



## **David Hume: 18th Century Philosopher**

*Hume's argument against miracles*

### **Winifred**

To discuss Hume's argument against miracles Peter Kail, who is Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at Saint Peters College Oxford, joins Timothy Chappell in the studio.

### **Timothy Chappell**

Peter Kail, let's get on to the argument because I think it still has a lot of contemporary relevance. It's still an argument we need to consider today because people still make claims about miracles. So what is the argument that Hume is making and perhaps first of all what does he mean by a miracle.

### **Dr Peter Kail**

Well, he defines miracle in two ways actually. One is the violation of the law of nature, and that's the main definition. And the second is the violation of the law of nature by the immediate interposition of the deity i.e. it identifies not merely what happens namely a law was violated but also what the cause of that violation is namely God.

### **Timothy Chappell**

So it's not just that something happens which is extraordinary and against all the laws of nature it's also that God makes it happen

### **Dr Peter Kail**

Yes. But it's important here in the structure that Hume is trying to identify a miracle first in order for it to be a proof of the existence of God.

### **Timothy Chappell**

And why couldn't there be a miracle according to Hume?

### **Dr Peter Kail**

Well it's actually wrong to say Hume is denying that there are miracles. What Hume is actually arguing for is that it's never rational to believe a report of a miracle. What he says essentially is this. Look our experience of laws of nature constitute a proof of the existence of the laws of nature. Testimony for miracles claim that that law of nature was violated. But now when we are assessing what some one says we don't simply take their word for it but we consider as it were all sorts of factors. And now these two things can interplay. The more extraordinary an event that is attested by someone the more likely it is we are going to demand something more rigorous from the person who tells us that it's happened.

### **Timothy Chappell**

So something that is a very extraordinary report we need a stronger reason to believe that that report is true.

### **Dr Peter Kail**

I think that's right. That's right. And essentially what Hume does is to say look we can think of all sorts of ways in which we should assess what everybody says so we think of various criteria. We want to know of any report how many people witnessed this? If you want to say for example something that's very odd namely that there was a tiger in Shaftesbury Avenue this afternoon am I merely saying so well you might say okay but that seems such a strange thing. I just want to check with someone else. Secondly of course you might want to know whether the person telling you something is in any way interested – interested in that kind of bad sense of something namely if I tell you that there was no money in the drawer and yet I have an interest you know independently of trying to acquire more money you might then

think well Kail telling me that there was no money in the drawer is kind of somewhat undermined by the idea that I know that I'm trying to acquire money.

**Winifred**

So the witness to the miracle might be undermined because they might want it to be a miracle.

**Dr Peter Kail**

Exactly.

**Timothy Chappell**

So suppose you have something which we think is a violation of the laws of nature and suppose you've got lots of witnesses who claim to have seen this happen and suppose there is no reason to think that any of them is biased or as you put it has a special interest in the case. On those conditions why shouldn't we say a miracle has occurred

**Dr Peter Kail**

Well how Hume describes it is that he says we now face something called a proof versus proof. On the one hand we have sufficient evidence to think we have an established law of nature and on the other hand there is a claim to the effect that there have been a sufficient number of people of good standing, good reputation who would lose quite a lot if they were found out whom we think are not biased or deluded in any way shape or form. Now what Hume actually says is that no miracle report has ever met the conditions whereby you would think that the testimony of the miracle report is sufficient to mean that there really was a violation of the law

**Timothy Chappell**

Wow and he published this in his lifetime?

**Dr Peter Kail**

He did publish this in his lifetime

**Timothy Chappell**

Because this is extraordinarily controversial because of course the whole of his society was based upon the idea of the Resurrection and the claim must be presumably that a miracle occurred when Jesus was resurrected or allegedly resurrected. There must have been a miracle. It must have been witnessed by enough people and whether or not they had an interest in it that interest can't have been decisive and biased to say things that weren't true

**Dr Peter Kail**

Indeed and Hume's reputation as an anti Christian was there in place and it wasn't something that he ever denied. He denied being an atheist but he thought the particular stripe of religion called Christianity, he thought that those kinds of arguments the witnessing of a miracle command our assent as per reason

**Winifred**

So Hume believes that there have never been any credible accounts of miracles. Does he believe there never could be?

**Dr Peter Kail**

I think he thinks it's highly unlikely because he allows the possibility of there being a credible report of a miracle when he discusses an imaginary situation when in 1600 all is darkness for seven days. And he says I can imagine perfectly a situation that there will be good cases whereby if there could possibly be a number of people of sufficient character etc etc to testify that. But his main thought is that when it comes to the investment in religious belief that there hasn't been and be given human psychology it's always most likely to be that no testimony is going to amount to a proof that would over ride any report of the law of nature.

**Timothy Chappell**

Peter Kail, thank you.