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According to Hume, if a miracle were to present itself, in a sufficiently convincing fashion, we would have to reevaluate our description of the laws of nature. Kant, on the other hand, argues that it would never be reasonable, in routine affairs of life, to believe in miracles—not even transcendently. I argue that even though Hume and Kant have different perspectives and definitions of a miracle they come to the same conclusion, that is: we only describe an apparent miracle as “miraculous” due to our own misunderstanding of the laws of nature.

### **Hume on miracles**

In his book, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume famously argues that we should only ever believe in miracles if it would be more unreasonable not to do so.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to some interpretations of Hume’s view on miracles, Hume does not deny the possibility of their occurrence. Rather, Hume is skeptical of the notion that miracles have occurred and been experienced by any human throughout history. As Hume writes, “no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof... it is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature” (pp. 183-184). By this, Hume does not say that miracles cannot happen nor that testimony cannot be proof of miracles, but that one should be skeptical of any account of miracles because there is rarely sufficient evidence to establish that a miracle happened. Hence, we always compare the same kind of evidence (i.e., experience) to determine

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<sup>1</sup> Hume writes that “when any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle” (p. 174, para. 13).

whether a miracle has occurred; and the amount of experience that we have that confirms a law of nature by far trumps the amount of experience that supports a miracle. For example, if one were to claim they have seen someone walk on water, our many experiences with sinking in water would outweigh their single claim of the opposite.

In one of his footnotes in the *Enquiry*, Hume defines a miracle as “*a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent* [italics in original]” (p. 173). According to Hume’s empiricism, these laws of nature are determined through human observation of the natural world. A miracle would, therefore, be a violation of the established laws of nature, as these are observed from the perspective of humans. By this definition, a miracle performed by such an agent operating within the laws of nature would not be a miracle as long as it doesn’t transgress these laws.

### **Kant on miracles**

In his book, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant defines miracles as “events in the world the operating laws of whose causes are, and must remain, absolutely unknown to us” (p. 81). By this, I take Kant to mean that because miracles are events that are ‘absolutely unknown to us,’ it must be the case that if a miracle were to occur, it would occur in the noumenal world (a concept I explain on the next page). That is, because anything in the sensible world (the phenomenal world) is knowable in principle (and hence can never be “absolutely unknown to us”), nothing in the sensible world can be described as a miracle, according to Kant’s definition.<sup>2</sup> To get a clearer understanding of Kant’s reasoning for why miracles cannot

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<sup>2</sup> While we do not know everything about the sensible world, everything in it is still—in theory—knowable to us, and hence nothing in the sensible world can be ‘absolutely unknown to us.’

occur, I have divided his reasoning into two arguments: miracles in relation to the nature of God<sup>3</sup> and miracles in relation to the morality of God.<sup>4</sup>

To understand why Kant explicitly states that theistic miracles cannot occur (as opposed to claiming that we simply should not accept them), it is important to recognize the distinction Kant makes between the phenomenal and the noumenal world, which I briefly mentioned already. The phenomenal world is the world in which sensible objects appear, whereas the noumenal world contains objects outside the realm of experience, which can only be thought of as objects through understanding (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B306). Thus, anything sensible to humans is in the phenomenal world, whereas God, for example, would reside in the noumenal world.

If miracles could occur, then they would have to originate from the noumenal world before presenting themselves as miracles in our experience (in the phenomenal world). This point, however, Kant disputes in his nature of God argument by arguing that if miracles occur, they occur only because of humans' lack of understanding of the laws of nature. Humans experience the phenomenal world through observation and it is from this perspective—the human perspective—we explain the world and establish our description of the laws of nature. However, because human understanding is limited, we cannot perfectly align our description of the laws of nature with how the laws in themselves operate within the noumenal world. Thus, this explains why humans may suspect a miracle could occur (or has occurred) even though it

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<sup>3</sup> I use 'miracles in relation to the nature of God' and 'miracles in relation to the morality of God' to refer to two of Kant's arguments, even though Kant does not himself refer to his arguments made in the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* as such. Thus, these references to the two arguments are references I have created for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Kant also discusses demonic miracles and briefly mentions angelic miracles (*Religion*, p. 80).

would be impossible. That is, if something observable to humans occurs that transgresses the laws of nature (as we experience them in the phenomenal world) it would seem like a miracle, but it would, in all actuality, only be a violation of the human description of the laws of nature (based on our limited phenomenal experiences) and not of the laws of nature in themselves, as they actually exist in the noumenal world. For this reason, miracles can never transgress the laws of nature, but only our understanding of them. It is, therefore, deeply problematic when we grant the possibility of miracles, as it undermines reason by appealing to faith instead. Rather, we should, as sensible people, view phenomena that transgress our understanding of the laws of nature as possibilities for us to discover new laws.<sup>5</sup> To summarize the argument, our experience of a miracle is simply a confusion within our experience (we have experiences of the laws of nature and an experience of a miracle, and these don't match). Yet, we do not experience the laws in themselves, and so we can't know if the miracle violates them—we only assume this based on experience.

In his second argument (i.e., miracles in relation to the morality of God), Kant argues that by believing in a certain kind of miracle we paradoxically doubt the greatness of God. The kind of miracle in question is one where God acts against God's nature. Kant views God's nature as being supremely good. Provided that a miracle is a transgression of the laws of nature, God would have to violate the laws of nature to perform a miracle—the law in question here being that God is supremely good. Such a miracle by God must, therefore, be a case where God commits an evil deed. This, however, is impossible because God cannot do evil. Thus, because

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<sup>5</sup> Or, as Kant writes, “[transgressions of our understanding of the laws of nature] opens up the prospect of a new acquisition for the nourishment of reason; that is, it awakens the hope of discovering new laws of nature” (*Religion*, p. 83).

God is supremely good, and hence unable to ever do evil, God cannot perform miracles. On this basis, if one were to believe in miracles, one would have to doubt the virtue of God.

### **Similarities between Hume's and Kant's positions on miracles**

To understand the similarities between Kant's and Hume's positions on miracles, it can be useful to illustrate it through an example of a "miraculous" event. The *Gospel of John* describes what is said to have been Jesus' first miracle when he turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana. From a Humean perspective, were such an event to have actually taken place it would be a transgression of the laws of nature and it would, therefore, be a miracle. Since Hume is an empiricist, he doesn't believe laws of nature are necessarily universal—we cannot experience universality and so there is no reason to see the laws of nature as such. This, according to Hume's empiricism, allows for a miracle to be granted, meaning that our understanding of the laws of nature must be changed to account for this new phenomenon. In this case, we would say that the new law of nature is something like, water cannot magically turn into wine, unless done by the son of God. When accounted for, the miracle would naturally cease to be described as a miracle as it would no longer transgress our understanding of the (revised) laws of nature. For this reason, it may be said that putative miracles can, according to Hume, manifest themselves in the physical world but not conceptually, and it is this non-universal account of the laws of nature that gives Hume's empiricism great flexibility.

Kant's view on the laws of nature, on the other hand, is universal, meaning that miracles are impossible. If Jesus did, in fact, transform water to wine, then such a process would be part of the laws of nature (as they exist in themselves in the noumenal world). However, because humans' account of the laws of nature does not perfectly align with the noumenal world, a

miraculous event, such as turning water into wine, only seems to be miraculous because of our imperfect description of the laws of nature. Because everything, at all times, operates within the laws of nature according to Kant, it can never be correct to describe an event as being miraculous.

Having examined both Hume's and Kant's positions on miracles, it can be concluded that Hume is more liberal in terms of allowing for the possibility of the occurrence of a miracle than Kant. While Kant argues that all accounts of miracles are impossible, Hume maintains that it is only impossible for a phenomenon to remain a miracle upon observation and experience; a phenomenon that transgresses the laws of nature may initially be described as a miracle according to Hume, yet as soon as our laws have been reworked to account for this phenomenon it would cease to be a miracle.

Similarly, Kant grants that the laws of nature as observed by humans are not necessarily universal as we are unable to perfectly align our description of the laws in the phenomenal world to that of the noumenal world. If a phenomenon were to transgress our understanding of the laws of nature, it would not be a miracle, but simply a reflection of our inability to understand the noumenal world. Kant agrees with Hume that if a phenomenon violates our understanding of the laws of nature, then we are required to adapt our laws so to account for this previously unknown phenomenon. Contrary to Hume however, Kant fears that if we even refer to a phenomenon that transgresses the laws of nature as a miracle, then we fail to command to reason when accounting for it and instead account for it via faith.

Thus, both Hume and Kant agree that a phenomenon could occur that transgresses the human description of the laws of nature. However, according to Hume's position on miracles, a

phenomenon that transgresses the laws of nature would be a miracle only until our understanding of the laws of nature accounts for it, while, for Kant, miracles are, in all respects, impossible.

**References**

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