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Hume's argument against believing miracles happen

Most of the philosophers of the early modern period were religious, and their metaphysics or epistemology made room for God in some fashion. However, David Hume did not do so and urged people to reconsider whether accounts of a miracle occurring can prove God's existence. In this paper, I shall explore Hume's main argument against believing that miracles happen based on testimony. First, I will lay out some of Hume's groundwork on forming rational beliefs. Then I shall explore Hume's definition of miracles and testimonies, and finally explain the argument against believing miracles occur. To conclude, I shall offer an objection that testimony can be stronger than personal experience.

First, let us discuss how one is to form rational beliefs about the world. Hume believed there were two kinds of objects of inquiry: "relations of ideas and matters of fact." (Hume, 336) The first are things known to us a priori, those whose opposite would imply a contradiction; for example, a square having only three sides. The second are things known to us only a posteriori or through experience, and they encompass things whose opposites do not imply a contradiction. Matters of fact provide most of our knowledge of the everyday world like the sun existing and rising every day.

A crucial aspect of matters of fact is that experience is our only method of reasoning about them. Yet, at the same time, experience "is not altogether infallible, but in some cases is apt to lead us into errors." (Hume, 371) Consider climate: a person would be justified in thinking that it will rain on a particular day in November, if it is the rainy season. However, it could undoubtedly be the case that it does not rain that day and if so, they should not be surprised as experience also teaches us that some effects do not follow with

complete certainty after some causes. However, other things, like gravity, always hold no matter who observes them and no matter where they are observed. Dropping a ball will always result in it falling downwards. Ultimately, there is a broad spectrum for matters of fact where some have high certainties of occurring based on our past experiences, and some have low certainties. Thus, Hume believes that a "wise man proportions his belief to the evidence." (Hume, 371) This echoes what we know about science and how we live our lives. The more experiments we do and the greater the probability of some event E occurring after some event X, the more sure we can be that if X occurs then so will E. A law of nature then is something that we have proof of, through uniformity of experience.

Now, we can understand what a miracle is. Hume offers that a "miracle is a violation of the laws of nature." (Hume, 373) This category of miraculous is different from the marvelous or improbable. For example, winning three lotteries in a single day would be incredibly marvelous, but not miraculous since no natural laws would be broken. On the other hand, if one saw someone start returning to life after being dead for some time, that would go against our understanding of the natural world and certainly be miraculous.

Lastly, let us explore what testimonies are and their evidential weight. According to Hume, testimony should be treated no differently from any other source of evidence or experience. After all, our assurance of them comes either from if we think the person in question is truthful, which is established through past experiences of them being, in fact, truthful or from what they say directly lining up with our past experiences (Hume, 372). Imagine that I say to you that today I saw a pig fly. If you think I am untrustworthy and have lied in the past, you will dismiss my claim as false immediately. If you thought I was truthful, you may consider it and look for more evidence, but I doubt you would conclude that it is now possible for pigs to fly since that goes against all your past experiences. Essentially,

testimonies are akin to first-hand experiences but are usually weaker because they introduce more possible avenues of falsity. Consider how often people lie to get something beneficial, or how many false prophets there have been, or that we are psychologically inclined to believe in wondrous stories (Hume, 375).

Finally, we can put all this together to understand Hume's overall argument. Suppose that some event E occurs, which breaks some natural law L thus being miraculous. The evidence in favor of L is all your past experiences, and those of most other people. This uniformity of experience means we have proof of L. The evidence for event E occurring is only testimony. Furthermore, if E is true, then L cannot be true, and so we have the full weight of evidence for L being true in opposition to E occurring. So even if we somehow had proof of E, it would be proof against proof and they would cancel out. So we still would not have sufficient evidence to believe that the miraculous event E occurred (Hume, 378). However, most of the time, testimonies do not result in proof and have many deficiencies. This means that we usually have more evidence for the law L, so as the wise man proportions his belief as guided by evidence, we should believe that L holds and event E did not occur. Hence, it is clear that we should not believe in miracles occurring based on the testimony of other people. Thus, we cannot rationally believe a religion to be factual based on a miracle.

One difficulty I find with Hume's argument is that testimony is akin to our own experience and cannot be stronger than our own experience. Consider that most people used to believe that the Earth was flat. But how do we know this is false, have you ever seen the Earth to be a sphere? Also, consider that we once thought light to be a particle, but now we know that it is both a light and a particle. Nevertheless, again I doubt most of us have seen or experienced this. How do we know it to be true then? Purely through the

testimonies of scientists who have given us cohesive evidence. The Earth being flat seems far more intuitive based on our everyday experiences and yet none of us believe this, because we respect the testimony of scientists and authority figures. In this same sense, it is clear that in rare cases, we believe some people's testimony to be stronger than our own experience. It is also clear that many of our natural laws are not laws because of our own experiences but rather the testimonies of others to begin with (e.g., light's behavior).

I have demonstrated that testimony from authority figures can be more reliable than our own experience. As Hume first pointed out, experience is not infallible, so we can feasibly have trust that the experience of someone else is more likely to be true than our own experience. Hence, it becomes possible that the testimony of a miracle occurring (someone else's experience) can be stronger than the natural law (our experience) it violates. Thus, we should accept it. Consider if a collection of the world's greatest thinkers and scientists, all with various backgrounds, suddenly reported the same miraculous phenomena occurring. I do not think that it would be irrational of you to believe them, considering that they are also the upholders of the natural laws we take to be true.

In conclusion, testimonies are not sufficient to establish the occurrence of a miracle in most scenarios since testimonies are more likely to be false. However, I believe there is a possibility, albeit very slim, that testimony could have more evidential weight than one's personal experience. In this scenario, perhaps testimony could rationally be enough to establish a miracle and a religion.

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Works Cited:

Ariew, Roger and Watkins, Eric (eds.). 2000. *Readings in Modern Philosophy, Volume II* (Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Associated Texts). Indianapolis: Hackett.