Evaluating Hume's Argument Against Miracles

Kenneth J. Coughlan

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In his discussion of David Hume's argument against miracles, Norman Geisler

summarizes the "soft version" as follows:

> 1. A miracle is by definition a rare occurrence.
> 2. Natural law is by definition a description of regular occurrence.
> 3. The evidence for the regular is always greater than that for the rare.
> 4. A wise man always bases his belief on the greater evidence.
> 5. Therefore, a wise man should never believe in miracle.[1]

Geisler points out a number of problems with even this "soft" version of Hume's argument.

First, similar to the "hard" interpretation, it is question begging. Hume claims that the

"uniform" experience of humanity is that miracles do not occur. This, though, is precisely the

question up for debate. Hume begs the question by assuming from the outset that no one has

ever seen a miracle. There certainly are plenty of people who claim to have experienced a

miracle. If Hume is intending to exclude those people from consideration, then Geisler rightly

observes that he is guilty of special pleading.[2]

Second, Geisler criticizes Hume for "adding evidence" rather than "weighing" it.[3] In

other words, because miracles are by definition rare, and because the operation of the natural

order of things is by definition regular, there will always be more examples of events following

the natural order than going against it. As such, according to Hume, there will always be more

evidence against the occurrence of a miracle than in its favor. Hume, however, is merely

adding up the pieces of evidence, giving no consideration to the relative strength of each piece.

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[1] Norman L. Geisler, "Miracles & the Modern Mind," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 75.

[2] Ibid., 77-78.

[3] Ibid., 78-79.

For instance, suppose someone claimed to hold a winning lottery ticket. This would be an extremely rare event. In the overwhelming number of instances in which a person purchases a lottery ticket, it is not a winner. Most people probably do not even know someone who has won the lottery. Therefore, following Hume's reasoning, the evidence for the ticket being a loser will always outweigh the evidence that it was a winner, and therefore we should never expect that this person actually won. What if she produces the ticket with all the winning numbers? What if the merchant's records confirm that they sold a ticket with those numbers to that individual? While the number of instances of people buying losing tickets far exceeds those who purchase winners, the weight of the evidence that this is indeed a winning ticket begins to overpower any claims to the contrary.

Douglas Groothuis explains this difficulty for Hume as the difference between "general probability" and "conditional probability."[4] Groothuis concedes that the "general probability that a miracle will occur is low, since they are infrequent." However, "conditional probability assesses all the pertinent evidence for a claim."[5] He gives the example of the probability of a person running a four-minute mile. The general probability for this having occurred is very low since the overwhelming majority of people cannot accomplish such a feat. However, if we learn that the person making the claim is an Olympic runner who has done this before, then the conditional probability of it being true becomes much higher.[6]

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[4] Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 534*.*

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 534-35.

Third, Geisler points out that if Hume's reasoning is followed to its natural conclusion, we should not believe in a miracle even if one actually occurs.[7] After all, even if a miracle happens, it would still be a rare event and the number of regular occurrences would continue to far exceed it. Clearly it is not rational to adopt a view that would require us to reject belief in an event that actually happens.

In addition to these various criticisms, Hume's argument also would undercut the position he takes on the problem of evil. In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume famously asked in regard to God, "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"[8]

Hume's argument assumes that a proper response to the occurrence of evil in the world would be for God to intervene to stop it. However, in his argument on miracles he claims that we are never justified in believing a miracle has occurred. Surely the prevention of some forms of evil, especially natural evil, would require miraculous intervention of God's part. In order to accept that the argument from evil does not disprove the existence of God (at least in the way God is understood in Christianity) Hume insists that we would have to be convinced that God has miraculously intervened to prevent all sorts of evils. However, in his argument against miracles Hume states that we can never be convinced that God miraculously intervenes. In response to Hume's question, then, of "Is he both able and willing?," the theist could retort,

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[7] Geisler, "Miracles & the Modern Mind," 79-80.

[8] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779; repr., New York: Penguin Books*,* 1990), 108*.*

"Under your criteria, how would you ever know that God was able?" Hume has set up a standard in regard to the problem of evil which his position on miracles would render incapable of ever being met. He is not consistent in his own philosophy.