

Mar 19th, 3:30 PM - 4:30 PM

Wittgenstein and Hume on Miracles

Samuel Wheeler
Old Dominion University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/undergradsymposium>

 Part of the [Philosophy of Language Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Wheeler, Samuel, "Wittgenstein and Hume on Miracles" (2022). *Undergraduate Research Symposium*. 5.
<https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/undergradsymposium/2022/artsletters/5>

This Oral Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Student Events at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Symposium by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

Wittgenstein and Hume on Miracles

Samuel J. Wheeler, *Old Dominion University*

Philosophy of Religion, PHIL 313

3 December, 2021

Word Count: 2,073

In this paper, I intend to contrast the positions of Ludwig Wittgenstein and David Hume on miracles. While Hume holds that miracles are violations of laws of nature which can never be probable, Wittgenstein would reject this definition. Instead, he takes a broader stance on miracles and holds that many events which are not transgressions of laws of nature can be seen *as* miraculous. And the point of this is to highlight the vastly different events *we call* miracles. *Contra* Hume, Wittgenstein thinks that even some of our greatest certainties can call up in us a sense of absolute wonder and awe, and thus, be thought of as miracles.

I.

In his famous article “Of Miracles,” which appeared as section X in his book, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume defines a miracle as a “violation of the laws of nature.”¹ In the section, Hume is arguing against one *justifiably* believing in the occurrence of miracles. And this follows immediately from his definition of a miracle. For Hume, our belief in the occurrence of an event is based on both probability and testimony. Since a miracle is supposed to be a violation of a law of nature (which necessarily holds), it could never be probable. To think so would be to posit not only that the law no longer holds, but also that its holding is *improbable*. But neither should we believe that a miracle has occurred based on the presence of testimony. If we are going to believe something based on testimony, there needs to be a greater number of testimonies in favor of the event’s occurrence than against. For Hume, this can never be the case because, “in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary.”² Since members of other religions claim the occurrence of their own miracles (by members or prophets of their religion), and would reject the miraculous powers of those from other religions,

¹ David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 83.

² *Ibid.*, 87-88.

there will always be more contrary testimonies than ones in favor.³ Take, for example, the Christian claim that Jesus Christ miraculously rose from the dead, and in doing so, sacrificed himself for the sins of humanity. If a person who believed a different religion were to accept this, they would be going against the claims of their own religion. In this way, their claims about human need and salvation and the Christian's are mutually exclusive, and to accept one is, in a sense, to reject the possibility of the other.

Of course, in order for one to accept Hume's argument against justifiably believing in the occurrence of miracles, one must also accept his definition *of* a miracle. His definition is extremely restricting in what it allows us to call a miracle, and an important question to ask is: does this line up with our everyday use of the word 'miracle'? It is my contention that Hume offers a definition of 'miracle' that does not match the way we commonly use the word. In section two, we will look at a different account of miracles offered by Ludwig Wittgenstein. For him, to call something a miracle is simply to look at the event in a certain way. To look at it with awe and wonder. This way of viewing miracles is much more in line with the way in which we use the word in our everyday lives. This, of course, isn't to say that Hume offers a *wrong* account of miracles. But rather, his belief that, "Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature"⁴ isn't in line with our actual ways of speaking.

³ Hume also offers different arguments for not believing in the occurrence of miracles through testimony. E.g., p. 85: "The many instances of forged miracles, and prophecies, and supernatural events, which, in all ages, have either been detected by contrary evidence, or which detect themselves by their absurdity, prove sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvellous, and ought reasonably to beget a suspicion against all relations of this kind." And p. 86: "It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with that inviolable sanction and authority, which always attend received opinions."

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

II.

In Wittgenstein's *A Lecture on Ethics*, he gives an example of an event that we often view with wonder and awe, but is not a transgression of any law of nature. When one thinks of the world, their place in it, and the circumstances that have allowed one to be here, one often has a feeling that could be described as a "*wonder at the existence of the world.*"⁵ This is not a simple amazement at the *way* things are, but *that* things are at all. For him, this feeling can just as well be described as "the experience of seeing the world as a miracle."⁶

It is very important that Wittgenstein uses the expression "seeing the world *as* a miracle" here, as opposed to asserting that the world *is* a miracle. For it is also possible to view the world's existence as not a miracle at all. The scientist, e.g., when trying to give an explanation for the world's existence, does not view it as a miracle. She views it as something to be gotten clear about, an event that we can explain and not something to wonder about. Later in the lecture Wittgenstein gives an example of a student's head suddenly transforming into the head of a lion.⁷ For him, there would be two different ways of viewing and reacting to this event. The one person would immediately fetch a doctor and look for a scientific explanation of the event, but the other would see the event *as* a miracle.⁸ To look for a scientific explanation would be precisely to reject the miraculous nature of the event, i.e., it would be to look at the event, not with

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ C.f. In the movie "Pulp Fiction," there is a scene where two of the main characters are shot at from a few feet away, but the bullets somehow miss them entirely. One character responds to the event by pointing out how "lucky" they are, the other, calls the event a case of "divine intervention" and a "miracle." Both characters view their barely surviving in completely different, and contrasting ways. For the second character, something is missing entirely when one tries to pass it off as just "luck." He can't help but seeing their surviving as a miracle from God.

amazement, but as something that we can give an explanation for.⁹ Wittgenstein gives this second example as a much clearer case where viewing an event in a certain way is a matter of viewing it *as* miraculous or, in contrast with this, as something to be explained by science. When we view the event as something to be explained by science, “it is clear that...everything miraculous has disappeared.” For “the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle.”¹⁰

Now this “seeing the world as a miracle” is a feeling that many would admit to having had, and yet, the world’s existence is certainly not a transgression of a law of nature as Hume tries to characterize *all* miracles. But to further stress this point that we often refer to events as miraculous even though they do not transgress laws of nature, let us look at some other cases.

When a mother is pregnant, people often talk about the *miracle of childbirth*.¹¹ But is childbirth a miracle, according to David Hume’s definition? If it were, then it would have to be improbable that any human being were ever born, and any testimony of a child’s birth would have to be untrustworthy. But this obviously is not the case. And yet, most people understand us when we refer to childbirth as a miracle. This expression gets at the gravity and seriousness of childbirth. In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein offers an example that is similar. He says: “The miracles of nature...(The blossom, just opening out. What is *marvelous* about it?) We say: ‘Just look at it opening out!’.”¹² When one sees a beautiful flower blossoming, one often looks at it in

⁹ Often, when watching someone perform magic, we begin by trying to think of the different ways in which the magician could have performed this “trick.” *That* is the scientific viewpoint – trying to find an explanation for the occurrence of the event – and not simply looking at it in awe.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ C.f. the miracle of modern medicine, the miracle of love, etc. None of these are examples of “transgressions” according to Hume’s definition, and yet, they are phrases we use and understand.

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. Von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 56e.

amazement. One wonders at the fact that nature can produce such beautiful creations.¹³ Again, this is in contrast with the botanist who may view the blossoming as *simply* a chemical or biological process. To explain the blossoming or beauty of the flower in this way is not to view its existence as a miracle at all. But the important point is that one *can* view the blossoming as a miracle, as something to look at with amazement.

Wittgenstein even thinks one can view an event which is shown to be a possible case of “cheating” as a miracle. In his *Lectures on Religious Belief*, he imagines a person who says: “The balance moves when I will it to move.” But he then points out that “it is not covered up, a draught can move it, etc.”¹⁴ To this, he remarks:

I could imagine that someone showed an extremely passionate belief in such a phenomenon, and I couldn't approach his belief at all by saying: ‘This could just as well have been brought about by so and so’ because he could think this blasphemy on my side. Or he might say: ‘It is possible that the priests cheat, but nevertheless in a different sense a miraculous phenomenon takes place there.’ I have a statue which bleeds on such and such a day in the year. I have red ink, etc. ‘You are a cheat, but nevertheless the Deity uses you. Red ink in a sense, but not red ink in a sense.’¹⁵

Here, Wittgenstein is again stressing the fact that many events can be viewed *as* miracles, regardless of whether or not it is possible to give an explanation for their occurrence.¹⁶ The case of a priest with red ink is certainly a borderline example of anything we would want to call a miracle, but one can view the priest as used *by* the Deity to evoke in others a sense of wonder

¹³ Wittgenstein is constantly stressing the point that often times, one cannot help but seeing an event *as* miraculous. In *Culture and Value* (45e), Wittgenstein gives an example of trees bowing down at the words of a saint. He goes on to say: “The only way for me to believe in a miracle in this sense would be to be *impressed* by an occurrence in this particular way. So that I should say e.g.: ‘It was *impossible* to see these trees and not feel that they were responding to the words.’ Just as I might say ‘It is impossible to see the face of this dog and not to see that he is alert and full of attention to what his master is doing’.”

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Compare “Red ink in a sense, but not red ink in a sense” to the doctrine of transubstantiation. The Catholic priest might say something like “it’s bread in a sense, but *not* bread in a sense.” Whether or not the bread is really transformed into the body of Christ is irrelevant to the believer. For the devout Catholic, the miracle of transubstantiation isn’t something to be tested by science. To do so would not only be sacrilegious, but would also fail to demonstrate accurately the role that the Eucharist plays in the believer’s life.

and awe. For the person who views the “bleeding” as a miracle, the priest’s owning red ink is entirely irrelevant. If someone were to bring it up that the priest could be “cheating” them and asked questions like, “Can it only be explained in this way? Can’t it be this or that?”¹⁷ they would consider that blasphemous, since it is not possible to view the event as simultaneously a miracle and a case of cheating (which opens it up to scientific explanations). If the priest uses red ink, then the miracle lies in the fact that the Deity used this person to evoke wonder in the people who view the statue’s “bleeding.”

III.

One immediate objection to this view of miracles is that to call something like “childbirth” a miracle is to use the word in a derivative sense. The idea here is that our original sense of “miracle” refers to the things that Hume discusses, events which are supposed to be transgressions of laws of nature. When we refer to the world’s existence, childbirth, or the blossoming of a flower as miracles, we are only using the word in a *secondary* sense. Wittgenstein would certainly agree that we are using the word “miracle” in a much different sense in all of these cases. In fact, one of his goals in philosophy is to show that confusions arise *because* we fail to recognize the variety of senses that a word may have. But for Wittgenstein, the fact that we do use the word “miracle” in a variety of ways does not mean that one use of that word is primary. Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of a rope to describe the way in which words may have a variety of meanings and uses. He says:

We find that what connects all the cases...is a vast number of overlapping similarities, and as soon as we see this, we feel no longer compelled to say that there must be some one feature common to them all. What ties the ship to the wharf is a rope, and the rope consists of fibres, but it does not

¹⁷ Ibid., 60-61.

get its strength from any fibre which runs through it from one end to the other, but from the fact that there is a vast number of fibres overlapping.¹⁸

Applying this to the concept of a miracle, we can see that the word, while used in a variety of ways, does not have *one* use that is primary. For Wittgenstein, to describe childbirth or the blossoming of a flower *as* a miracle is just as legitimate a use of the word as when we describe events which are supposed to have violated laws of nature. We may be employing a different sense of the word “miracle,” but that doesn’t mean it is derivative or metaphorical. Nor does it mean that one sense is entirely dependent on the other, just like there is no single fibre that runs the entirety of the rope for which all other fibres are dependent.

Ultimately, what Wittgenstein is trying to do with his comments on miracles is to point out the variety of events that we can see *as* miraculous. Seeing the events in this way does not necessitate our positing them as transgressions of laws of nature, it simply requires us to look at the events with a sense of awe and wonder. And this makes it possible to view even the simplest things in life, like the blossoming of a flower, *as* miracles.

¹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1960), 87.

Bibliography

Hume, David. (2007) *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter Millican.

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1980). *Culture and Value*. Edited by G.H. Von Wright. Translated by

Peter Winch. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1966). *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and*

Religious Belief. Edited by Cyril Barrett. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1993). *Philosophical Occasions*. Edited by James C. Klagge and Alfred

Nordmann. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1960). *The Blue and Brown Books*. New York: Harper and Rowe.