

Review of “Hume on Miracles: Interpretation and Criticism”

Philosophy Compass

Minor Revision ✓

This is a nicely organized, clearly written essay on a topic of perennial interest. The way you explain the distinction between matters of fact and truths of reason with reference to Hume's bachelorhood is clever. Features like this make your paper a model of good pedagogy.

My comments reflect my own impressions about some details of your presentation, and some differences in perspective about (1) the proper interpretation of Hume on certain points, (2) the concept of a law of nature and, hence, of a miracle, and (3) the nature of evidence and its place in determining the epistemic status of belief in miracles (or, more particularly, resurrection belief). I don't expect to persuade you of any of my claims, but they are here for you to consider should you make changes to your paper.

1) The subtitle "Current Debates" does not, I think, reflect very precisely the content of your paper. You do offer an alternative analysis of the concept of a law of nature, but without indicating whether this is a novel conception or one at large in the literature. (I suggest that it can be found in the literature, including literature on Hume on miracles.) You do say something about evidence as understood from the point of view of Reformed epistemology. But I don't see how your response to Hume using these resources amounts to a discussion of current debates. Maybe your paper doesn't need a subtitle. A more focused main title may do the trick, something that suggests that Hume has a mistaken view of natural laws and too narrow an account of evidence.

2) I, and others, interpret Hume somewhat differently on the point of "violating" a law of nature. As you understand him, any "violation" of a supposed law is a counterexample to a universal generalization, such that what was thought to be a law was not a law after all. Some who interpret Hume along these lines think that he does, in effect, define miracles out of existence. That would be true only if Hume also held that any event that occurs must occur in accordance with the laws of nature. If this were Hume's view, why shouldn't he just say so? Why the argument about whether it is more reasonable to believe that a reported miracle occurred or to believe that it did not? (Notice the kind of evidence he cites to support his claim that it is more reasonable to believe that a miracle has not occurred: it is not a priori.)

Suppose natural laws are not quite universal generalizations, but rather "general" generalizations, allowing of "counterinstances" (as Swinburne says). On this view, the operation of a law of nature is cancelled when a miracle occurs because the miracle over-rides what would otherwise occur given the laws of nature (as ordained by God). Perhaps this is a sense of "violation" compatible with what Hume says in "On Miracles." Whether or not it is consistent with what he says elsewhere—in the bits you refer to on page 10—about constant conjunction is another matter. But do you actually show, on page 10, that for Hume "natural causal laws simply [are] contingent

universal generalizations"? Your critique of Hume on the semantic point depends on this. But I remain sceptical about your characterization of Hume on this point.

3) Given what you say on page 6 about Hume's conception of a law of nature, it's awkward to hear the phrase "violation of a law of nature" in continued use (e.g., on page 7). The locution "violation of a law of nature" seems to suggest that there may be such a thing as a bona fide law that is "violated." But your characterization of Hume on laws of nature precludes this. So the locution, once understood the way you render it, seems misleading. I guess you could say it's simply a manner of speaking. But it's an awkward manner of speaking, if a law of nature is, for Hume, what you say it is.

4). I do like your formulation of the question (page 7), "What should we do if we have evidence for the claim that all A's are B's and evidence for the claim that some A's are not B's?" That does seem to me to be the right question.

5). Given the question, repeated in (4) above, and what you say later about epistemically justified atheism, epistemically justified agnosticism, and epistemically justified theism, perhaps only the agnostic will have evidence of both kinds. I says perhaps. After all, the question is about what is indicated by the evidence one has. So the atheist could have some (but hardly enough) evidence that some A's are not B's, and theists could have some (but not enough evidence that all A's are B's)—where the substitutions for A and B pertain to natural events and miracles. But later it sounds like you think that Christian theists may have "grounds" that others do not (page 17). If everyone who has this kind of grounds for believing that the resurrection occurred is also a Christian, then maybe it is only the Christian who has "some" (and, as it happens, that some is enough) "evidence." The point I'm getting at is that it's not clear who, besides a Christian believer, could be in a position to have some evidence that some A's are not B's; and it's not clear that a Christian believer could have some evidence that all A's are B's (given how he acquires his belief about, or simply finds himself believing in, the resurrection). Of course, that may be a result that you're willing to allow.

6) Can an atheist who is justified in believing that miracles are impossible (page 15) have evidence that a miracle has occurred? In what sense could he have such evidence? And yet, does not the well-informed atheist, familiar with the kinds of evidence you describe concerning the resurrection of Jesus, "have" such evidence?

7) On Hume's "Proportionalist Evidentialism" (pages 15-16): I understand how typical it is for Reformed epistemologists to that think of evidence a certain way and of evidentialists as adopting that way of thinking about evidence, where it necessarily involves inference or argument. But I think it's a serious mistake to conflate "believing on the basis of propositional evidence" with "believing on the basis of (other) belief(s)." After all, most contemporary evidentialist epistemologists (e.g., Richard Feldman and Earl Conee) are also foundationalists. In his introductory text in epistemology, Feldman defines evidentialism approximately as follows: "S is justified in believing P at t iff S's evidence supports P at t." But Feldman also defends foundationalism, according to which there are justified basic beliefs. If someone's (S's) basic belief is justified at t "iff S's evidence supports that belief at t," then S's basic belief is grounded in evidence. And S may be fully aware of what that evidence

is, and that it is that evidence that grounds her basic belief. I see no reason why Hume should be thought to repudiate such a notion of evidence. In fact, I should think he plainly accepts it. (About matters of fact, all we have to go on are sensory experiences.) So it seems to me that you've characterized Hume's "proportionalist evidentialism" too narrowly, and escaped his challenge too easily.

8) On page 16 you point out that some deny Hume's evidentialism. But on what basis would you argue that it is reasonable to do so? Your discussion of the epistemic status of belief in miracles would be strengthened if you had something to say about this.

9) I don't know what the percentages are, but I suspect that many, if not most, Christians believe on the basis of testimony, rooted in historical evidence, that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. They may sing, "You ask me how I know he lives; he lives within my heart." But I wonder if they mean this, or are right about what grounds their belief even if this is what they think grounds it.

10) Some Christian philosophers (e.g., William Craig and Gary Habermas) believe that evidence for the resurrection is not only evidence that God exists, but evidence sufficient to justify belief in God. You seem to think that what one makes of the evidence for miracles depends on one's general worldview. So could an epistemically justified atheist have a potential defeater for his atheism, in the form of evidence for the resurrection?

11) Hume's essay "On Miracles" is presented in the context of his more general discussion of the epistemology of testimony. Suppose Hume was to say that his treatment of belief in miracles is restricted to belief that is based on human testimony, passed along through the ages. Might you agree with him that that kind of evidence is not sufficient to overturn evidence for the claim that dead men don't rise? If you would agree on this point, then have you made a serious criticism of Hume by deflecting the requirement that belief be proportioned to the evidence?

12) One of three smaller points: On page 13, line 3, we are to "suppose that a miracle is a relatively rare event that cannot be explained in terms of natural law" Are you sure this is how you want to make your point? As I understand your characterization of a miracle, it shouldn't matter whether a truly miraculous event could be explained by us in terms of natural law. For explanation in terms of natural law is a matter of our perspective on how nature normally operates and whether the event in question conforms with that. We may be missing something, so that what appears normal, and hence can, from our point of view, be "explained" in terms of natural law, actually isn't normal—because God has intervened in a way that we are not in a position to recognize. And if God's reasons for making miracles happen are not limited to convincing us of their miraculous nature, there may well be events of that sort.

13) Speaking of "normal," it seems to me that you could strengthen your conception of a law of nature (page 12), without compromising the point you wish to make, by observing that these laws have a deep, but qualified, "necessity" built into them by God—they are divinely ordained. (Others have made this claim.) By using the term

"normal," you seem to be following Hume too far in conceptualizing a natural law in epistemic terms, or in terms of how things seem to us.

13) Third small point: Page 14—Why assume that it is "uncontroversial" that Jesus of Nazareth lived, etc.? Why can't it just be "very likely" that . . . ?

14) Finally: Another excellent point in your paper is the distinction between probability assessments limited to enumerative induction and reasoning to the best explanation (IBE). I think this is the basis for a serious criticism of Hume. Others have made this point. Should they be acknowledged?

I very much enjoyed reading and learning from your paper.