

Assess Hume's reasons for rejecting miracles

Law



Assess Hume's reasons for rejecting miracles Hume defined miracles as a "violation of the laws of nature" and consequently rejected their occurrence as both improbable and impractical. This view has been supported by modern scientists and philosophers such as Atkins, Dawkins and Wiles to a certain extent. However Aquinas, Tillich and Holland and Swinburne to a certain extent reject Hume's reasons, instead arguing that miracles have a divine cause and that Hume's arguments are weak.

This essay will argue that Hume's reasons for rejecting miracles are not valid and in doing so consider his two main arguments; lack of probability and Hume's practical argument. Hume's first reason for rejecting miracles was a lack of probability. He argued that evidence from people's experience of observing the world showed the laws of nature to be fixed and unvarying. However to suggest a miracle occurred was to say that the laws of nature had been violated, hence his definition of miracles being a "violation of the laws of nature. Miracles were reported as having occurred by eyewitnesses, as is stated in the Bible in the case of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. However for Hume it was far more likely that the eyewitnesses were mistaken in what they witnessed, than for Jesus to have actually raised Lazarus from the dead and in doing so violated fixed laws of nature. A violation of the laws of nature was therefore an improbable occurrence. Wiles' agrees with Hume's point that it is more likely the eyewitness was wrong than a miracle occurred, in doing so raising the problem of evil.

It was illogical to suggest God was omnipotent and good if he showed clear favouritism through creating miracles whilst at the same time many people were suffering. It would be more likely that a witness made a mistake or did

not understand what they saw than an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God showed clear signs of bias and favouritism through miracles therefore Hume's first argument is valid. Swinburne supports Hume's view that laws of nature are defined by the experiences of people observing the world, as he believes that people's observations are the basis for all natural laws.

Additionally Hume's argument that miracles are improbable is supported by Dawkin's view that it would be highly unlikely that someone could simply learn to walk again after being paralysed as a result of a miracle, as this would constitute a violation of the laws of nature. This also supports the idea that Hume's argument is valid. However he rejects Hume's concept of the laws of nature being fixed and unvarying, as he believed them to be "corrigible" due to the possibility new discoveries and observations about the world could result in them being altered in some way.

Additionally Swinburne 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 the sun staying the sky, Swinburne argues that miracles are more "probabilistic" such as picking out a red grain of sand, highly unlikely but not totally impossible therefore the validity of Hume's first argument can be questioned.

Additionally Swinburne criticises Hume's definition of miracles as a "violation of the laws of nature" as he believes that whilst a miracle such as that of Jesus' resurrection clearly does not fit in with the laws of nature, on its own it is not enough to prove the laws of nature have been violated, a view supported by Aquinas who suggests miracles have a divine origin. The contingency argument, supported by Holland and Tillich also criticises <https://assignbuster.com/assess-humes-reasons-for-rejecting-miracles/>

Hume's definition of miracles as a "violation of the laws of nature. It uses evidence from the Bible, such as Jesus feeding the five thousand, to highlight that God's aim with miracles is not to fit in with the framework of modern concepts but to for God to reveal Himself to the people. Tillich himself argues that miracles do not have to involve the violation of nature as they can be possible events, such as a train stopping just in front of a child on a crossing, which hold religious significance for some people. Therefore a miracle does not have to be an improbable event, suggesting that Hume's argument is not significant.

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. The stories these people reported were usually circulated and exaggerated, altering them significantly as is the case with urban myths, such as that after Hurricane Katrina stating that law and order had broken down.

Hume also considered the general level of education of the country as a whole to be important. He 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.

Additionally Hume believes that miracles used by religions to prove their religion true would be cancelled out, as not every religion could be true.

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Dawkins presents a key strength of Hume's second argument, by supporting his belief that miracles are only reported by the uneducated, as he believes there is a scientific explanation for the effects, such as Jeanne Fretel being cured at Lourdes.

The miracles of people being cured at Lourdes, as well as those reported in the Bible simply show that miracles were used to cover up a lack of understanding of a way the world worked and to increase people's faith in God, something which is no longer necessary as most people no longer rely on God for guidance therefore Hume presents a relevant argument rejecting miracles. Atkins supports Hume's argument that the typical educated person would not be inclined to report the occurrence of a miracle as they would know better.

According to Atkins it is only the publicity seeker or someone deluded or hallucinating who would claim to have witnessed such an event as they may lack the scientific level of understanding of their peers, therefore Hume's argument is relevant. However this view has been criticised by Swinburne as it raises questions about how to define terms Hume raises. It is unclear at what stage a person becomes "educated" sufficiently to reject miracles. It is also unfair to assume that a person believes in miracles simply because they do not know any better, as it is possible to both have a strong belief in God and a good understanding of science.

Further to this it is unclear what constitutes being "ignorant and barbarous" as whilst earlier nations may now seem uneducated compared to modern times, the nation may have been highly educated for the time as the standards change. Therefore the relevance of Hume's second argument can

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be questioned. In conclusion Hume believes that miracles are "violations of the laws of nature" which are fixed and unvarying, and that they are only experienced by uneducated people who do not understand Science.

This view is rejected by Aquinas, Swinburne, Holland and Tillich. Swinburne believes the laws of nature to be "corrigible" whilst Holland and Tillich argue that miracles are not violations of the laws of nature but sign events revealing God to the people. However Dawkins and Atkins support Hume's view that miracles are only experienced by the uneducated. Overall Hume's reasons for rejecting miracles are valid to only a minimal extent, as he does not consider the different definitions of a miracle, and does not define what constitutes ignorant and barbarous.