

Miracles and philosophical reasons



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Examine key concepts of miracles and philosophical reasons to believe in them. Miracle is an event that goes against usual of nature or appearing to break the law of science. Hume defined miracles as a “violation of the laws of nature” and consequently rejected their occurrence as both improbable and impractical. Many philosophers back this view up to a certain extent, such as Wiles. However Aquinas rejects Hume’s arguments due to the lack of belief of people’s testimonies to be true. Hume (1771-1776) was initially known as an intellectual for his literary works.

He was an empiricist, which means that he believed that gaining knowledge from the world from observation and experience is more reliable. Hume’s first argument is the most important point in arguing reasons for believing in miracles. If you interpret the laws of nature to be strict and rigid, then it makes sense that if anything breaks these boundaries, then they should be classed as a miracle. Hume links the breaking of a law of nature to the 'Deity', so a miracle has religious meaning. For example it stated in the Bible in the case of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

But this was more of an eyewitness mistake, than an act that violated fixed laws of nature for Hume. Therefore a violation of the laws of nature was an improbable occurrence and is unbelievable. Wiles agrees with Hume’s point that it is more likely the eyewitness was wrong than a miracle occurred. This would make God arbitrary as this would show clear favouritism by creating miracles while others were suffering. Wiles claims that miracles present an obstacle to religious faith: people are being asked to believe in omnibenevolent and omnipotent God who fed 5000 people but does nothing about world starvation today.

A God who intervenes selectively would not be worthy of worship because of his failure to act on a wider scale. However Aquinas disagrees with Hume. Around five hundred years earlier, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1275 CE) married the two ways of knowing: Theology (faith), philosophy (reason) and concluded that both come from God (contained Revelation). He had offered a similar definition of a miracle to that of Hume, defining it as, 'those things... which are done by Divine power apart from the order generally followed in things'.

However, he actually differed from the latter Hume's definition as he said miracles were also: 'Those events in which something is done by God which nature could never do. ', 'Events in which God does something which nature can do, but not in that order. ' And 'When God does what is usually done by the working of nature, but without the operation of the principles of nature. ' he allowed for the possibility of miracles to occur within the 'system' of 'natural activity'. Aquinas also allowed for the possibility that God's activity with the natural realm, may be part of the normal order of things.

Similarly, Swinburne also disagrees with Hume's idea of what an improbable event is. Whilst for Hume this means an event which it would be foolish to suggest occurs at all, such as walking on water, Swinburne argues that miracles are more "probabilistic" such as picking out a red grain of sand, highly unlikely but not totally impossible. Therefore we are able to claim that it is possible to believe in miracles. Agreements on what constitutes a 'law of nature' are that people do not come back to life several days after having died, gravity, orbit of the planets, amputees do not grow limbs.

However an argument based on logic and reasoning is John Hick's. He defines natural laws as 'generalisations formulated respectively to cover

whatever has, in fact happened'. In other words natural laws must be widened as and when new discoveries are made. For example the first time when humans were able to walk on the moon (1960) and travel in space would be defined as a miracle in the past as it goes against the law of gravity. Thus it is possible to believe in miracles.

Hume's second reason for rejecting miracles is presented in his practical argument. He considered levels of education to be a significant factor as miracles were only reported to have occurred by those who were not educated enough to understand the scientific explanation of an event. He also highlighted how the early history of countries is full of miracles and visions due to the ignorant and barbarous populations, such as the very long life of Adam. However as the country becomes more developed and the populations better educated such stories disappear.

Therefore for Hume Adam living to 930 was simply a story made up by the uneducated, as living so long would suggest the laws of nature to be false. In conclusion Hume believes that miracles are "violations of the laws of nature" and that they are only experienced by uneducated people who do not understand science. Aquinas and Swinburne rejected this view, believing the laws of nature to be "corrigible".

Overall it is possible to believe in miracles as we can't argue that they don't exist and we can also reject miracles and say they do not exist as this would conclude that God is arbitrary and it would violate the laws of nature. To what extent do criticisms undermine belief in miracles? One issue that immediately comes to mind is how one begins to distinguish between a miracle and a coincidence? One could say that the distinction is that the

former is always the work of God but then does this rule out the possibility of any coincidences being in some way 'God's work' as well? Not necessarily. However, in order for a miracle to be validated as such we are usually looking for that which is not of the 'ordinary'.

Thus it seems that in order for one to validate and 'observe' miracles as supra-natural phenomena they may need to be considered along the lines of the Humean definition as a 'transgression of a law of nature'. Hume believed that the occurrence of a miraculous event was always a violation of the laws of nature. However, his argument does not preclude the possibility of a miracle occurring and this allows for an interesting development in our understanding of miracles. There can be no satisfactory 'proof' that a miracle has occurred.

No atheist would claim that God has performed a miracle and the testimony of any religious person who claims a miracle has occurred is declared insufficient grounds for belief as they have an a priori interest in proving this to be the case. On the other hand if an atheist were to claim that they had witnessed a miracle then, according to the Humean definition, this may be sufficient grounds to believe a miracle had occurred. People are assessing the same phenomena yet using the word 'miracle' to mean different things.

The religious person uses it to mean a 'work of God which transgresses the laws of nature' whilst the rationalist is using it to mean 'an unusual event which can be explained by rational means'. Disagreements between religious people and rationalists are not about whether a 'miracle' has occurred, but between their use and understanding of the word 'miracle' itself. In conclusion criticisms undermine belief in miracles to a minimum extent as

we can not fully disprove the existence of miracles and therefore it is possible to believe in them.