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## **What are We to Make of Miracles?**



### **Rehabilitating the Notion of the Miraculous**

**The phenomenon of miracles ... what are to make of them?**

## **If — as the Scottish Skeptic and Philosopher David Hume**

**maintained** — the reason for the uniformity of the events we observe is not discoverable; that is, if we can perceive nothing in the way of *necessity* linking putative causes to supposed effects — and if, therefore, the succession of observed events can *always* be otherwise than what we observe without implying contradiction — then while we have not answered *why* miracles occur, we have nevertheless arrived at an explanation of *how* miracles are able to occur, how miracles are at all possible.

Miracles, by this reasoning — which I think is correct — are not understood to occur in *violation* of laws inherent in nature — for there are in effect no laws to be violated; only *observed* uniform events. From this perspective, what we call miracles are no more than a reordering of an *anticipated* sequence of events that were *never* necessary to begin with. And this is simply another way of saying that in effecting a miracle, God merely *suspends* — but does not *violate* — what *we construe to be laws* at work in the universe.

Uniform events, in other words, or uniform sequences of events, for which we have found, experienced, no disqualifying instance, suggest something of *necessity*.

It is precisely at this point that we make a subreptive leap from statements concerning *observations*, to illicitly interpreting these observations in terms of *laws* analogous to the types of laws to which we appeal in, say, geometric models — at least in the way of perceived necessity.

This, however, is a *psychological*, and not a *logical*, much less a mathematical, phenomenon — for what we designate as “laws”, when examined carefully, *we can neither discover through reason nor prove through experience*. Such “laws” are, and without exception, *always formulated retrospectively*, in view of past *empirical observations*. The concatenation of events that science articulates as putative “laws” are, one and all, assembled *a posteriori* (*after* the observation) and therefore possess nothing characteristic of the nature of *a priori* necessity. Simply that such and such *observations* have (... up to this point) exhibited unbroken *historical* pedigree does not *rationally* qualify them as necessary. Such “laws” are nothing more than *historical statements* and are inherently, intrinsically, susceptible to *one* disqualifying instance sufficient in itself to abrogate the “law”. We *observe* an unbroken and historically precise sequence of events which we interpret as linear "causes" that culminate in what we construe as an “effect”. What we perceive are apparently uniform events. What we do not, and cannot perceive, are the presumed “causal” connections between successive events in which we have *as yet* experienced a disqualifying instance, one exception that deviates from

the anticipated event and produces another event altogether. The supposed “cause”, however uniform, remains a mystery to us. That “such and such *has, up to now,* always been the case” is altogether different from “such and such *must* be the case”. It *could* be otherwise —without invoking any logical contradiction whatever. It is simply the case that it has always simply *been* the case —and no more. This is the genius, the perspicacity, really, of David Hume.

What has all this to do with miracles? This is really a penultimate question, for what we really want to know is this:

***Is it absurd to give credence to miracles — and at least implicitly, through miracles, to God?***

Let us attempt to answer it this way:

If the suspension of “laws” is presumed to be attributable to God in the occurrence of miracles — and such unanticipated or miraculous events are (*insofar as reason can discover*) *at least as likely to occur* as the effect we have come to anticipate — then on what grounds would we be persuaded from ascribing the *uniform* events that very clearly occur, to God as well, and simply because God wills them?

Such a proposition implies no more contradiction than the problematic inherent in the notion of causality itself. Since causes are not discoverable to reason we have no warrant to ascribe necessity to *any* event.

It is, I suggest, *at least as cogent* to argue that *God* is the cause of this unqualified but unexplained uniformity — as to argue that there is no cause at all. The skeptic will argue, “You cannot produce God”. We will argue, “You cannot produce causes”. In our experience, “*will*” is at least intelligible in any concept of agency. “*Nothing*” is not.

If this indeed is so, it would be of great consternation to David Hume — who did not believe in God — and there is something terribly condign that a correct line of reasoning, formulated to discredit the existence of God through a disabused notion of causality, should all the more corroborate it.

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