particular report of a miracle such that the report becomes unbelievable.

This argument, however, commits the fallacy known as question-begging. Hume assumes that either God does not exist (so miracles are extremely improbable) or, if God does exist, God’s intentions are wholly shown to us by nature’s laws (so miracles are extremely improbable).

In its second part “Of Miracles” offers four other types of arguments: historical, psychological, sociological, and religious. The first three arguments, which address what constitutes a poor witness to a miracle, are unsound, because they overgeneralize where case-by-case investigations are required. For example, just because Hume makes the claim that all people exaggerate doesn’t make it so; the tendency to exaggerate varies from person to person.

Part 2’s final argument attempts to pit miracles from competing religions against each other, thereby making reports of miracles cancel each other out. This neglects several crucial questions, however: Are the alleged miracles real? Are they equally significant? Is their evidence equally strong? It also neglects the fact that of all the miracle reports up for investigation, only the biblical miracle of Jesus’ resurrection involves the supernatural in a coherent and meaningful manner, and boasts strong authenticating evidence.

Hume’s arguments thus do not destroy the reasonableness of belief in the occurrence of miracles, especially concerning the case for belief in Christianity’s foundational miraculous event—the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Paul was dumbfounded by the rumors. “Since you believe our preaching that Christ rose from the dead,” he demanded to know, “why are some of you saying that dead people can never come back to life?” If the miracle of bodily resurrection was mere fantasy, then Christ Himself was still dead. If Christ was still dead, then Paul’s preaching was equally lifeless and their trust in God meaningless and hopeless.

He wasn't trying to rewrite history or to begin a "Church of Paul." He simply was trying to pass on to the Christians in Corinth what he had been told. Christ had died for their sins, just as the Scriptures foretold. He was buried and, three days later, resurrected from the grave, just as the prophets foretold. Peter saw Him next, then "the Twelve," then five hundred Christian brethren at once (most of whom were still living at the time of Paul's recounting). James saw Him, too, and finally, Paul announced, "I saw Him," although long after the others (see 1 Cor. 15:8-10).

Despite such compelling eye-witness accounts of Christ's resurrection, over the past two thousand years, philosophers, scientists, psychologists, sociologists, educators, and ordinary people have equated believing in miracles with folly and believing in resurrection with delusion, since the very notion of the dead coming back to life is considered absurd.

One of the most recognized attacks on the probability of miracles was put forth by the philosopher David Hume in the eighteenth century. In his essay "Of Miracles,"¹ he attempted to set out an "everlasting check" against reasonable belief in any miracle's occurrence.² Many scholars have criticized "Of Miracles,"³ but Hume's work continues to persuade some influential contemporary thinkers.⁴

The purpose of this article is to introduce Hume's arguments in "Of Miracles" to those who are not familiar with them, and also to help individuals who still struggle with Hume's attack on miracles by considering how his main arguments fail. I will accomplish this in two steps. First, I will show how the main philosophical argument in Part 1 of "Of Miracles" commits the fallacy of question-begging; then I will show how Hume's four main arguments in Part 2—historical, psychological, sociological, and religious—are unsound.

As a preliminary, I should point out that Hume does not argue overtly against Jesus' resurrection; rather, he does so in a somewhat veiled way, though the veil is quite threadbare in places. Veil or no veil, if Hume's arguments succeed, then Christianity's foundational belief in Jesus' resurrection is rendered unreasonable. Also, I should point out that sometimes in "Of Miracles," Hume's arguments get intertwined and messy; nevertheless, I am confident that the untangled versions I set out accurately present the main thrusts of Hume's work.

HUME'S MAIN ARGUMENT: DOES THE "VERY NATURE" OF A MIRACLE DESTROY THE CREDIBILITY OF ITS REPORT?

Hume argues that when a miracle is reported, even if we concede that it actually occurred and has excellent evidence in its favor, something about what is reported is sufficient reason for not believing its occurrence. According to Hume, "A miracle may be accurately defined [as] a *transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent*" (emphasis in the original).⁵

In other words, in a miracle, God, or some agent outside the boundaries of natural law, over and against the natural law itself, performs an action. Hume writes, "Let us suppose, that the fact, which [the witnesses of a miracle] affirm...is really miraculous; and suppose also, that the testimony considered apart and in itself, amounts to an entire proof; in that case, there is proof against proof, of which the strongest must prevail, but still with a diminution of its force, in proportion to that of its antagonist."⁶

Hume adds (and clarifies): "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" (emphasis added).⁷ Hume's idea is that "the very nature of the fact" to which the testimony refers contains the seeds of the testimony's own destruction as credible evidence. The evidential value of miracle testimony implodes because of the miracle's *law-violating aspect*. The law-violating aspect of a miracle makes it reasonable to weigh the evidence for the laws of nature, evidence that is extremely powerful, against the evidence of any report that the laws were violated, even if this evidence were extremely powerful too, thus rendering the persuasiveness of miracle testimony impotent.

A miracle “violates” the laws of nature by going against what the regular course of nature would predict. The laws governing the regular course of nature are extremely well-established by humanity’s collective understanding and experience. This makes the laws of nature more reliable than the limited evidence for a particular miracle.

The evidence for the laws of nature, Hume argues, constitutes good grounds for thinking the occurrence of a miracle is improbable in the extreme, so we should believe that any given report of a miracle is, more than likely, untrue. Even if the miracle evidence were super-strong (i.e., a “proof,” which is Hume’s way of saying that the evidence is as strong as evidence can get), the also super-strong evidence for the laws of nature (i.e., the “proof” arising from the laws of nature) would still weigh against the evidence for the miracle. Based on this reasoning, then, we should suspend belief concerning the miracle report. In either case, according to Hume’s argument, to believe the report of a miracle is not reasonable.

Hume’s Assumption, Not the Miracle, Destroys the Credibility of the Miracle Report

On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that this argument of Hume’s commits the fallacy of question-begging, also known as circular reasoning. This fallacy assumes as proven that which is at issue, and it sneaks this assumption into the argument’s premises. An example of the fallacy of question-begging would be the Christian’s statements below:

Christian: God must exist.

Skeptic: How do you know?

Christian: Because the Bible says so.

Skeptic: Why should I believe the Bible?

Christian: Because the Bible was written by God.

The problem in the above reasoning is that what is at issue—God’s existence—is *assumed* as a reason for trusting the Bible, but this reason is the very thing being argued for in the first place!

Hume takes the “violation of law” aspect of *miracle* as sufficient grounds for rejecting miracle testimony, and thereby he judges any miracle’s occurrence to be extremely improbable. To be sure, in the case of, say, Jesus’ resurrection, such an event *would be* extremely improbable if we granted not only the laws of nature but also Hume’s assumption that there is no intervention from outside the physical system—but this is precisely where the question begging occurs. Hume makes the assumption that no other background knowledge is needed to make a probability judgment here: all we need is our knowledge of the relevant laws of nature. We needn’t concern ourselves about any possible intervention from outside of nature. It should be emphasized, however, that we are supposedly talking about a *miraculous* resurrection (as suggested by the evidence, and as Hume supposes for argument’s sake), and so, although we should grant the laws of nature, we should *not* grant that there is no intervention from outside the system.

In making the above assumption, then, Hume is in effect assuming that either God does not exist (and so God never intervenes via miracles) or, if God does exist, His influence on nature is shown to us wholly by the laws of nature (and so God never intervenes via miracles). If, however (as Hume explicitly assumes for the sake of argument), there is good evidence for what seems very much to be a miracle (as we’ve noted, Hume even allows it to be a *real* miracle), then Hume’s assumption about the background knowledge is at issue. In other words, any legitimate, truth-seeking investigation of an alleged miracle requires that an assumption such as Hume’s be put on hold.

Hume’s argument works only if we assume that there is no God, or God-like being, who, being outside of nature (whatever we understand this to mean) can and does intervene in nature via miracles. This assumption is at issue when we are considering any alleged evidence for miracles; thus, by assuming the above-described background knowledge as a hidden premise, Hume mistakenly begs the question that only the miracle evidence, which he disallows from the start, can answer. Hume’s mind is already made up before he investigates the miracle evidence, and he is not open to what the evidence suggests.

HUME'S FOUR OTHER ARGUMENTS

In Part 2 of his essay, Hume details four additional arguments to drive home Part 1's philosophical argument. These arguments are historical, psychological, sociological, and religious in nature.

Hume's historical argument⁸ proposes that as a matter of historical fact no miracle has been attested to sufficiently by reliable and reputable witnesses; that is, history shows that no miracle has had enough highly educated, socially outstanding, patently honest people who have lots to lose by lying (and who are situated in circumstances that, if lying, would be found out) as witnesses to it. Hume's psychological argument⁹ proposes that testimony for miracles is weak because of the psychological fact that humankind has a propensity for lying when it comes to miracles. Hume's sociological argument¹⁰ proposes that, as a matter of sociological fact, miracle reports arise primarily in "ignorant and barbarous nations," where lies are less readily exposed.¹¹ Hume's religious argument¹² proposes that miracles from contrary religions simply cancel each other out.

Hume's Historical, Psychological, and Sociological Arguments

The historical, psychological, and sociological arguments in "Of Miracles" are overgeneralizations on Hume's part. Were he to have attempted case-by-case analyses of witnesses to alleged miracles, he surely would have concluded that:

- *not all* people are required to be highly educated to be considered credible witnesses,
- *not all* people are equally prone to credulity,
- *not all* people are equally prone to exaggeration and lying,
- *not all* people are ignorant and barbarous (even though they might come from what Hume takes to be an ignorant and barbarous nation), and
- *not all* lies are more difficult to expose in these so-called ignorant and barbarous nations.

The first of the previous points deserves some elaboration. Whether an education is needed to make a witness credible depends on what it is that is witnessed. In some cases, a high level of expertise is needed. In the case of a miracle in a Petri dish that contained cellular DNA, a DNA expert would be preferred, since only a DNA expert could attest to such a miracle. In the case of the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, however, no expertise is needed for a witness to be credible. Educated witnesses or not, Jesus' resurrection was quite easy to verify. This is because over a period of several weeks Jesus visited various people at various times in various places. He engaged His followers in intelligent conversation (Luke 24:13–35, 44–49; John 20:10–18, 21:15–25; Acts 1:3–8), dined with them (Luke 24:41–43; John 21:1–14), and, occasionally, allowed them to examine Him (Luke 24:36–39; John 20:19–31).

Hume's Religious Argument

Hume's fourth argument (which I will call the "Canceling Argument") in Part 2 claims that miracles from contrary religions cancel each other out. It should be noted that this argument requires that the miracles be apologetic miracles (i.e., miracles whose primary purpose is to support or vindicate a theological claim). Some miracles, however, such as some healings, may be caused by God simply out of compassion and regardless of the religious tradition of those who witness or experience it.

The Canceling Argument only works if we know the actual physical or spiritual cause of the alleged miracles. Some of the events under consideration may be due to natural causes, whereas some may not. We know, however, that a resurrection such as that in the case of Jesus would not be due to natural causes, because we know what relevant natural forces can and cannot do, and natural forces cannot resurrect a being from the dead. A resurrection more obviously would be due to a supernatural cause, whereas, say, a return to good health could be purely psychosomatic and wholly natural.

The Canceling Argument further requires that the apologetic miracle testimonies of contrary religions be equally strong, but perhaps miracle evidence is strong from one religion and weak from the rest. Even if we were to grant that the miracle testimonies from contrary religions are equally

strong, Hume's argument fails to address the significance of the *qualitative* differences between miracles. Not all alleged miracles are qualitatively equal; indeed, some alleged miracles have greater existential and moral significance than others. As philosopher Francis Beckwith astutely observes, "If the miracles of religion A and religion B are evidentially equal, and religion A claims to be ordained by the true God because its leader has the ability to instantaneously heal patterned baldness, while religion B appeals to the resurrection of its founder, then religion B has a qualitatively better miracle."¹³

In other words, even if the apologetic miracle testimonies of contrary religious systems were equally strong, a miracle's qualitative dimension is highly significant and counts in the favor of the religious system on behalf of which the miracle is alleged to have occurred. Of the major figures of the various religions of the world, for example, Confucius, Buddha, Moses, Muhammad, and Lao Tzu, only one—Jesus—is reported to have resurrected from the dead. This report, further, is backed up by a significant body of historical evidence.

HUME'S FAILURE IS HUMANITY'S GAIN

Few, if any, of us actually have witnessed a miracle; instead, if we believe in such matters, the evidence for their occurrence is typically human testimony, and we all admit to the unreliability of testimony. For Hume, generally speaking, the more improbable an event, the more reasonable it is to doubt its occurrence. The miracle of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead runs counter to the vast historical record of humankind. Is it more likely that the witnesses are mistaken or are lying, or that the event actually happened?

Hume writes,

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 endeavors to establish...When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider myself, whether it be more probable, that the person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the miraculous event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.¹⁴

We reasonably can conclude, however, in view of the critiques given earlier, that *all* of Hume's arguments in "Of Miracles" fail, mainly because he assumes that theism is false. As philosopher William J. Wainwright astutely notes,

In short, one's assessment of the inherent probability of miracles should be guided by one's convictions about the nature of reality. If naturalism is true, the inherent probability of miracles is low. Miracle reports probably aren't credible enough to offset this low probability. If theism is true, the inherent probability of miracles is higher. In some cases, testimony may be sufficiently credible to justify believing in their occurrence.¹⁵

If we *don't know* whether theism or naturalism is true, then we should *not* follow Hume in assuming that a miracle is inherently and extremely improbable; rather, we should let the merits of the miracle report be our primary guide.

Hume's failure may seem like bad news for someone who believed his arguments, but it's actually good news. The New Testament provides historical evidence for the miracle reports concerning Jesus, evidence that is corroborated by sources outside the New Testament;¹⁶ because that evidence is quite strong, any person who is open to the possibility of God would be well advised to check it out.¹⁷ Those reports provide solid ground for us to take Jesus and His teachings seriously. Among other things, Jesus teaches us that He is God (the Son) and that *God loves us*. This surely *is* good news! Surely, too, no one should miss out on its benefits because of Hume's failed arguments against miracles.

RECOMMENDED READING

For helpful readings on Hume's argument that set out my points of contention and other criticisms in detail, I recommend the following works along with those cited in the notes.

- Francis J. Beckwith, "History and Miracles," in *In Defense of Miracles*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 86–98.
- John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- J. Houston, *Reported Miracles* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- David Johnson, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).
- Robert A. Larmer, *Water into Wine?* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).
- C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).
- George I. Mavrodes, "David Hume and the Probability of Miracles," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 167–82.
- George I. Mavrodes, "Review of David Johnson's *Hume, Holism, and Miracles*," *Philosophia Christi* 3, 1 (2001): 251–57.
- Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- Hendrik van der Breggen, "Hume's Scale: How Hume Counts a Miracle's Improbability Twice," *Philosophia Christi* 4, 2 (2002): 443–53.
- Hendrik van der Breggen, "Miracle Reports, Moral Philosophy, and Contemporary Science" (Ph.D. diss., University of Waterloo, 2004).

NOTES

1. "Of Miracles" is Section 10 of Hume's *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, which was published in 1748 and then in 1752 and thereafter as *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which can now be found in David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford Philosophical Texts, ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). I hereafter will refer to Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (as found in the 1999 edition) simply as *Enquiry*.
2. Hume, *Enquiry*, 169.
3. Some philosophers have argued that Hume's concept of miracle as a violation of a law of nature illegitimately sets up a conflict between belief in a miracle's occurrence and evidence for the laws of nature that it allegedly violates. The idea is that a miracle is better understood as an intervention by which God injects a particular configuration of matter and energy into the physical realm without violating any natural laws in so doing; hence the creation's regular performances do not weigh evidentially against miracle reports. (See references to C. S. Lewis and Robert A. Larmer in "Recommended Reading.") Other philosophers have argued that Hume mistakenly assumes that the high probability that a miraculous event is rare logically implies that there is a high probability that there is no such event. (See references to David Johnson and George Mavrodes in "Recommended Reading.") Philosophers also have argued that, when one views Hume's main argument of Part 1, that is, his alleged "everlasting check," against the background of contemporary moral philosophy and contemporary science, the logical implications of the miracle concept actually *enhance* the plausibility of miracle reports—especially in cases such as that of Jesus' resurrection—thereby making Hume's main argument *backfire*. (See reference to my doctoral dissertation in "Recommended Reading.")
4. For examples, see A. C. Grayling, *The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), 126, and Chris Horner and Emrys Westacott, *Thinking through Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 239.
5. Hume, *Enquiry*, 173n.
6. *Ibid.*, 172–73.
7. *Ibid.*, 173.
8. *Ibid.*, 174.
9. *Ibid.*, 174–76.
10. *Ibid.*, 176–78.
11. *Ibid.*, 176.
12. *Ibid.*, 178ff. Be aware that in various places on p. 178 and following of the *Enquiry*, Hume reinjects his main argument from Part 1.
13. We have very reliable knowledge about death. Our universal experience (with the exception of Jesus' case) over thousands of years is that dead people, when left to themselves, do not resurrect or transform themselves into living, high-powered bodies with rejuvenated flesh; rather, our knowledge of cell necrosis (cell death) shows us that dead bodies stay dead and begin, irreversibly, to decay. Bodily decomposition starts within minutes after death and, after a day or more without refrigeration, renders resuscitation, let alone resurrection (on naturalistic assumptions), physically impossible. Resurrections, then, as Francis Beckwith points out, are more than inexplicable merely *at present*. (See Francis J. Beckwith, "Theism, Miracles, and the Modern Mind," in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser [London and New York: Routledge, 2003], 225.) To think that there are some previously unknown natural laws waiting to be discovered may be reasonable in some not-well-understood fields of investigation (say, a healing of cancer as an apparent answer to prayer), and so it would be rash to conclude that a law that pertains to one of those lesser understood fields can't or won't be discovered (perhaps our bodies have built-in, nonmiraculous healing powers that become activated when we exercise an attitude of faith). The fact remains, however, that it is not reasonable to think this way in the very well understood realm of human death. In sum, resurrection is

not something we just don't understand now and can hope to explain later, because it's not part of some little known field of investigation; it involves the field of death, about which we have sufficient knowledge. Advances in science over the past few centuries serve to underscore the fact that no naturalistic explanations for resurrection are forthcoming. If a resurrection were to occur, it thus is reasonable to think that it would be a *supernaturally caused* resurrection. Resurrection evidence, then, suggests supernatural, theistic intervention.

14. Francis J. Beckwith, "David Hume's Argument against Miracles: Contemporary Attempts to Rehabilitate It and a Response" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1988), 100.
15. Hume, *Enquiry*, 174. The unusually placed commas in this quotation were in the original.
16. William J. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 64.
17. On the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, i.e., evidence that comes to us via the New Testament and other sources, see (for starters): Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004). See too Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?* 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) and N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). On the evidence that makes God's existence more than a mere possibility, see (for starters): J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003). Also, see C. Stephen Layman, *Letters to Doubting Thomas: A Case for the Existence of God* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).