

# Philosophy of Religion

## 5. *Miracles*

What is Hume's argument against the credibility of miracle reports? Is it successful? In discussing this, explain his understanding of miracles and laws of nature: does his account have the implication that miracles are absolutely impossible?

### 1. Essential Source

David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, available in many editions.

### 2. Critical Discussions

An extensive overview of the literature on Hume's treatment of miracles is available in §9.1 of my "Critical Survey of the Literature on Hume and the First *Enquiry*", in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding* (OUP, 2002), pp. 450-5, or available online at <http://davidhume.org/ehusurvey.php#9a>.

An excellent discussion of some of the difficulties in understanding Hume's argument is provided by Don Garrett, "Hume on Testimony concerning Miracles", chapter 7 of his *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (OUP, 1997) and reprinted in an adapted form, with a new appendix in my *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, chapter 11.

Hume's discussion of miracles is given some historical context by John Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (Macmillan, second edition, 1988), pp. 135-65.

J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (OUP, 1982), chapter 1 gives a philosophically insightful discussion of the topic, but is not entirely faithful to Hume.

Perhaps the most substantial attacks on Hume's argument are those of Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (Macmillan, 1970) and Joseph Houston, *Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume* (Cambridge, 1994). Both are briefly summarized on p. 452 of the Critical Survey mentioned above.

There is a fair amount of literature tacking Hume's discussion from a probabilistic point of view (for an overview, see pp. 454-5 of the Critical Survey). One useful discussion which gets near to the heart of the issue is "Hume versus Price on Miracles and Prior Probabilities", by David Owen, Chapter 12 of my *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*.

Slides from a talk to the Royal Institute of Philosophy in February 2009 are available from the Web at <http://www.davidhume.org/millican.htm>.