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DAVID HUME ON MIRACLES

by

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Miracles

Albert Einstein once said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is.” A quick study of David Hume’s *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* reveals that he believed strongly in the first way. Why is this?

First of all, it is in his definition of miracle. Hume defines a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature. This is a problematic definition to begin with, as it appears to preclude the possibility of there ever being a miracle. If a miracle is something that violates the laws of nature, and the laws of nature cannot be violated, it looks as if a miracle by definition is impossible. However, we will ignore this for the time being and look into what he says about believing reports of miracles.

Hume says that, with any argument, one must consider proofs and “proportion his belief to the evidence.” Experience is really one’s only guide concerning anything in the world, but we know our experience, and the conclusions we draw from our experience, are not entirely infallible. We all know about hallucinations, misinterpretations of the sensory data (such as Descartes’ example of a tower, which appears round from a distance but, upon closer inspection, is actually square), so-called “threshold” experiences in which you’re not sure if you actually saw or heard something or not, and other such things, so we can’t always trust our experiences implicitly. So if we apply all this to miracles, the proper procedure, when someone informs you of a miracle they witnessed, is as follows. You must consider the possibility of the miracle actually happening, then you must weigh it against the opposite side, or the miracle not happening. For an example, let’s say John tells you the following story. Yesterday, he was walking down the street and saw a man burn a puppy. John, being an avid animal-lover, fervently prays over the puppy, and after he finished, the charred puppy stood up, regrew his fur, and walked away happily barking. This seems pretty unlikely, and, if it is
true, would seem to be a clear violation of what we understand to be the laws of nature. In order for this to have actually happened, we must accept that either we have an extremely limited understanding of the laws of biology (much more limited than we previously realized), or that the dog is some sort of supernatural god-like being with extraordinary powers, or possibly some other supernatural critter has an affinity for dogs. Most of us would be pretty reluctant to believe any of these. On the other hand, how likely is it that this did not actually happen? For this to be the case, either John lied to us or he was deceived himself. So we must start considering those possibilities.

Has John ever deliberately lied to us in the past? Is he an incessant storyteller? Is he prone to hallucinations? If we answer “yes” to any of these questions, it appears that it is probably more likely that this event did not happen. But what if we can’t answer yes to any of these? Perhaps we have never known John to tell a lie. He is also a very boring person and never tells any stories. We know he has never done any drugs, so it is unlikely he is having a drug- or flashback-induced hallucination. And what’s more, he seemed very sincere in telling us about this dog. Perhaps there is some truth to his story. Hume, however, would disagree. Perhaps John was unknowingly given a hallucinogen by his archnemesis. Perhaps he is suffering from some horrible disease that is causing him to have distressing hallucinations. Perhaps he is sleep-walking and sleep-talking and reporting to us the events of the dream he’s currently having. His sincerity doesn’t necessarily count for much. Many people have been sincere and still wrong.

Hume would say that one should only believe the man’s report of a miracle if its falsity would be a stronger miracle. For example, suppose three months from now, Yassir Arafat, who recently died in France, showed up again and ran the Palestinian Liberation Organization for five more years. In this situation, Hume would say, he “would be surprised at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances, but should not have the least inclination” towards believing anything miraculous
had actually happened. Instead, he would believe it had all, somehow, been faked. On the other hand, if the sky suddenly clouded up this afternoon, and blocked out all the light from the sun, and this was a worldwide phenomenon lasting eight days, Hume insists we must begin searching for natural causes from which this could arise. Of course, Hume’s definition of miracle is something that happens contrary to the laws of nature, so if a natural cause was found, Hume would consider it a proven non-miracle. Of course, under Hume’s definition, something only has to be consistent with the laws of nature, not necessarily a direct result of them.

There are problems with this, however. First of all, Hume has already demonstrated that our past experiences are not infallible. We can’t always trust our experiences. As such, we don’t really know the laws of nature; we only think we have pretty good approximations of them. As far as our past experiences go, some of them we have found to be continually true, day after day, such as the sun rising in the east. Others are variable, such as when I wake up and find an inch of snow on my car a week after spring officially begins. So some predictions are more likely to be erroneous than others, but they can all possibly be wrong. Perhaps some alien civilization with god-like powers will carelessly destroy our sun overnight, not only dooming our entire race, but also proving us wrong about the sun rising every day, without fail. So, [p] when we are confronted with a highly credible witness to an alleged miracle, or even multiple highly credible witnesses, and we compare them against our past experiences, we can’t always rule out the occurrence of the miracle. How are we to know that we have a correct grasp of the laws of nature? Perhaps we have been hallucinating in the past, or perhaps we are living in a dream-world, and only remember small, misinterpreted bits of our real world, which we experience wrongly as dreams. There is really no way of knowing which of our past experiences we can trust and which ones we can’t. Basically, Hume would be the first to admit that just because something happened in the past doesn’t mean it will continue to happen
in the future. It only means that it *might* continue to happen or that it is highly probable that it will continue to happen, not that it absolutely will. Similarly, just because we have never heard of something happening does not mean that it has not happened or will not happen. For example, some tribes in the jungles in Africa still haven’t had very much, if any, exposure to Western culture and civilization, and may have never heard of ice. They would be very surprised to find out what happens to water when it reaches a certain temperature. So while it might seem that the testimony of a witness will never be strong enough to believe in a miracle based only on the testimony, it also appears that the evidences of our past experiences will never be strong enough to preclude the possibility of a certain miracle happening. It seems we are stuck in a state of miracle-agnosticism: unable to believe it, yet unable to deny it. Yet Hume says that, for all intents and purposes, we should just trust our experience and generalize it as much as we need to in order to live in this world. We can *reasonably* assume that the sun will rise in the east every day for the next few million years, at least, and maybe we should learn to assume we will probably get the occasional snow storm in Cache Valley maybe even in April.

It seems, though, that the biggest problem with Hume’s miracle argument is simply his definition of a miracle as something that violates the laws of nature. This seems to preclude the possibility of there *ever* being a miracle. Everything that happens in the universe, by definition, happens according to the laws of nature. The laws of nature are *descriptive* laws, not *proscriptive* laws. They tell us what *generally* happens and what *has* happened. Thus, anything contrary to the laws of nature simply can not happen. If it happened, it would be in accord with the laws of nature, regardless of how likely or unlikely the event is, or how bizarre the particular laws of nature describing its occurrence might be. Perhaps we can formulate a better definition of the term “miracle.” Given that they are in accord with the laws of nature, what constitutes a miracle? It
seems, first of all, that a miracle would have to involve some sort of divine intervention. If we want to talk about miracles, we must talk about a higher power. Without some sort of divine being performing the miracles, either on a personal level, such as Jesus healing the sick, or on an impersonal level, such as the regenerating puppy John saw, it seems we would be stuck with extremely unlikely occurrences, not true miracles. So how do we determine if something happened because of divine intervention or not? Many people say that miracles only happen in response to a prayer. Some scriptural lore tells of God protecting his followers or prophets, or at times, punishing his detractors or rule-breakers. If a man is speaking out against God on a clear blue day, and a lightning bolt strikes the man dead out of the blue, this would seem to be an act of divine intervention. Similarly, if a man is preaching repentance to an angry mob of evildoers who start shooting at him from a short range, but no one seems able to hit him, this could also be seen as divine intervention. It’s very hard to prove beyond doubt that an event occurred because of divine intervention. The heavy burden of proof would include such things as proving that God exists, proving that God actually did the intervening, proving that the event couldn’t have occurred had he not intervened, etc. But while it might be hard to definitively prove that an act was divine intervention, we can certainly make pretty good guesses on a case-by-case basis.

But is apparent divine intervention the only requirement for a miracle? It would seem not. One suggestion is that a miracle must be desired on some level. If there was a very minor car wreck that should have resulted in minor scrapes, but God divinely intervened and directly caused someone’s death, this would definitely be a divine occurrence or an act of God, but it doesn’t seem to be a miracle, as it was a very undesired outcome by the people involved. On the other hand, if there was a major car wreck that, by all accounts, should have resulted in massive deaths and injuries, but God divinely intervened and saved everybody’s lives, this would seem to be a miracle.
The people involved wouldn’t have had time to pray about it, and probably couldn’t have consciously expressed their desire for a miracle, but surely they subconsciously desired it. So far, a miracle seems to be an event desired by somebody that appears to have happened as a result of divine intervention, something that couldn’t have happened had God not intervened. But consider the following example. Say I knew a person 10 years ago who was a real jerk to me, and at the time, I wished he was dead. Now, not only have I completely forgotten about him, he lives on the opposite side of the globe as me. He happens to be the person in the earlier example that God killed in the minor car wreck. So in this case, there was some desire at some point in time for this particular occurrence. However, it does not seem to be a miracle, as it doesn’t really make any difference to me now whether he’s alive or dead. It has no bearing on my life. So our working definition of miracle is something that happens as a direct result of divine intervention, is desired by somebody, and is somehow applicable to the person with the desire.

Of course, it is clear that this is only a working definition, and is not necessarily as solid as it could, or should, be. This is a field of philosophy in which not much adequate work has been done. Some have thought Hume and his followers simply didn’t believe in the factual occurrence of miracles and were trying to justify their beliefs. Many people use the term “miracle” very loosely in everyday, non-technical discussion, calling such natural occurrences of the good weather, the birth of a new child, and other such things miracles. But to have a reasoned philosophical debate, one must first clearly define one’s terms. I hope I have provided a more solid foundation to base further discussion of miracles on.