

Discuss the philosophical problems related to purported evidence for miracles (28)

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There are many philosophical problems relating to purported evidence for miracles and there are also many criticisms put forward by philosophers. The main criticiser of miracles is Hume. Hume put forward many criticisms which appear to discredit apparent miracles. However there are also criticisms which suggest that Hume's problems with the evidence for miracles aren't sufficient to reject the existence of miracles.

One of the most important criticisms of miracles put forward was from Hume. He said that "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." He argues that no single man is reliable and trustworthy enough to be believed, and that no miracle has been witnessed by enough people to be believed or proven to be true. This is important because if his argument to be believed, then miracles don't exist and have never occurred. However Hume didn't actually specify how many men constituted a sufficient number, or how good sense, education and learning was to be measured and judged.

An equally important criticism is Hume's criticism of testimonies, where he stated that "No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavours to establish." He said that because each testimony of a miracle is different to another, they cancel each other out and so each makes the other testimonies unreliable. He said that "In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles, on which the system was established." Hume also said that it was "more probable that a person is lying than a law of nature had been broken" because the natural laws are based on a posteriori evidence

However when Hume was writing, testimonies were passed by word of mouth but today, alleged miracles are heavily investigated by the Church and can be supported by scientific evidence. Vardy explains this as "Hume was writing at a time when the only support for miracle stories came from word of mouth reports. Today claimed miracles are sometimes supported by scientific evidence." A famous example of this is Lourdes, where 68 miracle healings have been officially recognised by the Church. These healings break the natural laws and are therefore extremely important because most of the people healed were chronically ill or paralysed and had been told by doctors that there wasn't a cure for whatever their conditions were. Becoming healed at Lourdes goes against medical and is inexplicable. However the healings can be investigated by the Church and proved by medical records showing that the person involved was incurable before visiting Lourdes, and perfectly healthy after leaving.

Also, Swinburne argued that unlike Hume, we should trust people and their insights of what they have witnessed. He used the Principle of Credulity which says that we should trust people and not be sceptical of what they say. He said that "if it seems to a person that *X* is present, then *X* probably is present." He also said that it should be up to the sceptic to prove the miracle didn't happen, not the other way round. He said that it is "reasonable to believe that the experiences of others are probably as they report them" which is supported by the Principle of Testimony, that states that people are unlikely to lie. This is important because it uses the opposite assumption of human nature to Hume. Hume assumes that people are untrustworthy and lie, whereas Swinburne argues that people don't always lie.

A less important but still substantial criticism is Hume's comments on human nature and excitement. He said that it's in human nature to love excitement, and so people could be easily persuaded that they've experienced a miracle and talk about it more because it's exciting. He also states that miracles witnessed and recorded thousands of years ago are unreliable because the witnesses were "primitive and uneducated." Davies supported this argument, using the example of a kangaroo in a bathroom. He said that "if *Fred*, *Bill* and *John* testify that there is a kangaroo in the bathroom and if *Mabel*, *Marty* and *Catherine* testify that there is no kangaroo in the bathroom then the testimonies cancel each other out, and neither should be accepted."

However just because someone is excited about witnessing a miracle, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are lying. Witnessing an event such as a miracle would most probably cause a great deal of excitement. Also, Hume assumes that the witnesses of earlier miracles are primitive people. However at Lourdes, some of the 68 miracles officially recognised by the Church have occurred in the 20th century. It has been argued that these people were clearly not primitive, and so Hume's assumption that the witnesses are primitive is a weak criticism of miracles.

One of these criticisms is that when Hume was around, the laws of nature were very strict. Since then, advances in science and other things have increased human understanding of the natural laws, and that some of them are actually incorrect. Vardy says that "Hume talks of laws of nature, as if they were set in stone, thus implying that no natural law can ever be shown to be false."

In conclusion, there are many strong philosophical problems for purported evidence for miracles; however there are also many counter-strengths. Overall, whether a person believes in miracles or not is dependant on how they perceive things. Sceptical empiricists who rely on observing miracles rather than faith to believe are less likely to believe that miracles occur, because the very nature of them state that they are not normal everyday occurrences and so most people will never witness them. Although philosophers such as Swinburne say that we must trust people, there have been numerous false claims of miracles occurring and so we must not be

gullible and require some form of evidence. It is today widely accepted that the laws of nature are changeable or extendable and so events don't "violate" them which makes Hume's definition quite inadequate. However Hume's definition is regarded as the classical understanding of miracles, and has been accepted over time and so must be given some credit even if it isn't completely believable. Throughout history, miracles have been the subject of much debate due to the lack of evidential support backing them up. Hume's argument regarding testimonies is important and accurate when referring to miracles witnessed by one person with out any kind of other evidence. However it's not possible to determine if every single witness of a miracle is lying and many events thought to have been miracles have since been proved using today's science and more advances in science could further disprove thing events thought to have been miracles have since been proved using today's science and more advances in science could further disprove things we would assume to be miracles today.