

THE HUMEAN VIEW ON MIRACLE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS.

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Abstract

There is no doubt that History plays a crucial role in human existence. It does take the human person back to previous events that occurred even in preceding generations, present events and as well foreshadows the future. All these work according to the natural law. Therefore, over the years, the human person consciously or unconsciously produce their social relations, social configuration or organizations and their forms of collective structuring. Though they produce this, the result is not immediate, but comes through long and complex collective experiences which they have shared together. The factors responsible for this include religion, education, science and technology, politics, culture, economy to mention but a few. Reflectively, the concept of miracle which strictly belongs to the religious worldview has been bastardized by both theistic and atheistic philosophers as a result of its epistemic challenges. With regard to this, Hume contended that the smallest and subjective evidences which backup miracles can never outweigh the widespread, objective evidences supporting the contention that they never took place as reported. This has made the objective evidences needed to prove such occurrences significant. Hence, the logical background created by Hume against the existence of miracle affected not only sense perception but also posed a serious constraint to all religious beliefs. However, for the speculative philosophers, especially those who hinge their system on Absolutism, miracle poses no problem but for the logician and empiricist does because there is no rational proof for its existence. The analytic method of research was adopted for this discourse.

Keywords: Miracle, Implication, Religious, Beliefs

INTRODUCTION

During the medieval period, the medieval researchers, while trying to know the urstuff of the universe, conceived nature as divinely created and directed by the divine master and saw everything happening according to the instructions which nature has received from the ultimate cause. This perception was supported by the already conceived postulations of some classical researchers that all things are moved by an unmoved mover, and this necessary being was assumed to be God. However, with Copernicus' verdict that the sun is the centre of the universe,

as against the church's teaching which was made firm with Galileo Galilee's blood, man discovered that there are truths which could be grasped by reason alone and that man can actually know. Already, this has been established during the renaissance period against the formal theological teaching the church with which controlled philosophy, political and social norms, morals, doctrines and institutions, that man cannot know anything except by faith. Therefore, with the separation of science from religion per se, many scientists, mathematicians, geometricians etc. delved into research, which continue to give rise to different theories, discoveries and theses till date. Therefore, this paper will give an in-depth understanding of David Hume's view on miracle and his arguments against supernatural events.

AN OVERVIEW OF MIRACLE

The above term as a result of its epistemological challenges has remained a subject of debate among philosophers till date. The word "miracle" is sometimes used in general discussions to refer to any unexpected event. However, when it is used in its distinctively religious sense, it implies the occurrence of an unusual remarkable event that would not have occurred in the exact manner in which it did if God had not intentionally brought it about, that is, if "God had not at some point and in some manner directly imposed his divine will on the natural order" (Swinburne, 1970:70). While some philosophers believe in the existence of God and his divine powers on the natural order, others do not. In response to the above, epistemological critics of miracle conceive the term as the violation of natural laws. For them, it is incoherent for such is not obtainable as natural laws.

Another school of thought, while suggesting that the idea of violation of law be thrown away, opined that "miracle" should be reserved for only those occurrences that are permanently inexplicable in the sense that no event of this type could ever be given a fully natural explanation.

DAVID HUME'S VIEW ON MIRACLE

David Hume, argues that a wise person will always apportion his or her belief to the evidence. For him, when such evidences are considered rationally, if they pose no problem and for the very fact that natural laws are based on uniform past and present experience, alleged miraculous violations of these laws are supported only by the personal testimony of few individuals. Consequently, these testimonial evidences are always weaker than the laws they claim to have contradicted. Reflectively, since humans by nature want to find mystery and wonder where there is none, they passionately believe that miracles occur. Thus, Hume maintained that "no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle because our experience codified in natural laws, offers us sufficient reason not to believe that alleged counterinstances to natural laws have actually occurred as reported.

According to Hume, the evidence for miracles is weak. Consequently, he argued against supernatural events and opined that they ought to be received and treated with contempt.

Basically, Hume outlined arguments against supernatural events which he defined as violations of the laws of nature; laws which are so firm and have been confirmed by unalterable experience. Admittedly, since natural laws are uniform, public and from past experiences, we should always seek and question the evidences of such miraculous claims as they consist solely of the personal testimonies of few biased individuals which cannot be substantiated by independent testing. For him, it is possible that all men will die, and no miracle can prevent them. But it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life. He gave this instance because it has never been observed in any age or country. Peterson, et al 2014:465)

In his empirical view, as uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is a direct and full proof, from the nature of fact, against the existence of any miracle. To maintain this, he established two propositions (inferior and superior), known as relatively destructive arguments, as the standard of judgment for any miraculous act. Following the inferior argument, the fallacies and deceptions behind miraculous stories may stand, but following the superior argument which carries natural fact, they cannot be rendered credible because what remains after the deduction is inferior, which does not correspond to miracle. To this effect, no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle. unless the testimony tends to establish falsehood and there should be doubt regarding miraculous events because it based on prodigal evidence. Hume's five arguments include:

THE WITNESSES ARE NOT RELIABLE: According to David Hume, there has never been a time in history when miraculous events were attested by a sufficient number of people with unquestioned good sense, education and learning let alone having sufficient number of people noted for undoubtable integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicions of being capable of deception. This is a necessary foundation for any testimony to be upheld. He laid emphasis on this criterion because it secures us against all delusions. However, there has never been a time such requirement was met; hence the number of the propagators of these pretentious stories is always insufficient to make their message true.

HUMANS ARE GULLIBLE: Analytically, a close examination of human nature has shown that human memory is often so unreliable as to distinguish clearly the assurance on human testimony. According to Hume, while accepting some of these testimonies, we often drop the use of reason which makes us question such. This is partly due to the passions of surprise and wonder, arising from such testimonies. Interestingly, the story does not end there as even those who cannot believe these miraculous events gradually become propagators of what they are not sure. In addition, human gullibility, coupled with religion, necessarily makes one dismiss one's sensory experiences so that one sees one's imaginations and wonderful adventures, which are often strange, as reality, not regarding that one is aware that such reality is false ... there is no sufficient judgment to canvass their evidence; yet one perseveres in it in order to promote a 'holy cause'.

EDUCATED PEOPLE ARE SELDOM CONVINCED: Hume believes that educated people, unlike the gullible people, are not easily convinced with supernatural stories. Thus, they stand in opposition to ignorant, barbarous people who accept these supernatural stories

without questioning. In the same vein, if such belief is found amidst civilized people, it is believed that such stories originated from their barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with inviolable authority. Ignorance then makes one think that these stories are real, but with enlightenment, one comes to learn that there is nothing mysterious or supernatural in such stories. For this very reason, enlightened people often see these strange things as renowned lies, which have spread and flourished because they were sown in a suitable soil (ignorant nation), where there is no large correspondence, sufficient credit or authority to contradict or beat down its delusion. (Corner, 2007, p, 458).

THE COUNTEREVIDENCE IS ALWAYS STRONGER: This is a strong criticism against miracles which diminishes all authority of prodigies. Accordingly, there is no testimony, even those which have not been expressly detected, that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses. Not only does miracle destroy the credit of testimony, but the testimony also destroys itself. All testimonies in different religions stand against one another. As each religion narrates this supernatural story in order to establish its own system, more indirectly does it aim to overthrow other systems, and as it destroys a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of its already established testimony. Hence, there is no corroboration of one fact. As each proof opposes another proof, it makes it even more necessary to reject supernatural stories because the same experience which gives authority to human testimony also assures us of the laws of nature, and it does not contradict itself.

WHY MIRACULOUS REPORTS USED TO SUPPORT RELIGIOUS BELIEF ARE EVEN MORE DUBIOUS: There is no doubt that Hume recognized his limitations when he asserted that a miracle can never be proved, in such a way as to be the foundation of a system of religion because there could exist the possibility of violations of the usual course of nature which of course can be proved by human testimony. However, it will be impossible to find such in the records of history. He disagreed to agree that religion does not emanate from the stories of violations of the laws of nature. Contendingly, outside the experience which we have of Being's productions following the usual course of nature, we cannot know the actions of the Being to whom miracles are ascribed. Consequently, we are pushed into comparing the instances of the violation of truth in the testimony of men with that considered as the violation of the laws of nature. Notably, the violations of truth are more common in the testimony concerning religious miracles than any other matter of fact. Therefore, using reason we must diminish and never pay attention to these superstitious stories which were founded on faith, not on reason (Hume, 1861: 115).

IMPLICATION OF HUME'S VIEW FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

David Hume's view on miracles has significant implications for religious belief. He not only challenged traditional religious claims about supernatural occurrences and their role in validating religious beliefs but also the rationality of believing in such, and that is why he defined miracle from an empirical perspective in order to establish its irrationality, unreliability

and the fact that there is nothing unnatural about supernatural stories. The end product of his view is radical scepticism towards miracle. This is so because miracles are incoherent with natural laws and this makes the occurrence necessarily probable and uncertain. Accordingly, from the uniform experience of the external world which is based on the regularity of natural laws, it is more reasonable to doubt miraculous claims than to accept them because it is unfair to describe natural operations of the universe as miracle.

Obviously, his view has laid more ground for naturalistic theology against sacred theology. This seeks to interpret religious truths with human reason, moral sentiments and evidence, (Hume, 1978: 212-320), hence it provides justification for considering religion as a social construct that serves a specific function as against the sacred realist conception of an Absolute Being. Therefore, instead of attributing these extraordinary occurrences to divine intervention, many people now seek natural explanations, or question the authenticity of the reported events. In addition, with the credibility of miracles being called into question, contemporary believers have suddenly placed more significance on experiences and proper basic belief which is the rational justification for the existence of God rather than relying on external supernatural stories. This makes religion a philosophical and scientific enterprise, thereby removing the inhuman elements in various religious beliefs.

Just like Nietzsche's view on eternal reoccurrence which holds that time and events will keep reoccurring till infinity, (Copleston, 1965: 189), and in line with the laws of thermodynamics, there is no need of attributing anything to a "Being whose actions are unknown" (Peterson, 2014:471), because there is nothing absolutely new in the universe; things will keep reoccurring. In line with this, given the incredibility of supernatural stories, man should introspect and find possible ways of turning himself into an overman so as to be able to develop himself and the material world. Subsequently, religious claims and concepts such as resurrection, God, angel, salvation, etc could be explained using this view. Definitely, the human person would succumb to the change of becoming without relying on any transcendental Being.

Analytically, from the 20th century till date, Hume's criticism of Miracle has remained a subject matter for debates and counter debates. While many empirical scientists and philosophers argued against miracle, which implies the denial of the existence of the Ultimate Reality, who, according to Paul Tillich, in every divine manifestation, makes himself present in time and space, the theistic philosophers maintained that there exists a Being whose existence must not be proven empirically. This has sparked off a contention between the theistic and atheistic philosophers/scientists regarding the nature of miracles and their compatibility with religious beliefs. Notably, this has negatively impacted on many religious systems, especially those systems which are not open to critical evaluation and questioning.

Interestingly, Hume's logical interpretation of Miracle embraces matters of fact, and the claims that only authentic proof comes from experience and the use of reason against all form of Absolute authority. By implication, matters of fact can actually be known through reason alone and they exist independent of the perceiver. Thus, the evidence required to

establish a miracle should always be weighed against the evidence for the regularity of the laws of nature. Notably, this discards all 'religious language and symbols' which make no sense outside the religious context.

Contrastingly, it is important to note that while Hume's views have influenced religious belief, they have not rendered it obsolete or universally rejected. Many believers and religious traditions continue to maintain faith in miracles, emphasizing the roles of personal conviction, religious experiences, and the importance of faith beyond empirical evidence. Again, Karl Popper's view that a theory can be falsified can be properly upheld in regard to this because there was a time in history when science was non-science. Therefore, the critics of miracle should take it easy for with time, the rational existence of the Being itself may be empirically proven.

EVALUATION

Hume as a strict empiricist has established that man's existence is totally different from the creation story fashioned on myth through his enthronement of reason against faith. Away from religion, and from an epistemological perspective, there is no doubt that 'miracle' offers us knowledge. Nevertheless, Hume questions the possibility of such knowledge and its certainty and verifiability. The term miracle which entails the violation of nature has been bastardized and misused by man in line with what Karl Marx considered as the opium of the people, and as such it has become a tool for massive social exploitation. It makes people incapable of understanding their social conditioning (labour) and enthrones extreme fatalism.

However, there are things beyond empirical observations and explanations. Thus, Hume failed to explain the immaterial aspect of the human person that makes for the possibility of miracle owing to the fact that man has some spiritual craving which he aspires to satisfy. In addition, Hume's position was filled with assumptions especially when he opined that enlightened people do not believe or relate these miraculous messages. Some philosophers of religion have argued against this position. For them, there are some circumstances could be explained in consonance with nature but the resultant effect of these circumstances could be termed miracle. Put differently, there is no need to assume that a miracle must contradict the laws of nature.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, having rigorously examined Hume's view on miracle, it is still worth nothing that upon reflection on Hume's argument, the ultimate problem remains that the individual seeking to accept such a claim has a double burden of holding that the event took place and that it "violated" a law of nature. Analytically, if this individual has very strong evidence that a seeming counterinstance to natural law has occurred, then she or he has a very strong reason to believe that the law as currently understood is inadequate. In addition, if this

individual has very strong evidence that the laws of nature are adequate, then he or she has a very strong reason to believe that the seeming counterinstance did not occur as reported. Accordingly, to maintain that these laws are adequate and still believe that there has occurred a counter instance is extremely difficult.

However, many scholars have criticized the views of Hume and his contemporaries using four types of evidence about past events: personal memories, the testimony of others, physical traces, and the contemporary understanding of what is possible. Admittedly, experience codified in natural laws, presents justification to believe that alleged counterinstances to natural laws have actually occurred as reported; but while personal memories can be faulty, past experience gives us reason to believe they should be given strong credence. Despite the fact that the testimony of others could also be faulty, there are sound methods for determining the reliability of such testimony and this could be easily done through increasing sophisticated physical traces and we ought not to believe that these forms of evidence could not, in principle, outweigh the evidence of physical impossibility. Hence, the counterinstances to natural laws cannot be ruled out in an a priori manner.

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