

DEFINING MIRACLE: HUME, THEISM AND THE HISTORY OF A CONCEPT

Sam Welbaum¹¹⁷

In the 18th century, the Scottish empiricist philosopher David Hume famously defined miracles as violations of natural law. His definition did not arise in a vacuum; rather he pieced together existing strands of thought into a single codified view, which may or may not have been consistent with the rest of his philosophical system. After Hume defined miracle, he went on to assert that the belief in miracles must be proportioned to the strength of the evidence of testimony that is presented in favor of the miracle, over against the likelihood of the testimony being false.¹¹⁸ With these two moves, Hume shifted the course of the dialogue on miracles in a dramatic way. Since the 18th century, religious people, particularly within the Christian tradition, have attempted to defend the existence of miracles with both Hume's definition and test of truth as the starting point. They have done so with mixed results.

The question however, is not whether the church or religious philosophers have successfully defended the existence of miracles while assuming a Humean definition and method; but rather is the endeavor necessary? While Hume did not develop his definition in isolation, it is not the only definition for miracles available, nor is his test for truth the only one available. Hume's work on miracles, while influential, does not need to be assumed as the sole starting place for one's understanding of miracle. Indeed, the church and religious philosophers would be (and some have been) better served by altering or challenging Hume's definition and augmenting his method. Hume's definition, while based in some medieval

¹¹⁷ Sam Welbaum an adjunct professor for the School of Christian Ministries at California Baptist University, Staff Apologist/Radio Host with Apologetics.com, youth pastor at Shoreline Baptist Church and working on his PhD in Philosophy of Religion and Theology at Claremont Graduate University.

¹¹⁸ Hume's discussion of miracles is found in *Enquiries* X.86-101 pp. 109-131.

scholasticism, does not reflect the totality of theistic thought on the matter, and can be properly responded to by returning to an earlier understanding of miracle.

Please note, this paper will set Hume and theistic thinking in contraposition, that is not to say that they do not and cannot overlap; rather that the majority of the discussion on miracles since the 18th century has appeared to be theistic thinkers and Humean philosophers disagreeing with one another. In order to understand the context in which Hume wrote, we will first look at the history of Western thought on the matters of natural law and miracles. After this, Hume's definition and method will be analyzed and seen to be in need of revision, particularly if it is to be adopted by those within religious contexts.

A History of Definitions: Natural Law

The concept of natural law is integral to Hume's understanding of miracle, even though miracles were not often defined in relation to natural law until the 16th century.¹¹⁹ The actual term "law of nature" first appears in the *Gorgia* by Plato, in which Calicles uses the term as a synonym for the pre-Socratics' term "contrary to nature." In both cases (Plato and the pre-Socratics) the term is talking about morality, and humanity acting in a way that it ought not.¹²⁰ This understanding continues through Aristotle and Zeno who tie natural law to essence/purpose and fate respectively (though in the latter there are seeds of an understanding of the physical world acting as it ought, but understanding these statements by Zeno to resemble what Hume means by "law of nature" would be to read into the text a meaning that is absent.)¹²¹ It is not until Philo that a thinker

¹¹⁹ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: the Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 130.

¹²⁰ Robert M. Grant, *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), pp. 5, 20.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 21.

explicitly uses the term “laws of nature” to refer to the operations of the physical world.¹²²

In the early Christian era, not much change occurred to the definitions provided by the Greek philosophers. In the New Testament, Paul and Peter use the word *physis* (nature) in a similar manner to the Platonists, perhaps even the Stoics (though their understanding of ‘fate’ would be quite different). This understanding of nature is reaffirmed throughout the Patristic era, exemplified by Clement of Alexandria’s assertion that nature is “the truth of matters” or roughly how things are.¹²³ The 20th century thinker, C.S. Lewis defines nature in a similar way as that which occurs by itself without effort.¹²⁴ Though this understanding of nature still places an emphasis on morality, it also places a greater focus on the physical world and its regular operations. This conception of nature is developed throughout the middle ages, and will be discussed as we consider the Medieval understanding of miracle.

A History of Definitions: Miracle

The early Christian era’s understanding of miracle was greatly influenced by the Hebraic conception of the term. As Goodich points out, the authors of Hebrew Scripture understood apparently supernatural events that pointed the observer toward God to be miracles and ones that directed attention from God to be sorcery.¹²⁵ However, in Hebraic theology, creation itself is seen as the grand miracle, and God has freedom to work within it completely unrestricted by the laws of nature that He created. Within this grand miracle, anything that causes awe and wonder, or works as a pointer to the one who created it constitutes a miracle. The Hebraic, and therefore early Christian

¹²² Ibid., p. 15.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 16.

¹²⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: a Preliminary Study* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), p. 7.

¹²⁵ Michael E. Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders: the Development of the Concept of Miracle, 1150-1350* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 10.

understanding of miracle rests upon the conception of a miracle being a sign causing wonder and showing greatness; the idea of laws of nature only fit into the discussion in the context if the sign is something that causes wonder because it is out of the ordinary.¹²⁶ This understanding is found throughout the New Testament and feeds into the work of the Apostolic Fathers. For the most part, the Patristic writers followed Origen in speaking of miracles being “beyond nature,” but not “contrary to nature.” The latter term was reserved for the breaking of moral law where as the former indicates that God is free to do as He wishes unencumbered by the laws that He established.¹²⁷

Origen's idea is reaffirmed and expanded on in the work of St. Augustine. For Augustine, a miracle is an event, which is difficult (either unusual or contrary to our understanding of nature) and therefore exceeds the observer's ability to comprehend it.¹²⁸ Notice that in this initial look at Augustine's understanding of miracle (pieced together from *On the Utility of Belief* and *Contra Faustum*) we first see “contrary to nature” used to describe the event; however it is tapered by the assertion that it is contrary to our understanding of nature, not to nature (or natural laws) itself. For Augustine it is essential to understand that God created the natural order, and it runs on natural laws, but God also created that natural order in such a way that wondrous things can happen within it. Since this propensity for the wondrous was implanted in nature at creation, all miracles are natural parts of history and/or the created order. Augustine does not see a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature because miracles are a part of the laws of nature. Grant interprets Augustine as seeing a miracle as merely an acceleration of a natural process.¹²⁹

However, a better understanding may be that presented by Benedicta Ward. Ward suggests a two-part reading of Augustine on miracles. First, it is best to understand Augustine

¹²⁶ Grant *Miracle and Natural Law*, p. 153.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

¹²⁸ Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, p. 13.

¹²⁹ Grant *Miracle and Natural Law*, p. 217.

as suggesting that there is only one miracle: Creation. At creation, God infused the created order with the potential for wondrous acts (as affirmed in Goodich's reading of Augustine above). From this understanding, Ward draws the conclusion that everything is in some way miraculous. The second aspect of Ward's reading is the understanding that, even though rainfall, plant growth and the sun moving in its course are all miraculous, they are things that humanity sees perpetually, and therefore is not awed by them. The lack of awe is why we do not consider certain things miracles. Since Augustine's definition of miracle is awe-based, and everything in nature that can cause awe is miraculous due to its divine creation, miracles are not the violations of nature, but are the very working of nature.¹³⁰

This understanding of Augustine's view has a basis in the very use of the word 'miracle.' The term is derived from the Latin *mirus* meaning "something to wonder at" or "a phenomenon that confounds."¹³¹ For Augustine, who works as the pinnacle of early Christian thought on the matter and serves as the basis for the Medieval discussion on miracles, anything which points one to God is a miracle, but we are complacent due to familiarity, so God has planned certain confounding events which will cause awe and these events are traditionally called miracles. They are no more miraculous than any other event, but we are not complacent toward them. A child who has never seen snow is amazed by it, but the adult who sees it every winter just wants a warmer coat. This ability to grow familiar and even bored or frustrated with the miraculous (in Augustine's understanding) explains the changes that happen in the scholastic period.

In the 11th and 12th centuries, there was a shift in the church's approach to preaching, which saw miracles take a central roll. This shift saw an increase in the amount of miracles

¹³⁰ Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event, 1000-1215* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 3.

¹³¹ Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, p. 8.

that were reported and gave rise to many fraudulent and easily debunked stories of the miraculous. This increase in fraudulent miracles began to cause skepticism in the populace and led thinkers to change the way they approached the issue in order to mitigate fraud. This new approach, which was greatly influenced by Aristotle, began to place an increased emphasis on the uniqueness of miracles in the face of the uniformity of nature¹³²

Anselm augmented Augustine's view by dividing events into three categories: will, nature and miracle. Whatever the will of man, or the normal course of nature could not bring to fruition was the unexplained, and therein a miracle.¹³³ Albert Magnus made a similar move, however he drew a distinction between 'miracle' and 'the extraordinary.' The latter category was that which is wondrous, but could be explained, whereas the former was the wondrous which was inexplicable.¹³⁴ For both Anselm and Albert Magnus, the category of miracle rested on an event's inexplicability.

In the wake of the rediscovery of Aristotle and the changes in scholastic theology, Thomas Aquinas developed an understanding of miracle, which in many ways anticipates Hume's definition centuries later. Aquinas argues that God can act outside of nature, and when He does, it causes wonder; however things within creation can cause wonder as well. If a natural cause can be determined for the event, which causes wonder (such as an eclipse), then it is not a miracle. If no such cause can be determined and it can be seen that God is the ultimate cause of the event, then that event is a miracle.¹³⁵ It should be noted that Aquinas' view of causation does mean that every event which causes wonder is an event caused by God due to indirect causation; however because there is a known link between causes leading to the event it is merely wonderful

¹³² Graham H. Twelftree, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 155.

¹³³ Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, p. 5.

¹³⁴ Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, p. 21

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

and not a miracle. Aquinas sees God as the cause of both categories, but they are still distinct categories.¹³⁶ Aquinas' move is problematic for reasons that will be discussed more fully as we now move into addressing Hume's definition; however it should be noted that Aquinas' system leaves all claims to the miraculous perpetually tentative, awaiting further study and possible explanation.

Hume's Definition of Miracle

During the Enlightenment, the definition of miracle continued to evolve. Hume's work on the subject was initially not considered influential due in large part to the obvious influence in his work by Spinoza and Deistic thinkers. However, as Hume's work gained momentum in other areas, his thoughts on miracles increased in prominence and have come to dominance in the field.¹³⁷ Goodich notes similarities between Hume's work and that of the medieval schoolmen, however Hume goes farther than they desired to. While the schoolmen sought to limit what might be considered a miracle, Hume (in Goodich's estimation) sought to destroy the category altogether.¹³⁸

In his *Enquiry* Hume provides two definitions of "miracle." The first, which appears in the text of the work, asserts that a miracle is a violation of the law of nature.¹³⁹ The second, which appears in a footnote on the following page asserts "A miracle may be accurately defined, [as] a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent."¹⁴⁰ In both definitions Hume ties the understanding of miracle to the concept of violation or transgression of a law of nature. For Hume, the laws of nature are formed within us by various

¹³⁶ Twelftree, *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, p. 44.

¹³⁷ Keener, *Miracles*, p. 119.

¹³⁸ Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, p. 27.

¹³⁹ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1975), p. 114.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

impressions being made in our minds either simultaneously or in sequence. The more that various pairings of impressions appear in our mind, the more we will begin to presume that they are in someway connected and in as such, will appear in the same manner in the future. As impressions continue to gather in our mind, we build a greater and greater amount of evidence that there is an increased probability that these impressions are connected. In this way a law of nature is determined and according to Hume, said law would have to be contradicted in order for a miracle to have occurred.

The greater the evidence one has for a law of nature, the more likely that any testimony against such a law is fraudulent. Hume asserts that one must base his or her belief in testimony on the preponderance of such evidence.¹⁴¹ As such, he concludes that one can only believe the testimony one gives for a miracle, if it is more probable that the miracle happened than that the person giving the testimony is lying, mistaken, etc. P.S. Wadia notes that many recent critics of Hume's view have attempted to provide cases in which this burden of proof is met; however it seems like a misguided endeavor.¹⁴² What Hume has done, as we shall see in the contemporary responses below, is establish an argument in which an event that is labeled a miracle cannot happen. The laws of nature are formed by habit, and any individual experience that occurs is put into the impression/evidence pool within one's mind and used to inform one's future understanding of a certain event. Therefore, even if an event were to occur in which a natural law was violated, it would merely mean that the habit within the mind would need to refine that projected law of nature.

Hume concludes his argument against testimony as a support for belief in miracles by asserting that no miracle has ever met a satisfactory test for proof among educated men free from delusion. Further, all reports of miracles happen among the ignorant and barbarous.¹⁴³ With these claims, Hume

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁴² P.S. Wadia, "Miracles and Common Understanding," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 26, no. 102 (1976): 69-81.

indicates that not only are miracles unbelievable, but those who do believe in them are capitulating to an ignorant understanding of the world from days gone by.

Contemporary Responses: Earman

In his book *Hume's Abject Failure*, John Earman completely rejects Hume's approach to miracles. In his estimation, Hume has constructed a system in which miracles are impossible merely by definition. Since a law of nature is an exceptionless regularity, and a miracle in the Humean sense is an exception, or violation, of that regularity, the sheer concept is flawed from the beginning. Earman does allow that if a system with this definition of miracle was the case and a deity exists, then a miracle could occur, because that deity could change or temporarily augment the laws of nature. However, Earman does not see how a deity can be a functional part of Hume's system. In fact, Earman is surprised that Hume includes mention of a deity in his second definition of miracle given that such a statement cannot be empirically verified. To assert that a deity caused an event is to interpret the event in a certain way, but it does not explain the causal connections involved.¹⁴⁴

In fact, David Basinger points out that if an event is a singular occurrence for which a cause cannot be determined, determining that it is a miracle seems to be science giving up.¹⁴⁵ This conclusion would be a "God of the Gaps" approach in its truest form. However, if science, or philosophy, or sociology or any other discipline were to explain the causal connections leading to and initiating the event, then in Hume's definition, the event would not be a miracle. The event may be very unlikely, but not a miracle. Earman delineates between the two in Hume's thought asserting that for Hume a miracle (by definition) has a probability of 0% whereas a marvel has a

¹⁴³ Hume, *Enquiries*, pp. 116-19.

¹⁴⁴ John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: the Argument Against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2000), p. 8.

¹⁴⁵ Twelftree, *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, p. 25.

probability of just slightly more than 0%.¹⁴⁶ Due to this probability structure, a marvel is always more likely to have occurred than a miracle (which is false by definition).

Earman formulates his understanding of Hume's attack on miracles as "Hume's Straight Rule." According to Earman, Hume proceeds with a straight rule of induction, which eliminates the concept of miracle (this formulation is an explanation of the presumption with which Hume has already dismissed miracles). For Hume, laws of nature, or causality in general, are determined by the association of ideas. If one's mind associates A and B together frequently, and a large enough sample of data (n) has been experienced, then one can conclude properly that there is a connection between A and B. Stated formally, if n As are B, and n is of significant size, then it is proper to conclude that all As are Bs.¹⁴⁷ If Earman is correct about Hume's Straight Rule, then miracles are ruled out not merely by definition, but also because they simply are new data. This method of induction allowed humanity to conclude that all swans were white until a black swan was discovered. After which, it was concluded that sometimes swans are black (and it was discovered it is not that uncommon). Earman's critique of Hume presents an understanding in which if someone were to resurrect, or if water were to turn into wine, then this would just be new data about particular instances in which the association of As to Bs is not as we once thought; however that would not make it a miracle. In Earman's reading of Hume, miracles cannot exist.

Contemporary Responses: Fogelin

In response to Earman and others who have attacked Hume's view, Robert Fogelin published his essay *A Defense of Hume on Miracles*. Fogelin begins his defense noting that Hume never actually argues that miracles are impossible by definition. This conclusion has been drawn by many who have read Hume, but,

¹⁴⁶ Earman, *Abject*, p.13.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

according to Fogelin, this conclusion is not supported by the text.¹⁴⁸ As evidence for this assertion, Fogelin appeals to Hume's example of a hypothetical eight days of darkness. If the world were to be dark for eight days, and the whole world were to see this fact, then a miracle would have occurred. Since Hume supplies this example, Fogelin concludes that he is not against miracles by definition.¹⁴⁹

The question this example brings to bear however, is how long this event might be considered a miracle? Hume is able to conceive of an event which could be labeled a miracle; however, this event seems to fall into the same trap that Aquinas' understanding did, in that the event would be a miracle until natural causes for the event were understood. For eight days of darkness, it is conceivable that the naturalistic causes for this event could be determined and concordantly its status as a miracle revoked, making it merely a marvel (the rising and setting of the sun in Alaska or our experiences with eclipses give us an idea of how this downgrading might occur).

If Hume is not writing to dismiss miracles merely by definition, then what is his motivation? Fogelin emphasizes that Hume's point is to question the practice of building religious beliefs off of miracles, which are so often discovered to be false. This argument is not one indicating that the purported miracle is false, rather that so many others have been false that basing one's belief off of someone's testimony to a miracle is an unwise choice. However, even in this claim, it is conceivable that the testimony could be so overwhelming that one should give assent to the miracle. This situation has never occurred, but in Fogelin's understanding, Hume is open to the idea.¹⁵⁰

Fogelin continues his argument rejecting the notion that Hume is a priori against miracles due to the conditionality of his thought.¹⁵¹ Hume's system is based on the assumption that our

¹⁴⁸ Robert J. Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume On Miracles* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 17.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 29, 57, 60.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 37, 39.

minds associate ideas in such a way; however at any time those associations could change. The laws of nature that we project onto the world may not always be as they are. Since Hume presupposes that our knowledge is tentative and based upon the correct understanding of impressions, the correct associations of ideas and the consistency of the reality we receive data from, miracles are always a possibility (though not a probability).

In Fogelin's estimation, the fact that Hume suggests that nature itself may change, and that knowledge is based on probability, excludes Earman's straight rule from applying to Hume.¹⁵² Earman's rule is contingent upon a uniformity of experience; however if that uniformity is merely expected, but not guaranteed, that means that it is logically possible (though not logically probable) that things might always be different than they are. If things can be different than they are, then Hume cannot be a priori against the concept of miracle. The fact that Hume embraces fallibility undercuts Earman's straight rule and the argument that Hume presupposes the impossibility of miracles.¹⁵³

Though Hume is not against the possibility of miracles, that in no way means that he supports them either. His arguments against their probability, etc still stand. However, to assert, as many do, that Hume is against miracle by definition is unfounded. Further, Fogelin holds that opponents of Hume's understanding of miracle must themselves produce an account of miracle more plausible than Hume's, yet still deserving of the name.¹⁵⁴ This request, while full of rhetorical power, does not seem as daunting as one might think, at least not on Fogelin's reading of Hume. If it is the case that things might always be different than they are, and that nature is itself subject to change perpetually, it could be argued that the apparent consistency of nature is itself miraculous. Further, Fogelin protects Hume from Earman's straight rule by embracing fallibility; however it seems as though embracing fallibility,

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 39.

while possibly undermining the straight rule, also undermines Hume's argument itself. If I can be wrong about everything that I know, then perhaps when I drop an item, it is not gravity that makes the object drop, rather a miracle occurs each time as the divine pushes the item to the floor. Since I cannot know for certain what has happened, the possibility of miracle is not kept from me, and the further one embraces the fallibility of knowledge, the easier it is to conceive of not just miracles, but a preponderance of them.

Contemporary Responses: Levine

Michael Levine begins his response to Hume by dismissing the idea that Hume thought evidence could ever support a miracle's existence. When Hume suggests that one can believe the testimony in favor of a miracle if and only if the likelihood that the testimony is false is more miraculous than the event it testifies to, Levine sees Hume as being tongue-in-cheek.¹⁵⁵ If the testimony's falsehood were to be more unlikely than the miracle, then its falsehood would be a miracle, so a miracle can only occur if it is the lesser of two miracles. Given the absurdity of the claim and the context in Hume's system, Levine's reading of Hume's statement although humorous does seem at the least possible, if not likely.

Keeping Hume's work on miracles in the context of his thought as a whole is central for Levine. He asserts that it is only within Hume's system as a whole that one can actually understand what Hume is arguing regarding miracles. Since any claims to the miraculous are actually claims of causality, and causality is something that humans are unable to know, Hume's system necessarily undermines the use of testimony as a means of verifying miracles.¹⁵⁶ This issue with causality does not invalidate miracles necessarily, merely their ability to be testified to by others.

¹⁵⁵ Michael Levine, *Hume and the Problem of Miracles: A Solution* (Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p. 14.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Levine sees Hume's assault on miracle happening on two fronts. On the one hand, Hume appears to discount miracles *a priori* and uses his argument merely as a gloss to validate his assumption that one cannot have an impression of a supernatural event.¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, Hume does in other areas seem to allow for a faint *a priori* possibility of miracles, but focuses on a strong (almost unshakeable) *a posteriori* argument against their existence (i.e. hoaxes, failure on the part of the observer, etc).¹⁵⁸ In both cases, the net result is a system in which miracles are seen as non-starters and certainly are not to be the basis of a system of belief.

Hume's system, in Levine's estimation, allows for the existence of exceptional events, but not miraculous ones. An event can only be labeled a miracle if the cause is a violation of a law of nature and since nature is the totality of what exists, nature would have to violate itself to produce a miracle. Nature cannot violate itself because in so doing it would be establishing new laws that would be the laws of nature.¹⁵⁹ Further, Hume's system is based on pure empiricism, and it is impossible for empiricism (based on sense data from the empirical world) to lead to a conclusion regarding a supernatural cause.¹⁶⁰ Whereas Hume does not explicitly make an *a priori* argument against miracles, his system does seem to imply such an argument.

For Hume, if a natural cause can be determined, then the event in question is not a miracle. Levine on the other hand suggests that even if a natural cause can be determined for a specific instance of an event, that does not negate the possibility of it being miraculous in the past. For example, if someone were to invent a machine which could turn water into wine, that does not mean that all past instances of water being turned into wine were non-miraculous, they may well have been.¹⁶¹ Levine still maintains that the cause of the event cannot be natural in

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 13, 65.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 94.

order to be a miracle, but that does not mean that humanity could not mimic something that was once a miracle.

Levine and Hume agree on the idea that a deity, or the idea of the supernatural/divine is central to an understanding of miracle. However, Levine thinks that the association of a miracle with the divine enhances the probability of a miracle occurring. If a God exists, then miracles are possible. Further, if a God exists, then any action that entity performs in the world would be a miracle (a deity's action has a divine cause by definition). In Levine's estimation, it is minimally possible that there is a supernatural sphere (undefined as it might be), and if it is possible that there is a supernatural sphere, then the idea of miracle is a live option.¹⁶²

A Direction for a Theistic Understanding of Miracles

It seems safe to conclude, if nothing else, that Hume does supply a strong a posteriori argument against miracles in his work. Further, though Fogelin offers arguments to the contrary, Earman and Levine make compelling arguments to see miracles as impossible within Hume's system. If Hume has constructed a system in which the idea of a miracle is self-contradictory, then assuming a Humean understanding of the universe and/or miracles is a failed project from the beginning. In this case it seems that the wisest course of action for the theist would be to take one of two approaches. The first would be a return to a strict Augustinian understanding of miracles in which every event is equally natural and equally miraculous. If the theist were to return to this understanding of miracle, she could agree that there are natural explanations to any miracle a person might suggest, and concordantly she could assert that there are miraculous or supernatural explanations for every natural event which occurs.

The Humean might respond to this move by suggesting that a system in which every event is a miracle is a system which has no miracles. If everything is a miracle, then nothing is a

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 101.

miracle. Further, if the natural causes of an event are known, then asserting a divine cause seems to be unnecessary and would fall victim to Ockham's Razor. To these arguments, the theist could respond first by rejecting the idea that everything cannot be miraculous. If it is true that everything is contingent upon the deity, then it is true that nothing naturally exists apart from the deity (presuming the deity is eternal and the universe is not), in which case the fact that anything exists is a miracle, so by definition, everything is a miracle and maintains its miraculous status, even though humans grow complacent to it. To the charge of Ockham's Razor, the theist does seem to be adding entities; however if the other system is unable to know all the causes to an event, the system cannot claim that an unneeded cause has been added, given the fallibility with which said system claims to know anything about causes.

The other approach a theist might take is to assume a similar definition to Hume's, but provide different presuppositions as a starting place. C.S. Lewis defines miracles as interferences in the natural world by the supernatural world.¹⁶³ In Lewis' understanding, the laws of nature are non-declarative, meaning that the laws of motion do not make things move, but rather they analyze the motion that occurs. The laws are not a part of nature, they merely comment on nature (Hume would agree with this statement it seems). When the laws analyze something and it is out of synch with the established pattern, that does not mean that the law has been violated, rather that something new has entered the pattern.¹⁶⁴

As an illustration, Lewis provides an example in which a man takes two pennies each day and places them in a drawer. On the sixth day, he opens the drawer and instead of seeing twelve pennies, he sees three. Lewis says that in this instance it would be fallacious to conclude that the laws of arithmetic have been violated; rather the drawer itself has been violated (or the laws of Britain). The rules haven't changed; something from outside the system has entered. Once something from outside

¹⁶³ Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

the system enters nature, the normal course of nature continues and the laws can analyze the situation and operations to be as normal. Wine that was once water can still intoxicate and a fertilized egg within a virgin will still gestate. The laws of nature has not changed, instead they are inclined toward a new object that has entered.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

Be it the Augustinian approach, a shifted presupposition approach (exemplified in Lewis), or a combination of the two, the theist should not feel it a necessity to allow Hume to dictate his understanding of miracles. Hume's approach to miracles presupposes their non-existence and therefore does not work as an argument against a theistic conception of miracles and will implode any system attempting to include it and yet maintain the existence of the miraculous. Within the Western Christian tradition, Hume inherited Thomas' definition of miracle (through the funnel of Spinoza) and augmented it greatly to not only mitigate, but eliminate the possibility of miracles, and the church has been operating within a framework presuming that he was correct to do so. If he was correct to do so, then Hume has made a case that will be difficult to defeat. However, if Hume was not correct to do so, then the church can merely define the word 'miracle' properly and the conversation moves to the matter of supernaturalistic or naturalistic presuppositions, which is where the true dialogue is to be had.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 90-95.