

## Miracles AO2 – Extract Handout

### Part 1

**It is unreasonable to believe in miracles. Evaluate this view.**

1. David Hume argued that it was unreasonable to believe in miracles. He claimed that a wise man proportioned his belief to the evidence. But as the laws of nature had been established and supported over a period of many hundreds of years, then it will always be more reasonable to believe that the law of nature has held and has not been broken, than to believe testimony claiming that the law of nature has been broken. He challenged the reliability of testimony by five arguments. He argued that no miracle had a sufficient number of witnesses. People are prone to look for marvels and wonders. The sources of miracle stories were from ignorant people. The writers had a vested interest and so there was bias. Religious traditions counteract each other. These five arguments show that testimony is always unreliable. Some people point out that Hume seems to be begging the question and arguing in a circle. Do laws never change? Hume rejects miracles regardless of the evidence. But he was an empiricist! No it is not unreasonable to believe in miracles if there is enough evidence.

2. David Hume argued that it was unreasonable to believe in miracles. He claimed that a wise man proportioned his belief to the evidence. But as the laws of nature had been established and supported over a period of many hundreds of years, then it will always be more reasonable to believe that the law of nature has held and has not been broken, than to believe testimony claiming that the law of nature has been broken. He argued that testimony to miracles had inherent weaknesses and so were always likely to be unreliable and weaker than our everyday experiences of the regularity of nature. He challenged the reliability of testimony by five main arguments. Hume pointed out that miracle stories lacked a sufficient quantity of educated trustworthy witnesses – people who would have a lot to lose if found to be wrong. However, it is not clear what Hume regarded as a sufficient quantity. Hume identified further weaknesses such as people's natural desire to spread stories of marvels, noting that most of these stories originated amongst ignorant people. In his essay he seemingly contradicts himself and cites a case that was attested to by witnesses of credit and distinction, only to dismiss it on the grounds that it was absolutely impossible. As an empiricist this seems contrary to his philosophical views.

Hume's accusation that the writers of miracle stories had a vested interest is aimed at religion and Christianity in particular. However, this seems to imply that all believers were either deceivers or the deceived. He fails to take into account the possibility that some people are natural sceptics, including some religious people.

Overall it is questionable how far Hume has shown that miracle accounts are unreliable.

3. There are various views as to what is meant by the term "miracles". The different understandings will be crucial in deciding whether it is reasonable to believe in miracles.

Perhaps the most well known definition is the one given by Hume. This refers to events that violate a law of nature. The difficulty is that laws of nature have been arrived at by regular observation whilst violations to natural law are by definition very rare if indeed they have ever occurred. Hence Hume argues that it will always be more reasonable to believe that the law of nature has held and not been broken, than to believe testimony that the law of nature has been broken. He then gives a number of reasons why testimony of miracles casts some doubt on its reliability. The claim that no miracle has a sufficient number of witnesses has been challenged as being far too stringent and that many events in history would not pass the test. Nevertheless most events in history are not involving the supernatural so is it so unreasonable to demand more evidence for claimed miracles? However, Hume himself gave an example in his essay "On Miracles" which was indeed witnessed publicly by a large number of creditable people – yet he dismissed the account as unreliable on the grounds that it was impossible. This suggests Hume decided it was unreasonable to believe in miracles regardless of the evidence.

Of course if the definition of miracles were to be taken as an event of religious significance, then the issue about assessing whether the event took place or not diminishes. Now it is more a case of how the observer interprets the event. If it has significance for them, then it can be classed as a miracle. The assessment has moved from the objective to the subjective. Those who see the event as coincidence may then well explain it without recourse to a God and so having no religious significance. However, the person who sees it as having religious significance may still interpret the "coincidence" as being God guided. The concept of reasonable also needs examining. For something to be reasonable implies that the argument and lines of reasoning are capable of moving an unprejudiced person to accept the conclusion as persuasive. As can be seen from the argument above, it is far from clear whether it is unreasonable to believe in miracles.

## Part 2

### QUESTION 1

**'Science makes clear that miracles cannot happen.' Evaluate this view.**

1. The definition by Hume defines miracles as events that involve violations of the law of nature. The view of science is that events that appear to break laws of nature have a natural explanation. There is no need for recourse to a "God of the gaps" argument. The law of nature is a law - a formula of what must happen in certain conditions. If there is an apparent violation of the law of nature then it will be seen that the conditions/circumstances are different that explain why things happened differently from that which was expected. The introduction of some supernatural being or God is not required. There is no evidence for such a being so to use God as an explanation merely complicates the issue unnecessarily. First one would have to know God existed before you referred to God as the explanation. Even if there was a God, the fact that God is added to the conditions means that the law of nature is no longer applying to the regular conditions (since God is now an added condition) – so technically the different conditions means that the original law of nature has not been violated.

Of course some argue that there is no entity called “science” that can authoritatively rule whether miracles can or cannot happen. Science is neutral and science also has limitations. Also modern science seems to favour some degree of unpredictability with the advent of quantum physics. Maybe events can seem to break laws of nature but not because of God but because of the workings of the universe.

2. Certainly science seems to persuade us that miracles can’t happen. Science assumes that there are laws and the universe is mechanistic in its workings. Therefore, there is regularity and order. Indeed, we experience it everyday. Indeed, when things happen unexpectedly we will find that there has been some change in the conditions to account for the change. No law of nature has been violated. It just means that new conditions require different laws to apply. Events still act according to laws of nature. Indeed, developments in science in the area of quantum physics suggest an element of unpredictability and so supposed “miracles” have a natural explanation without recourse to some supernatural being. Science explains so called “miracles”.

Some people define miracles as events that have religious significance. The classic example of Holland who tells of a child caught between the rail tracks with a train fast approaching out of sight. The mother could see the child on the tracks and the train approaching. She realised the child would be hit by the train and there was too little distance for the train to stop, once the driver saw the child. However, the train suddenly started to slow down even though the driver could not see the child. It stopped about a metre from the child leaving the child unharmed. The mother looking on saw it as a miracle. Even when she learnt that the driver had had a heart attack and the automatic braking system stopped the train, she still saw it as a miracle. Clearly in such cases, science does not stop miracles happening. In fact they explain them.

3. Science and religion have always been in conflict and no more so than in the area of “miracles”. Of course the extent of the conflict depends on the definition of the concept of “miracles”. The weaker version argued for by such people as Holland see the emphasis on the interpretation of events. If they are beneficial and unexpected, they can still be accounted for in the idea of natural laws and there is no sense in which the natural laws are broken. Hence, science sees no conflict. However, implied in this religious significance interpretation is hidden the idea that there is a God who at some moment in time is directing events to this particular beneficial end even though the beneficial coincidence looks random. Indeed, the actual events such as Holland’s example of the train stopping before hitting a child can be explained without any need of a breaking of a law of nature. The driver had a heart condition and the automatic braking system came into action. It is compatible with science as long as there is no claim that a supernatural being was at some point involved. Of course the problem is that the observer is claiming God is involved, after all, the event has religious significance. In this case science seems at odds with the “miracle” since it takes into account only the “natural”. The supernatural is excluded.

However, the debates about miracles and religion have been fought mainly over Hume’s understanding of miracles, in which the laws of nature are said to be violated. This seems contrary to the scientific understanding of the universe that is mechanistic, orderly and

regular. Given a certain set of conditions the same effects will always follow. Miracles seem to challenge that. If “miracles” happen, then the basis of science which takes into account only the “natural” is, at its very core, wrong. Hence, science does seem again to say that miracles cannot happen. Nevertheless, in recent times the development of quantum physics has challenged this mechanistic understanding of the universe in favour of unpredictability. However, this is hardly an explanation of miracles, which always seem to be linked to benefit and purpose rather than random non-significant events.

Overall, it does seem that there remains a clash between the scientific view of the universe that considers only the natural, and the religious understanding that involves the supernatural. Does science make clear that miracles can’t happen? Well, if it excludes the supernatural and God, then yes. But maybe it is more the case that science just has limitations. It cannot rule, in advance, as to whether laws of nature can or cannot happen. That would be to go against the scientific method.

## **QUESTION 2.**

**‘No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle.’ Evaluate this view.**

1. This is the view argued by Hume in his chapter “On miracles”. Hume is involved in an exercise in probability. Which is more likely: that a miracle occurred or that a witness is either lying or mistaken? People lying or being mistaken is common; exceptional events are, by definition rare. The probability is therefore against the miracle occurring. The balance of probability swings in favour of the miracle having occurred when the chance of the people reporting the miracle lying or being mistaken is as inconceivable as was the miracle occurring in the first place. Therefore, Hume sets out the criteria by which to establish the virtual impossibility that the witnesses are lying or mistaken.

They are a sufficient number of witnesses who are educated, trustworthy and witnesses to a public event. They must be people who would have a lot to lose if they were found to be lying. Hume does not deny the possibility of miracles as such but makes clear that such testimony required can never be forthcoming, and so miracles cannot be shown to have happened.

He gives a number of reasons why testimony is insufficient: i) people are prone to look for marvels and wonders ii) the sources of miracle stories are from ignorant people iii) the writers had vested interests and so are biased iv) religious traditions counteract each other. Also there have never been a sufficient number of witnesses of the calibre he required.

Therefore Hume concluded that testimony could never outweigh our present-day experience of the regularity of nature. No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle. The testimony would have to be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavoured to establish.

2. Although Hume’s chapter on miracles in his book “Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding” is scarcely 20 pages long, it is regarded as a major contribution to the debate. He wrote his famous chapter on miracles to demonstrate that no one could use the argument of miracles to demonstrate the truth of Christianity or religion in general. A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence. Where the experience has been constant then this constitutes a full proof. A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature that have

been established by firm and unalterable experience. Indeed, there must have been a uniform experience against such an event for it to be called a miracle. In such cases even the most impressive testimony would merely balance the counter-evidence provided by the improbability of the miracle.

When Hume considers the criteria of the testimony that would be required he points out that the testimony is never of this order e.g. a sufficient number of witnesses of educated trustworthy kind and witnesses to a public event. However it is not clear what constitutes a sufficient number. In his own essay Hume does actually cite a case that seems to match this criteria but then dismisses it as impossible an event.

He gives a number of reasons why the testimony is always suspect. For instance people are always prone to look for marvels and wonders and miracle stories acquire authority without critical or rational inquiry. There is an additional problem in that writers have vested interests in propagating miracle accounts especially if the account was used to establish a religion. However it does not seem reasonable to assume that all people giving testimony about miracles are either deceivers or the deceived. Testimony is not the only evidence for miracles. Physical effects could be seen. For instance – a healed withered arm. Also X rays may demonstrate the before and after situation. The clear conclusion is that testimony is not sufficient to establish a miracle.

3. This is the view argued by Hume in his chapter “On miracles”. The problem of reliable testimony arises mainly in relation to Hume’s definition of a miracle since his definition involves an event that breaks the law of nature and so is counter to our usual everyday experience of the world. Hume argues that a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence and our evidence of the world is that it is regular and orderly. Nature does indeed keep to its laws, which therefore allows us to accurately predict the outcome of events. As Hume points out, it would require a quality of testimony to be convinced that the law of nature has been violated or suspended in some way. It would need to be a public event that was witnessed by large numbers of educated, trustworthy people. Hume claims there has never been such an instance. However, he does actually cite a case in his own essay but then declares that the event was impossible so he dismisses the testimony. That does seem to imply that as far as Hume is concerned no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle. Certainly testimony can have weaknesses. Hume pointed out that people are prone to recount marvels and wonders as fact even when they don’t believe it. He also saw the origin of most miracle stories acquired authority without critical or rational inquiry.

However, if a person believes in God for other reasons, then this interventionist understanding might well be seen as consistent with a Supreme Being. Swinburne argues that we should expect miracles since God needs to communicate with his creatures and to authenticate his message. He further argues that if the event happens in response to prayer and is consistent with the nature of God, then it is acceptable historical evidence. Other scholars, such as Wiles, sees such supposed interventions as trivial acts whilst others dismiss the testimony on grounds that God cannot enter time and space since he is outside of time. Hence the debate focusses not just on testimony itself but also on the coherency of what the testimony is claiming.

The alternative definition of miracle as an event of religious significance also faces problems

over testimony. In one sense, if the testimony states it has religious significance, then is it a miracle? However, hidden behind that is the idea that God is somehow involved and so once again the coherency of the testimony raises doubts about the reliability of the testimony. It seems to demand that God providentially orders the world so that natural causes of events are ready and waiting to produce certain other events at the right time, perhaps in answer to prayer which God knew would be offered. Many would find that difficult to accept and so both understandings of miracles seem to suggest that testimony is insufficient to establish a miracle.