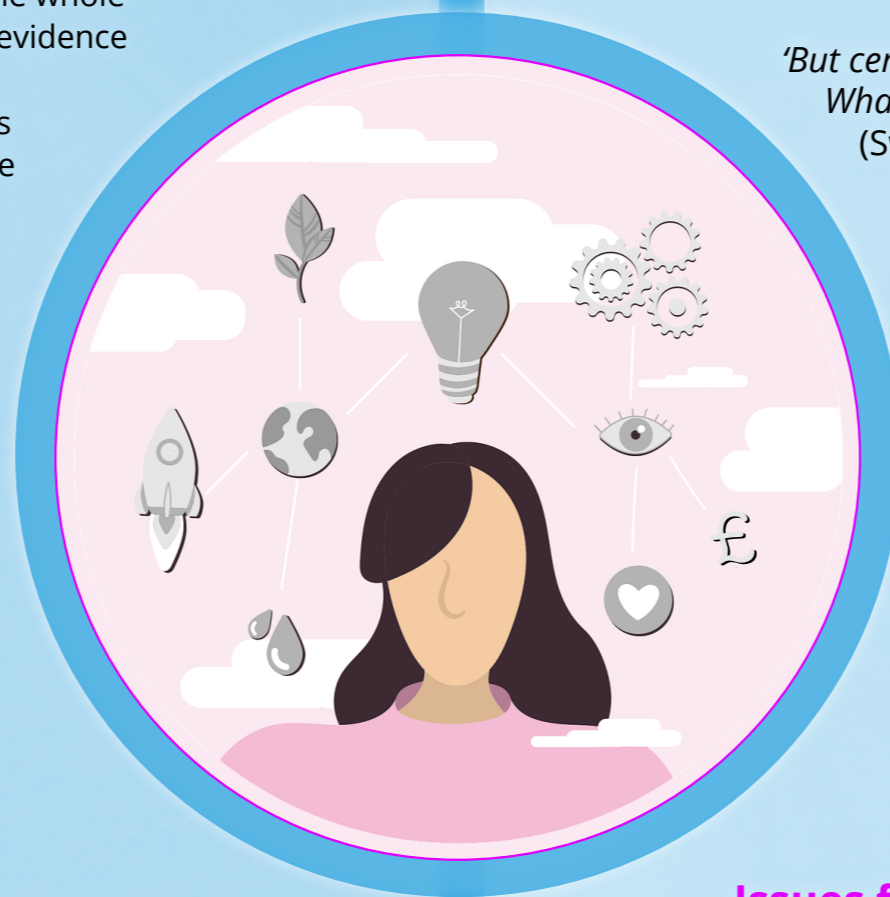


Key concepts

- David Hume defined miracles as *'a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent'*.
- Hume appeared to understand a law of nature to mean inviolable laws that are established through *'firm and unalterable experience'*.
- He takes a **sceptical** approach to miracles, arguing that they are improbable.
- An event can only be called a miracle if:
 - it is contrary to the fixed laws of nature
 - it is brought about by a deity
- Miracles contradict the huge volume of consistent experience that the whole history of humanity has of the laws of nature. None of the **variable** evidence given about miracles can outweigh the evidence for nature's laws.
- There are too many things that weigh against the quality of a witness for us to trust them. They may be lying, delusional, ignorant, or in the minority.
- People want to believe in miracles and with the best of intentions they may exaggerate. Or, they are too ignorant to challenge miraculous accounts.
- Accounts of miracles from different faiths cancel each other out as all claim to establish the truth of their own religion and have an equal possibility of being right or wrong. They contradict each other and therefore all are wrong.
- A wise person proportions their belief to the evidence. There is more evidence against miracle. Therefore, it is irrational to believe in miracles.
- Richard Swinburne defines miracles as *'a violation of a law of nature by a god, that is, a very powerful rational being who is not a material object (viz., in invisible and intangible)'*.
- A violation of a law of nature is: *'an occurrence of a **non-repeatable counter-instance** to a law of nature'*.
- Swinburne sees a law of nature not as **universal**, stipulating what must happen, but as **statistical**, predicting what will probably happen.
- He takes the approach of a Christian **apologist**, defending the rational possibility of miracles.
- An event is only called a miracle if:
 - it goes against the laws of nature and could not be expected to happen again
 - if modifying our understanding of the law to account for the event would make the law inaccurate in making predictions in other circumstances
 - it must be brought about by God and must have religious meaning
- The **principle of credulity** – if an event seems to have happened, then it probably has. To doubt other's testimonies and evidence in favour of a miracle, means we must doubt historical and scientific claims too.
- Hume has unnecessarily high standards for evidence. Different kinds of evidence have more worth. We can value most; our own experience, trustworthy people and large numbers of witnesses.



- The **principle of testimony** – if someone says an event has happened then it probably has unless we have solid reason to doubt them. Otherwise, we end up being sceptical of everything anyone says.
- Miracles could be, but never are, contradictory. True miracles from any source, show the power and benevolence of God, not details of doctrine.
- There are no logical difficulties in considering that miracles could occur.

Key quotes

'If the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense.' (Hume)

'But certainly one feels that Hume's standards of evidence are too high. What, one wonders, would Hume himself say if he saw such an event?' (Swinburne)

'There are no logical difficulties in supposing that there could be strong historical evidence for the occurrence of miracles.' (Swinburne)

Key words

sceptical	variable	non-repeatable counter instance
universal	statistical	apologist
principle of credulity	principle of testimony	

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some argue that Hume's assumption that claims of miracle only occur in ancient times or uneducated nations is wrong or even racially prejudiced.

Others point out that if there is reason to argue that a god exists, then there is no reason to doubt that he would be capable of performing miracles.

Some argue against Swinburne, that there is a good reason to doubt the testimony of those who claim miracle, simply because they claim miracle.

Key questions

Does Hume properly understand what is meant by the laws of nature?

Is Hume's standard for reliable testimony too high?

Is it rational to claim that if someone says an event has happened, then it probably has?