

# Miracles

Jeff Speaks  
April 17, 2014

1. The role of miracles in justifying religious belief .....	1
2 Hume's argument against belief in miracles .....	1
2.1 Testimony and evidence	
2.2 Testimony about miracles	
2.3 An extension of Hume's argument to eyewitnesses of miracles	
2.4 Problems for Hume's argument	
3. The relevance of religious diversity .....	4
4. Mad, bad, or god? .....	5

## 1. THE ROLE OF MIRACLES IN JUSTIFYING RELIGIOUS BELIEF

It is natural to think that miracles can, in principle, provide some evidence in favor of religious belief. Suppose that we think of a miracle as an event which is an exception to the laws of nature. Then, if we see such an event, we might be justified in thinking that it does not have a natural cause. But, especially if we think that every event has some explanation, one might reasonably conclude that it has a supernatural cause. But if it has a supernatural cause, then something supernatural must exist.

How might this be turned into a justification for religious belief even for people who do not witness miracles? The role of testimony in belief formation and justification.

It seems clear that, in at least many religious traditions, people have based their belief in something like this sort of argument from miracles.

Can miracles play this kind of central role in justifying religious belief of any sort?

We will focus first on the question of whether miracles can justify the religious beliefs of people who have not themselves witnessed miracles.

## 2 HUME'S ARGUMENT AGAINST BELIEF IN MIRACLES

Hume thinks that they cannot, and indeed that no rational person would base belief in God on testimony that miracles have occurred. He says:

“. . . therefore we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any system of religion.” (88)

This is Hume's conclusion. We now need to understand his argument for it, which begins with some premises about the role of perceptual evidence and testimony in the forming of beliefs.

### *2.1 Testimony and evidence*

Hume's first claim is that we should base belief on the available evidence:

“A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. . . . He weighs the opposite experiments: He considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: To that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgement, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call probability.”

The general moral seems to be correct: when deciding whether to believe or disbelieve some proposition, we should weigh the evidence for and against it to see whether it makes the proposition or its negation more probable.

How does this sort of general principle fit with our practice of basing beliefs on testimony? Hume has a very plausible answer:

“we may observe, that there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. . . . I shall not dispute about a word. It will be sufficient to observe, that our assurance in any argument of this kind is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses.”

One conclusion: testimony is one, but not the only, source of evidence which we should use when forming a belief. Testimony is relevant because it has a (relatively) high probability of being true. But, like any evidence, this can be overridden by other sources of evidence (like, for example, contrary testimony) which have give a high probability to the negation of the proposition in question.

### *2.2 Testimony about miracles*

We now need to apply these general points about testimony and evidence to the case of miracles. One conclusion seems to follow immediately:

“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 endeavors to establish . . . ”

This seems to be a statement of something like the following principle:

*Hume's principle about testimony*

One should not believe on the basis of testimony that M happened unless the probability of the testimony being false  $<$  the probability of M occurring.

The problem for the believer in miracles is that miracles, being departures from the laws of nature, seem to be exactly the sorts of events which we should not expect to happen. As Hume puts it:

“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 ...There must be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation.”

The implied question is: could testimony ever provide strong enough evidence to override our massive evidence in favor of nature's following its usual course (which is also evidence against the occurrence of the miracle)?

The answer to this question depends on how we should think about the probability of given miraculous event happening. And the above quote suggests the following *zero probability principle*:

If M has never been observed to occur (so far as I know), then I should think that the probability of M occurring is 0.

But then no testimony will ever be good enough reason to believe that a miracle has happened.

*2.3 An extension of Hume's argument to eyewitnesses of miracles*

So far we have only been discussing Hume's argument against beliefs in miracles which are based on testimony by (people who claim to be) eyewitnesses. But what about people who (seem to) witness miracles? Are they justified in forming religious beliefs on the basis of such experiences? Can you think of an extension of Hume's argument which would apply to this case?

*2.4 Problems for Hume's argument*

Consider the following example:

You are a citizen of Pompeii in AD 79, and there is no written record of the tops of mountains erupting and spewing forth lava. Accordingly, following Hume, you regard the chances of such a thing happening as 0%. On the other hand, you know that your visual experiences have been mistaken in the past, so you regard the chances of an arbitrary visual experience being illusory as about (say)

1%. Then you have a very surprising visual experience: black clouds and ash shooting out of nearby Mt. Vesuvius. What is it rational for you to believe?

This seems to show that the zero probability principle, plus Hume's principle about testimony, leads to falsehood. Suppose then that we ditch the first, and hold on to the second. Is there a way to re-work Hume's argument?

Two problems for the re-worked argument:

1. The possibility of multiple witnesses.
2. The following counterexample to Hume's principle about testimony:

What do you think that the probability of the truth of testimony from the writers of the South Bend Tribune would be? Let's suppose that you think that it is quite a reliable paper, and that its testimony is true 99.9% of the time, so that the probability of its testimony being false is 0.1%. Now suppose that you read the following in the South Bend Tribune:

"The winning numbers for Powerball this weekend were 1-14-26-33-41-37-4."

What are the odds of those being the winning numbers for Powerball? Well, the same as the odds of any given combination being correct, which is 1 in 195,249,054. So the probability of the reported event occurring is 0.0000005121663739%. So, if Hume's principle about testimony is correct, one is never justified in believing the lottery results reported in the paper, or on the local news, etc. But this seems wrong: one can gain justified beliefs about the lottery from your local paper, even if it is the South Bend Tribune.

You may want to think about how, if at all, Hume's principle could be modified to avoid these counterexamples.

### 3. THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Later in his discussion of miracles, Hume adds another reason to be skeptical about testimony about miracles, when he writes

"there is no testimony for any [miracles] ...that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses; so that not only the miracle destroys the credit of testimony, but the testimony destroys itself. To make this better understood, let us consider, that, in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary ... Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles) ...has the same force ...to overthrow every other system."

Is this best construed as a separate argument against miracles, or as part of the argument sketched above? If the latter, how does it fit in?

This is an issue to which we will return later.

## 4. MAD, BAD, OR GOD?

Let's now turn to a different question: do we actually have any good evidence for the miracles of, for example, Christianity? Today we'll talk about one intriguing argument that we do, which is due to C.S. Lewis. Here's the relevant passage:

“Then comes the real shock. Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. ... what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.

One part of the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offences against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, ... This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history.

Yet (and this is the strange, significant thing) even His enemies, when they read the Gospels, do not usually get the impression of silliness and conceit. Still less do unprejudiced readers. Christ says that He is "humble and meek" and we believe Him; not noticing that, if He were merely a man, humility and meekness are the very last characteristics we could attribute to some of His sayings.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

We are faced, then, with a frightening alternative. This man ... either was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic, or something worse. Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.”

This passage suggests a simple argument for the divinity of Jesus:

1. Either Jesus was God or Jesus was a lunatic or Jesus was evil.
2. Jesus was not a lunatic.
3. Jesus was not evil.

---

C. Jesus was God. (1,2,3)

How might one defend premise 1?

The line of defense implicit in the passage from Lewis is something like this: Jesus made claims which would only make sense if he were God. By making these claims, he in effect claimed to be God. Either he believed that he was God, or he did not. If he did not, then he was a liar on a grand scale, and hence evil. If he did, then this belief was either true or false. If it was false, then he was a lunatic; no sane person could mistakenly believe themselves to be God. But if it was true, then he was God. Hence the only possibilities are that Jesus was mad, bad, or God.

It is notable that Jesus does not often in the Gospels make explicit claims to divinity — but he does, as Lewis emphasizes, make claims which would only seem to make sense if he were God.

Could Jesus have been neither a lunatic nor evil but simply mistaken?