"A transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent"
Comment on the adequacy of this definition of a miracle (12)

Miracles have been defined by many different philosophers in many different ways throughout history. An example of this is Swinburne, who describes a miracle as "an event of extraordinary kind." However the definition put forward by Hume is often referred to as the "violation" definition of a miracle because it states that the laws of nature have to be broken, or violated. Hume's definition is also often referred to as the classical understanding of what a miracle is because it is the most widely understood definition. Philosophers often refer to something as a miracle if it contains the three main attributes; the event must be against regular experience and is often referred to as breaking the laws of nature, the event must have purpose and significance and it is possible to link religious significance to the event.

a)

In order to comment on the adequacy of Hume's definition of a miracle, it's important to first assert what the laws of nature Hume mentions actually are, and what defines breaking them. Swinburne's definition of going against natural laws states that "we are justified in taking an event to be a violation of a natural law if it is inconsistent with our whole understanding of the scheme of things." Laws of nature are things which are well established and have good evidential support to help maintain them being true. This evidential support is often scientific.

However this definition has come under extensive criticism. The first and most important criticism is that Hume describes the laws of nature as if they were unchangeable. However advances in science and knowledge show that earlier ideas of natural laws are incorrect.

One of the most important criticisms, which lessens the adequacy of Hume's definition, is other, different interpretations of the laws of nature. Philosophers such as Owen and Hick challenge Newton's views of the laws of nature and argue that these laws are flexible, that "natural laws are generalisations formulate retrospectively to cover whatever has in fact happens… we can declare apriori there are no miracles." Another interpretation of the natural laws is put forward by Holland, who argues that things can happen within nature, and God seems to be involved so can be classed as miraculous. These alternative views of the laws of nature are important because if they are believed, Hume's definition is shown to be inadequate.

Another important criticism is the view that Hume's definition is dated. This is because he based his definition on Newton's understanding of the natural laws, which said that the natural laws were fixed. However today, the general belief is that natural laws are based on probability. An example of this is that the sun rises every day. We do not know that it will necessarily rise

tomorrow, but we assume it will because it has done every day in the past. Hume's definition however doesn't include probabilities, which shows Hume's definition of a miracle to be incorrect and inadequate.

A less important, but still substantial criticism of Hume's definition is that it goes against the classical idea of God and the nature of God. The definition infers that miracles occur because the deity, God, or some invisible agent wishes them to. This supports the classical idea of an omnipresent, benevolent and omnipotent God because he creates miracles to help certain people which can be seen as a loving act. However the idea that God only interjects at specific moments challenges the idea that God is omnipresent. This criticism is important because in order for Hume's definition to be correct, God must perform miracles on earth and then leave again, defying God's omnipresence. It also challenges God's benevolence because yes he performs miracles for some people, but there are still many, many people who need miracles and never witness them. Lourdes, a famous place for miraculous healings has had approximately 200 million visitors, yet only 68 miracles have been officially recognised by the church. Hume's definition, if believed, also challenges the omnipotence of God because if he is benevolent and wishes to cure all his people, then questions are raised as to why he does not and if he cannot.

Also, the breaking of a natural law isn't necessarily enough to prove that an event is a miracle. Generally, philosophers agree that a miracle needs to have three main attributes in order to be classified as a miracle; the event must be against regular experience and is often referred to as breaking the laws of nature, the event must have purpose and significance and it is possible to link religious significance to the event. Hume's definition is therefore inadequate because it doesn't include the rest of the necessary characteristics accepted by most philosophers of classifying a miracle.

On the whole, the number of criticisms of Hume's definition suggest that his definition is inadequate, because of other interpretations of the natural laws, the challenging of the classical concept of God and how dated it is. Vardy supports the idea that Hume's definition is outdated, saying that "Hume's argument has much to comment it, but if we examine his claims in closer detail, their effectiveness will be seen to be more limited than he might have imagined."