

## 3.2 Hume on miracles

### Introduction

Hume famously attacks the idea of miracles in chapter 10 of his book *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*. Having outlined in previous chapters the idea that our mind consists entirely of things gained from experience, he seeks to apply this to a range of issues. This leads him to question causation and observe that laws of cause and effect are ideas that we acquire by habit. Hume also rejects the idea of chance and argues that the behaviour of objects is predictable scientifically. This worksheet summarises chapter 10 in detail.

### Part 1

1. Hume begins his account by observing that 'A wise man proportions his belief according to the evidence'. There is no such thing as chance but our mind naturally inclines towards whatever it considers to be most probable.
2. Given that we did not directly observe the miracles, the only evidence that is available to us is the testimonies and accounts of those who do claim to have seen miracles. Hence, the issue is how we decide whether to believe others or not.
3. This cannot be decided *a priori*. We can only base our judgements on what we have actually experienced. Hume gives the example of an Indian prince who doubted what others told him about frost. Hume suggests that the prince is right to reject this idea as it is outside anything that he has experienced.
4. Hume reminds us that the definition of the concept of miracle is 'a transgression of a natural law by a particular volition of the Deity'. Our experience of the laws of nature teaches us that these are uniform and constant. As such, we can safely assume that they were not broken in the past and are unlikely to be broken in the future. 'A uniform experience amounts to a proof... A full and direct proof, against the existence of any miracle.' Hume is using Induction. Every time we experience the regularity that we call the laws of nature, it reinforces our idea that the laws of nature always apply and in doing so, makes belief in miracles even less reasonable.
5. HARD: This may seem to contradict Hume's ideas expressed earlier in the *Enquiries* that we cannot reason to the laws of nature. The constant link between events is only called cause and effect because these events are linked for us psychologically. Each time we have let go of an object we have seen it fall to the floor, hence we say that event A causes event B. However, if every time you heard the word 'tomato' the student next to you started dancing, you would assume that there was cause and effect here too. However, one way of understanding Hume might be to say that the impossibility is one of definition. **If** we had **complete knowledge** of nature and this was **a uniform experience then** something would have to **break this uniformity** in order to be a miracle. But if it did break it, there is no longer a uniformity to compare the event to.
6. Hume's main point seems to be the impossibility of proving that a miracle has occurred. He suggests that, unless it would be more miraculous for the witnesses to be mistaken, we should not believe the account. 'No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavours to establish.'

## Part 2

In part 2 of the chapter, Hume gives four practical arguments to show that miracles are highly unlikely.

1. '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 in themselves...'  
It is unclear exactly how Hume is defining education and good sense or how many witnesses would be sufficient. Nevertheless, his general point about the testimony surrounding most miracles may be seen as valid.
2. Logically, the mind ought to go with the balance of probability but psychologically we have a natural tendency for things of 'surprise and wonder'. Hume gives the example of how enthusiastically audiences hear travellers' tales of sea monsters and mythical creatures. He observes that if religion is joined to the love of wonder, then we have the end of common sense. There may also be a darker motive at work; 'the religionist... May know his narrative to be false and yet persevere with it' for the sake of a holy cause.
3. It is mainly amongst the 'ignorant and barbarous nations' that miracles are reported and believed. 'It is strange that such prodigious events never happen in our days.' Hume observes that the alternative explanation 'that men should lie' is not strange. It is a fact of human nature.
4. Finally, Hume notes that all religions carry miracle stories yet they cannot all be right. The sets of testimonies would seem to cancel each other out. If miracle stories aim to establish the truth of the belief system they are found within, then this would leave us with completely opposite beliefs and ideas being put forward.
5. Hume concludes the chapter by considering two examples. He notes the recent alleged miracles at the tomb of Abbe Paris and observes that none of the testimonies given would even amount to a probability, let alone give proof.
6. His second example considers the theoretical case of Queen Elizabeth I having come back from the dead after a month. Hume argues that he would look for a natural explanation. It might cause surprise if all historians were claiming this had happened, but Hume is adamant that the cunning of human beings would yield a natural explanation.

## Conclusion

Hume concludes his chapter by stating that reason cannot establish the miracles that Christianity is based upon. Only faith can persuade someone to believe in miracles. In fact, faith within a person is a kind of miracle in itself. These are cryptic comments and may be taken as evidence of Hume's own position or a tongue in cheek remark to conceal atheistic views.

## Tasks

1. Why do some thinkers accuse Hume of being inconsistent regarding laws of nature? Do you think that they are right?
2. What weaknesses are there in Hume's four practical arguments?
3. Is Hume correct to suggest that no testimony can ever establish miracles? Does the answer change given our modern global media?