Philosophy of Religion

5. *Miracles*

How should a miracle be defined? What is Hume's argument against the credibility of miracle reports? Is it successful (or can it be made so through some suitable amendment)? Overall, how do you assess the prospects for miracles to provide substantial evidence for the existence of God?

1. Essential Source

David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, available in many editions, including from https://davidhume.org/texts/e/10.

2. Critical Discussions

On the definition of a miracle, see §1 of Timothy McGrew's article on "Miracles" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Hume's argument seems superficially straightforward but is actually very tricky to interpret, and most treatments of it fall short with regard to careful and objective analysis of the text (e.g. a fair number gratuitously introduce supposed premises that don't actually feature there). My paper "Twenty Questions about Hume's 'Of Miracles'", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 68 (2011), pp. 151-92 aims to provide a balanced guide that stays close to the text – it can be found at https://davidhume.org/scholarship/papers/millican/2011_20Qs_Miracles.pdf, and goes in turn through a range of mainly *interpretative* issues, in a series of relatively short sections. For a *philosophical* critique of Hume's argument (which is less interpretatively focused), see instead "Weighing Up Hume's 'Of Miracles'" at https://davidhume.org/scholarship/papers/millican/2024_Weighing_Miracles.pdf. This is in press, and forthcoming shortly as chapter 12 of Paul Russell (ed.), *Hume's Dialogues concerning Natural Religion: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge University Press).

If you're interested in further exploration of the interpretation of Hume's argument, an excellent discussion of some of its difficulties is provided by Don Garrett, "Hume on Testimony concerning Miracles", chapter 7 of his *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (OUP, 1997). Garrett's 2015 book *Hume* (Routledge) draws attention to a contrast between his interpretation and mine, in that his "depends on a sharp distinction between what would be strictly miraculous (that is, contrary to a proof) for an observer and what would merely be 'marvellous' in [Hume's] terms." He goes on to say that "A system of normative epistemic principles that does not recognize a similar categorical distinction, whereby whatever has the status of a law of nature systematically trumps in credibility even very high probabilities that lack that status, cannot fully vindicate or sustain Hume's argument", and in a footnote he mentions my interpretation as being of this type (p. 306). You might find it interesting to compare the two interpretations, both in terms of their philosophical value and their faithfulness to Hume.

If you're interested in the historical context of Hume's discussion, see John Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (Macmillan, 2nd edn., 1988), pp. 135-52.

J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (OUP, 1982), chapter 1 gives a philosophically insightful discussion of the topic from an atheist point of view (but is not entirely faithful to Hume). Richard Swinburne's *Is There a God?* (OUP, 1996), pp. 114-29 aims to defend miracles against the attacks of Hume and Mackie. Swinburne's earliest – relatively technical – treatment of the topic is in "Miracles", *Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1968), pp. 320-8.

There is a fair amount of literature engaging with Hume's discussion from a probabilistic point of view. One accessible and stimulating discussion is "Hume versus Price on Miracles and Prior Probabilities", by David Owen, *Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1987), pp. 187-202. If you find this sort of thing interesting, you might like to tease out the commonalities and contrasts between Owen's treatment and the others mentioned above. (Note also, if you prefer to read hard copy and are close to a suitable library, that Garrett's – slightly revised – 1997 chapter and Owen's 1987 paper are both reprinted in my *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, OUP, 2002.)

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