

**MIRACLE: THE POSSIBLE,
IMPOSSIBILITY**

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INTRODUCTION

Do you believe in Miracles? I know you will take a pause, miracle is a controversial topic. Believe in miracle is upheld by the spiritualist or Christians these includes the parting of the sea, turning water to wine, raising of the dead and other miraculous events as seen in the bible.

While those who are atheist or free thinkers find it hard to acknowledge that miracle truly happens.

Miracle is a concept which had gain relevant attention in the philosophy of religion in recent time. It is an issue which has drawn attention to religion as people take it to be that which can bring change in situation which is unexpected and which is beyond human ability or comprehension. Taking cognizance of the various conception of miracle had exposed us to some philosophers who opined that miracle is possible while, the likes of the British empiricist David Hume among all philosophers with a keen interest in miracle, view it as impossible. The formed the traditional basis for skepticism.

The focus of this paper shall be to look at the various definitions of miracle and the consideration of Hume's impossibility of miracle with the aim of debulking the various claims as posited by Hume.

MIRACLE: A DEFINITION

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary Miracle is an act or event that does not follow the laws of nature and is believed to be caused by God¹. From the foregoing, it could be seen that the definition is in line with the religious sect's conception of miracle because it is seen as that which hinges

on a Supreme Being (God) i.e a happening that breaks or violate the laws of nature and its brought about by God. But in a philosophical discourse, it could be asked that is God the ultimate or necessary cause of miracle?

To a layman, it could be seen as a lucky thing that happen that you did not expect or think was possible it has to do with that which goes beyond human imagination, that which ordinarily is not conceivable or imaginable.

St Thomas Aquinas in his own conception say's "those things are properly called miracle which are done by divine agency beyond the order commonly observed in nature (*praeter ordinem commuter observatum in rebus*) Acquires also re-appraises the definition as given above that which would be regarded as miracle is that which must have a divine intervention and goes beyond natural happening. It could be said that for Aquinas, miracle is that which brought about by the Supreme Being, God.

A miracle, philosophically speaking, is never a mere coincidence no matter how extraordinary or significant. For example: if you miss a plane and the plane crashes, that is not a miracle unless God divinely caused the event – an event ordinarily different from what would have occurred in the normal natural course of events. It is a divine overriding of, or interference with, the natural order. As such, it need not be extra ordinary marvelous or significant and it must be something other than a coincidence, no matter how remarkable. Unless the "coincidence" itself is caused by divine intervention. Miracles, however, are ordinarily understood to be not just products of divine intervention in the natural order but extraordinary, marvelous and significant as well.

Thus, Aquinas says a miracle is “beyond the order commonly observed”, for Dr. Eric Mascall views that the word “miracle” signifies in christian theology a striking interposition of divine power by which the operations of the ordinary course of nature are overruled, suspended, or modified”. In book Enquiries concerning Human Understanding, first published in 1748. David Hume says “A miracle may accurately be defined, as a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity, on by the interposition of some invisible agent”².

However, his slightly different definition of a miracle. “A miracle is a violation of the law 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”.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to strike the subject matter of the discourse which is on Humes view on the impossibility of miracle.

DAVID HUME AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MIRACLE



Hume's argument against justified belief in miracles or the possibility of miracles appears to depend heavily upon the premise that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature". However, the actual role such a premise plays in Hume's argument, and whether Hume meant to define a miracle as a sense "contrary" to the ordinary course of nature is, technically speaking, miracles are not violation of such laws but instead are positive instances of those laws. This is because laws of nature do not and are not meant to, account for or describe events with supernatural causes but only those with natural causes. Once some event is assumed to have a supernatural cause it is, by that very fact, outside the scope of laws of nature altogether and so cannot violate them. Only if one regards the possibility of supernatural causes can known exceptions to laws possibly be regarded as violation laws. However, in such a case there might be better reason that the exception simply shows that what was taken to be a law is not really law, rather than that the exception is a violation of a genuine law of nature.

Remarkably, the discussion of Hume on miracles has not been confined to, or even principally concerned with, whether or not Hume was correct in his argument on the impossibility of miracles. Instead, philosophical discussion has focused on exegetical issues concerning exactly what Hume was arguing. There is, for example, still no generally accepted view on the fundamental points of whether his argument against the possibility of miracle on the basis of testimony is:

(A) Meant as an a priori or a posteriori argument;

(B) if that argument can be, or is meant to be, generalised to include first-hand experience of an allegedly miraculous event; or indeed.

(C) If his argument, whether regarded as a priori or a posteriori, is meant to establish that one can never be justified in believing in a miracle on the basis of testimony. Hume does not seem to appear to claim that miracles are impossible only that justified belief in a miracle on the basis of testimony may be impossible. His argument is basically epistemological.

There are, however, grounds for supposing that a miracle is not even possible on Hume's account at least not given his wider empiricist views.

Hume's position on miracles cannot be properly understood apart from his analysis of causation, a posteriori reasoning, and indeed the most fundamental element of his empiricism – his analysis of "impression" and "ideas". In fact, Hume's position on miracles has never been properly understood because its connection to his views on causation has never been adequately examined. There is considerable controversy over what Hume's position actually was – let alone what his argument for that position is.

To understand Hume on miracles the following question must be answered. Why did Hume think that one could justifiably believe that an extraordinary event had occurred under certain circumstances, but that one could never justifiably believe a miracle had occurred? The proposed interpretation of Hume's analysis of miracle in relation to his analysis of causation and his wider empiricism yields the only plausible answer to this question that I know of. So despite Hume's a priori arguments against possibility in miracles he argues that under certain circumstances the

“evidence” may justify belief in the occurrence of an extraordinary event as long as we have experienced events analogies, Hume thinks that the most we are justified in believing is that the event did occur-not that the event is a miracle. We are to “search for the natural causes where it might be derived”. Such cases may even require us to re-assess, to some extent, our insinuation of what nature is capable of doing on our own, so to speak.

Sometimes statements of laws of nature must be reassessed and altered in light of new experience. Also, we must be careful not to extend our judgments as to what to believe or expect of nature to situations in which all of the relevant circumstances are not the same. Hume gave the example of the case of the Indian who refused to believe that water turned to ice. According to Hume, the Indian “reasoned justly” on the basis of his past experience. He refused at first, to believe that water turned to ice, despite the fact that it was well attested to because the event not only had the Indian is constant and uniform experience to count against it, but also because the event “base so with analogy to that experience.

The Indian “reasoned justly” but he extended his judgments about the properties of water to cases where all the circumstances were not the same. In certain situations in which we hear the testimony to extraordinary events we may be in situation similar to that of the Indian. Indeed, according to Hume if we justifiably believe that the extraordinary event did occur, then we should assume that we are in a situation just like that of the Indian. We assume this because, as I shall show, there are logically compelling reasons why the consistent Humean, in accordance with the principles of a posteriori reasoning

based on Hume's analysis of causation and his empiricism, can do nothing else.

The extraordinary event should be judged" not contrary to uniform experience of the course of nature in cases where all the circumstances are the same.



Why should we judge our situation to be like that of the Indians? Are there logically compelling reasons for doing so? Hume does not explicitly say why, but it must be because our experience has shown us that situations like the Indian's do arise. On the basis of experience, when we are justified in believing in the occurrence of an extraordinary event, we should liken ourselves to the Indian. That is why, in a case like the eight days of darkness, "we ought to search for the natural causes where it might be derived "experience demands it. it seems then, that according to Hume, when an extraordinary event is extraordinarily well attested to we have only two options. One is to accept the testimony and look for the event's natural causes. As much as Hume had

posited his argument in the impossibility of miracle, contrary to Hume one might try to posit some arguments.

Criticism of David Hume's Impossibility of Miracle

Is it inconceivable that we experience events for which no explanation like that suitable for the Indian has been forthcoming? It may be true that in some situations a seemingly naturally inexplicable event was later learned to have natural causes, but it is at least conceivable that there may be other explicable events for which no natural causes can be found. If experience can show that we are unable to find natural causes for certain events-though these events are very but as well attested to as other events only some of which we discovered natural causes for- then why must we liken ourselves to the Indian in cases where we justifiably believe in the occurrence of an extraordinary event? Why does experience demand that we either reject belief in the events occurrence or believe it but posit natural causes for the event? Justified belief does not entail belief in natural cause.

Experientially you have not shown that it does. Moreover, if we had independent reasons for thinking that no cause of some extraordinary event could be found e.g. on the basis of prophecy, then it is conceivable that we could be justified in believing that an extraordinary event occurred without thereby likening ourselves to the Indian. The grounds on which we might reject the supposition of a natural causes could themselves be experiential e.g. a prophet's track record. It does seem to be the case that we can always posit a natural explanation for an extraordinary event and based that supposition on

experience. On the other hand, we may reject such a supposition not only on the basis of prior, arguments of natural theology, but on the basis of experience.

For example, suppose that on extraordinary event that had some religion significance was prophesied, testimony justified belief in the event's occurrence, the prophet had been right about certain predictions made in the past, and no immediate natural explanation for the event that the least but of plausibility was forthcoming. The option of positing a natural explanation remains open, but experience does not necessarily demand that we avail ourselves of that option.

Hence thinks that the most that testimony can establish is that an extraordinary event has occurred, not that a miracle has occurred. To support this one must establishment the suppressed premise that we can have no good reasons on the basis of experience, for identifying an event as miraculous. Though Hume employs the premise he does not support it and the example just given suggests a reason for believing the premise to be invalid. In the absence of some criteria there is no logically compelling reason, and not necessarily compelling experiential reason, for assuming that the extraordinary event occurred (naturally) but a resurrection did not occur (miraculously). If the darkness can be justifiably believed in then so too can a resurrection as posit by the believers.

Furthermore, under the appropriate circumstances, not only could the resurrection be judged miraculous and not merely extraordinary, but so could

the eight day darkness. The thing that would determine whether or not the event was to be judged miraculous would be whether we had reason to believe that God or God's agents caused the event better reasons than for thinking that the event was caused naturally. It is conceivable that judgment that God caused a particular event can be experientially warranted. Again, imagine a prophet who is known to predict future event accurately.

The prophet has a track record of empirically verifiable prophecies concerning events of a most extraordinary nature or, imagines a case in which every time a "holy-person" pointed at some one that person lay down dead. An explanation of such goings-on can be sought in terms of natural (e.g. parapsychical) causes and abilities. However, would experiences necessitate the acceptance of this explanation over the supernatural one? Hume has not shown that it would.

Are Miracles real?

Miracle is not just a story of the first century, in recent times people have also shown strong believe in the concept of miracle.

More striking among such believers are those who claimed to have experienced miraculous happening have and also testified to it genuinely. Though some may argue the truthfulness in such claims, but then along years of relationship with some of those who have had experience is enough to make on believe their story.

Christians have attributed this strange occurrence to having strong faith in the impossible to come to reality. Many medical practitioners have also testified to

the fact that many patients who were once confirmed to be having on ailment or the other have been healed miraculously, defiling all medical impossibilities or condemnation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abimbola 'tunde graduated in philosophy with honors and holds an academic masters in Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations, he is a seasoned writer and a detailed professional with an experience over 8 years cut across the IT, Telecoms, Insurance and Fund management industry.

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