

## Hume's Error

In “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding”, the philosopher, David Hume, further develops the ideas of empiricism set forth by Francis Bacon and John Locke. This movement in epistemology stated that one could only learn through experience and observation. Hume expanded the concepts of empiricism and took them to the next level by beginning to apply them to the supernatural and the existence of God. Although Hume's method is effective, I think Hume's proof against the existence of miracles is flawed because it relies on inconclusive assumptions called custom or habit and contradicts logical arguments he used against the idea of rationalism stated earlier in his enquiry.

David Hume's proof against the existence of miracles can be grouped into four main points: the lack of reliable authority deeming the action was in fact a miracle, that a miracle is contrary to the laws of nature and human custom or habit, that faith would be required to believe it was a miracle that took place, and that the probability of the miracle occurring must be greater than the probability of the contrary.

The first point against the existence of miracles is that there has not been a miracle in all of history that has been witnessed by “men of good sense” that have everything to lose by claiming a miracle had taken place (78). Later in the section, Hume develops three subsequent contentions; two of which are derivations of this main point and the other simply states that the inconsistency of testimonies of the witnesses destroys the entire claim. This main point is protected by the second point of his argument.

The second point against the existence of miracles appears to be two distinct contentions that can be viewed as one because a miracle, by definition, is a defiance of the laws of nature, “A

miracle is a violation of the laws of nature” (76) and also, a defiance of human custom “... which subverts all the principles of human understanding and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience” (90). Hume states that an action cannot defy the laws of nature; he uses the argument that one cannot make the logical leap rationalists make in deriving a priori knowledge because the laws of nature are subject to change. “Their secret nature, and consequently, all their effects and influence, may change without any change in their sensible qualities” (24). Hume states that rationalism cannot lead to knowledge from experience because in order to do so the unwaveringness of the laws of nature must be assumed. If the concept of Custom is defeated the violation of the laws of nature is no longer a valid point because the laws of nature are subject to change.

The third point of the argument states that having faith is a miracle in and of itself and cannot be used as a justification for believing anything. “Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle by his own person...” (90). Hume denies the usage of faith and states that only knowledge derived through Custom is usable.

The final point is simply a statement that, the probability of the action performed is not a miracle must be less than the probability of the action being a miracle. “When any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive me or be deceived, or the fact, which he relates, should really have happened” (77). This final contention seems to put the nail in the coffin and concludes Hume’s argument.

In order for Hume’s argument to be invalid one must start with the second point. The concept of

Custom is a fundamental concept that Hume uses to base most of his argument on and protects his claim that a miracle defies the laws of nature. Once Custom without faith is proven to be inadequate, the contradictory nature of Hume's claim about the violation of the laws of nature defeats itself. The requirement of "men of good sense" to witness the claimed miracle can then be attacked because the "men of good sense" are "of good sense" because of the knowledge that they have derived through custom. If the above has been achieved the last remaining argument is that of probability.

The second point will now be split up as it is made of two distinct arguments that rely on each other. One must start with the justification of custom, because if that is proved inadequate Hume's contradiction finishes the invalidation of his own contention. Custom is used as the justification of assuming knowledge based upon past experiences. "This principle is Custom or Habit. For whenever the repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding; we always say, that this propensity is the effect of Custom" (28). Therefore, any predicted outcome at best can be possible, but by no means can be reliable. By extension, any knowledge obtained through means of Custom, is at best possible, but by no means reliable. Hume used Custom to justify knowledge derived from experience without assuming the laws of nature to ever change. With this claim that the laws of nature are capable of changing, he contradicts himself later when he says that laws of nature cannot be violated; therefore miracles cannot happen. This contradiction finishes the destruction of Hume's second main point.

The meager point that having faith is a miracle in and of itself (which Hume has made clear he does not believe in) destroys the possibility of truly knowing anything. As stated earlier,

any knowledge attained through the principle of Custom is at best possible but by no means reliable. Placing any certainty on this knowledge as “complete” would require a “leap of faith”.

If the idea of faith is denied to be a good reason for believing anything (as Hume has) one can know nothing truly and is in no position to debate what can and what cannot happen.

The next point that is to be attacked is the requirement of “men of good sense” to be present.

Experts now have no ability to make solid, reliable claims because their knowledge is obtained through Custom, a means that cannot provide knowledge of that caliber. Even if sufficient knowledge could be provided the use of faith is denied which further prevents that from being used. Hume adds a stipulation to what makes a man “of good sense” and that is that he must have something to lose by claiming that the miracle did occur. This implies that if a miracle is claimed to have happened, it would be detrimental to the expert’s reputation. An undeniable externality of this is that it is more advantageous for the expert to lie than to actually tell the truth if it is in fact a miracle.

Hume further develops his argument by adding three observations/hypotheses: 1. Human Testimony is inadequate 2. Humans have a tendency to claim that a miracle has taken place and 3. All claimed miraculous and supernatural happenings have occurred in barbarous and ignorant nations and people groups. The third point supports the argument for “men of good sense” wanting to maintain their reputation. The first point disproves Hume’s requirement of “men of good sense”. The second point seems to be the only point that carries any weight in the argument. If it is the tendency of mankind to claim the action was a miracle, would not faith be required to defy this tendency? The very concept that Hume denies and belittles seems to be the only justification for the entire argument.

The final contention of Hume's argument is a simple statement that relies entirely on the concept of probability. If the idea that the probability of the miracle occurring must outweigh the probability of it not occurring is accepted, then one cannot believe phenomenon that occur in society. The odds of winning the lottery are astronomical and through Hume's reasoning the claim that someone won the lottery or that you know someone that won the lottery can be classified as not believable by Hume's standards. Other examples are: someone getting attacked by a shark, getting struck by lightning, underdog sports teams winning, guessing the right space a roulette ball lands on, etc. Therefore, the argument from probability is not adequate after the other points have been defeated.

The final product of the attack on Hume's argument is barren. Once the idea of Custom being able to be used to know anything is undermined the idea that we can know one law of nature for certain is destroyed much less know all of them. Hume's rejection of the concept of faith seems to be the Achilles' heel of his argument as it removes the possibility of knowing anything for certain and strips the title of expert and men of good reputation from his stipulations. Probability, as recently shown, is certainly not enough to sufficiently disprove the existence of miracles.

Although David Hume created a method that works well, the method is limited because it cannot explain and/or adequately dispute the supernatural things that occur in the world, because refuting anything would require true knowledge which is dependent upon faith which Hume himself rejects. This rejection of faith destroyed any hope for knowing anything for sure and skepticism is the result of his method. Therefore the usage of Hume's method to refute the supernatural is not founded upon solid ground and cannot be used while expecting anything of

substance to be produced.