

“Miracles”: Impossible or Actual?

David Hume & 2 Views of Miracles



Defining “Miracle”

How does one define “miracle?”

“The first step in this, as in all other discussions, is to come to a clear understanding as to the meaning of the term employed. Argumentation about whether miracles are possible and, if possible, credible, is mere beating the air until the arguers have agreed what they mean by the word ‘miracle.’”

–Thomas Huxley, The Works of T. H. Huxley (New York: Appleton, 1896), p. 153.

What a “Miracle” is Not:

(for our purpose of analysis)

- Anomaly (ex. Random Chance or Coincidence, Selective Catastrophe or “Providence”)
- Psychological Phenomenon (ex. Mind Over Matter, Hypnosis, Hallucination, Phantom Limb Syndrome, False Pregnancy)
- Illusion or Magic (a.k.a. fortune-telling, spells — white, black or otherwise; manipulation of already existing natural elements or bodies for altered appearance)

Examples of “Miracles” in Question

- ✦ Confirmed Congenital Illness or Disorder Healed on Command or Otherwise without Physical Intervention (i.e. Surgery, Following Prognosis)
- ✦ Elemental Properties Completely Altered into Another Element and/or Multiplied on Command
- ✦ Weather Conditions Categorically and Instantly Changed on Command (i.e. complete weather cessation, exchange)
- ✦ Materialization *ex nihilo* on Command

Two Definitions Resulting from Foundationalism

Foundationalism concerns philosophical theories of knowledge resting upon justified belief, some secure foundation of certainty.

1. Empiricism (rejects supernaturalism)
2. Supernaturalism (includes but adds to empiricism)

1. The Empiricist's Definition:

David Hume (1711 - 1776)

David Hume* was a Scottish historian, philosopher, economist, diplomat and essayist known today especially for his radical philosophical empiricism and sceptical rationalism.

“**Of Miracles**” is the title of Section X of David Hume's An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding (1748).

Hume saw no legitimacy in claiming the possibility or credibility of miracles. His views are widely known to have contradicted the religious dogma of his day.

“Charles Darwin regarded his work as a central influence on the theory of evolution.” (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/>)



“Hume conceived of **philosophy** as the inductive, experimental **science** of **human nature**. Taking the **scientific method** of the English physicist Sir **Isaac Newton** as his model and building on the **epistemology** of the English philosopher **John Locke**, Hume tried to describe how the **mind** works in acquiring what is called knowledge. He concluded that no theory of reality is possible; there can be no knowledge of anything beyond experience. Despite the enduring impact of his theory of knowledge, Hume seems to have considered himself chiefly as a moralist.”

[Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

According to Hume, a miracle is defined (*a priori*) as:

“...a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.”...

“Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of nature.”

op. cit., X, i, 90n ; *loc. cit.* (underline mine)

Hume's *a posteriori* Allegations

Miracles and the Ignorant.

Hume says, “there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men of such unquestioned good-sense, education, and learning as to secure us against all delusion in themselves.” Nor are there enough witnesses of “such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others.” Neither are they “of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood.” Finally, neither have the alleged miracles been “performed in such a public manner and in so celebrated a part of the world as to render the detection unavoidable” (*Abstract of a Treatise*, 124).

“The strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and marvelous . . . ought reasonably to beget suspicion against all relations of this kind.” And “if the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense,” wrote Hume (*ibid.*, 125–26). [cont...]

Hume's *a posteriori* Allegations cont...

Hume believes the case for miracles is damaged because “they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations.” Those that have found believers in civilized countries, he added, usually got them originally from “ignorant and barbarous ancestors.” Further, “the advantages are so great of startling an imposture among ignorant people that . . . it has a much better chance for succeeding in remote countries than if the first scene had been laid in a city renowned for arts and knowledge” (ibid., 126–28).

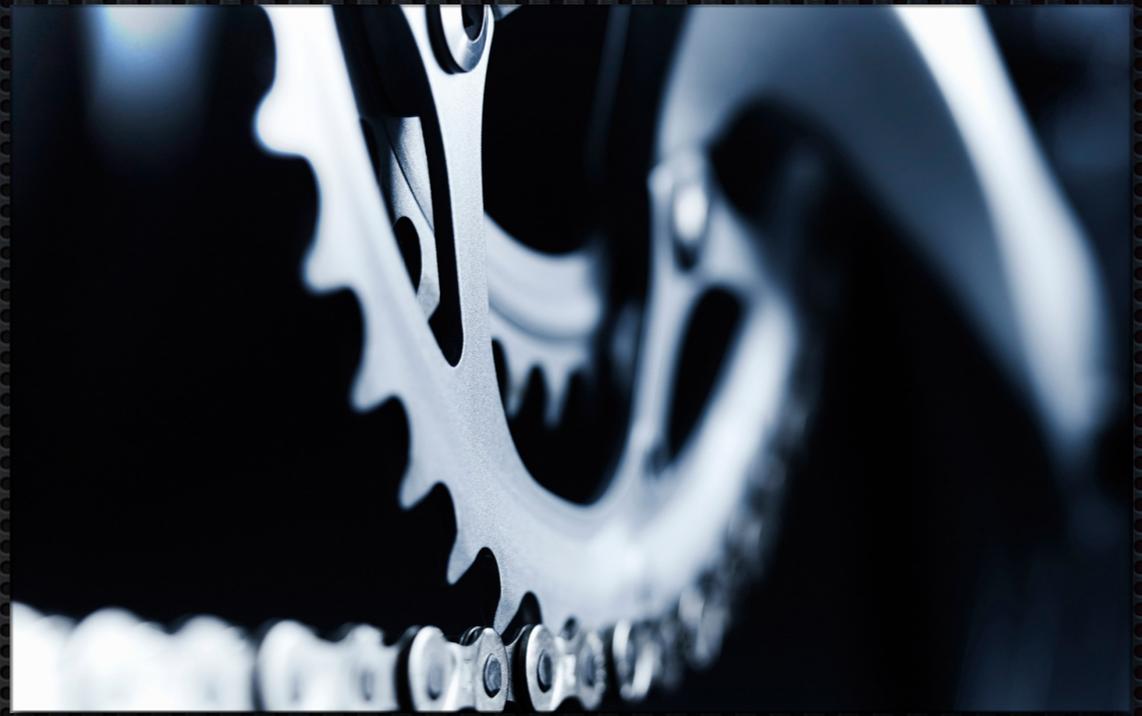
—Norman Geisler, *BECA: Arguments Against Miracles*

Summary of Hume's View

1. Natural Law is by definition a description of a regular occurrence. ("a firm and unalterable experience")
2. A miracle is by definition a rare occurrence. (one that does not happen in the common course of nature)
3. The evidence for the regular is always greater than that for the rare. The proof against miracles is overwhelming.
4. A wise person proportions belief to evidence.
5. Therefore, wise persons should never believe in miracles.

Alternate Re-Statement

1. Miracles, by definition, violate natural laws.
2. Natural laws are unalterably uniform. (cannot be proven to alter)
3. Therefore, miracles cannot occur.



2. The Supernaturalist's Definition:

“It may be that the event which we call a miracle was brought about not by the suspension [or, violation] of the laws in ordinary operation, but by the super-addition of something not ordinarily in operation.”

–*Sir George Stokes, Physicist, (Stokes, 1063; brackets mine)*

I use the word miracle to mean an interference
with Nature by supernatural power.

–*C. S. Lewis*

A miracle is a special act of God that interrupts the natural course of events.

–Norman Geisler, *BECA: Miracles are Possible* (underline mine)

“In other words, if a miracle occurs, it would not be a violation or contradiction of the ordinary laws of cause and effect, but rather a new effect produced by the introduction of a supernatural cause.”

-Norman Geisler, *BECA: Miracles are Possible*

Supernaturalist's Rebuttal of Hume's Epistemology

Hume: no theory of reality is possible; there can be no knowledge of anything beyond experience.

Supernaturalist: Your assertion is a theory of reality. Is your assertion based on a limitless experience or a limited one? (i.e. do you possess all knowledge from infinite experience?)



Supernaturalist's Rebuttal: Hume's False Premise

1. Natural Law is by definition a description of a regular occurrence.
2. A miracle is by definition a rare occurrence.
3. The evidence for the regular is always greater than that for the rare.
4. Wise persons always base their belief on the greater evidence.
5. Therefore, wise persons should never believe in miracles.

Supernaturalist's Answer to Hume's Skeptical Objection

The evidence for regular events is not always greater than the evidence for the rare.

Examples from Hume's own world view:

1. The Big Bang Theory is not based on regular events (It happened only once and not since).
2. The origin of life on earth does not occur regularly (It too occurred only once).
3. Macro-evolution is not regular but random.
4. The entire history of the earth is unrepeated.



Application to the Big Bang

Examination of the 2 Claims from
Foundationalism

Second Law of Thermodynamics: Universe is Running Out of Usable Energy

“Once hydrogen has been burned within that star and converted to heavier elements, it can never be restored to its original state. Minute by minute and year by year, as hydrogen is used up in stars, the supply of this element in the universe grows smaller” (Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*, 15-16).



Logical Observations

1. An infinite amount of energy never runs down (as the universe does).
2. If there is still usable energy in the universe, then the universe has not existed forever.

Stanford University Pinpoints Big Bang

New evidence from space supports Stanford physicist's theory of how universe began and shows that the universe is indeed expanding but started at a rate faster than the speed of light.

Astronomer Victor J. Stenger

“The universe exploded out of nothingness” (Free Inquiry, Winter 1992-93, 13).

Note: But what caused the explosion? “Nothing comes from nothing; nothing ever could!” ... unless supernaturalism prevails.



Therefore,--

Everything that had a beginning had a cause.

The universe had a beginning.

Hence, the universe had a cause.

And the cause of the natural world must be beyond the natural world (i.e. the supernatural; a.k.a. “a miracle”).

Therefore, there is a supernatural cause of the natural world.

Answers to Hume's *a posteriori* Allegations

Credible, educated and objective witnesses to miracles:

- [Testing Prayer](#) by [Candy Gunther Brown](#), Ph.D. (Harvard) Professor of Religion, Indiana University, Bloomington | Drawing on medical records, surveys of prayer recipients, prospective clinical trials, and multiyear follow-up observations and interviews, Brown shows that the widespread perception of prayer's healing power has demonstrable social effects which can in some cases produce improvements in health that can be scientifically verified.
- *Miracles* by Eric Metaxas:
 - ['Miracles' author shares stories 'beyond this world'](#) (video - Today Show)
 - ['Miracles' explores the science behind the existence of God](#) (video - Fox News, on [Fox and Friends](#), and on [Kelly File](#))
 - [Wall Street Journal Article](#)

Conclusions

- ✦ In foundationalism's choice between Hume's denial of miracles or Supernaturalism's allowance, empiricism betrays Hume.
- ✦ For "Miracle," the definition which best fits reality is: *a special act of a Supernatural Cause that interrupts the natural course of events.*
- ✦ Miracles can and do occur.

Supplemental Resources

Stanford University's Plato archive: Miracles: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/miracles/>

Fordham University's Modern History Sourcebook:
David Hume: On Miracles
<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/hume-miracles.asp>

Maranatha Baptist Seminary's "A Critique of David Hume's
On Miracles":
<http://www.mbu.edu/seminary/journal/a-critique-of-david-humes-on-miracles/>

[Answering the Objections of Atheists, Agnostics and
Skeptics](#) by Ron Rhodes

["Miracles"](#) by C. S. Lewis

[Science and Philosophy](#) (video) by Prof. John Lennox,
Oxford University



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