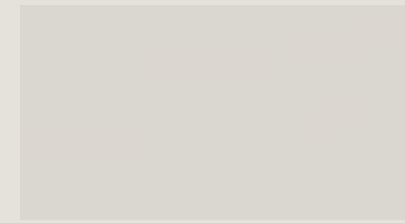




THINK
THEISM

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RATIO
CHRISTI

The Problem of Miracles: Can God Act in Nature?

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Ratio Christi, March 25, 2021

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“It’s a miracle!”



Tonight's talk

1. Hume and Miracles
2. The Enlightenment and Miracles
3. Hume and Witnesses
4. Hume and Comparative Religion

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The Raising of Lazarus, 1310–11, Duccio di Buoninsegna
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth



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1. Hume and Miracles
 2. The Enlightenment and Miracles
 3. Hume and Witnesses
 4. Hume and Comparative Religion



AN MIT
PROFESSOR
ANSWERS
QUESTIONS
ON GOD AND
SCIENCE



IAN HUTCHINSON

CAN A
SCIENTIST
BELIEVE
IN MIRACLES?



Miracles

C·S· LEWIS

1. Hume and Miracles



Categories to distinguish miracles

**Natural
Causes**



**Special
Providence**



Miracle

A miracle lies outside the productive capacity of the natural world.



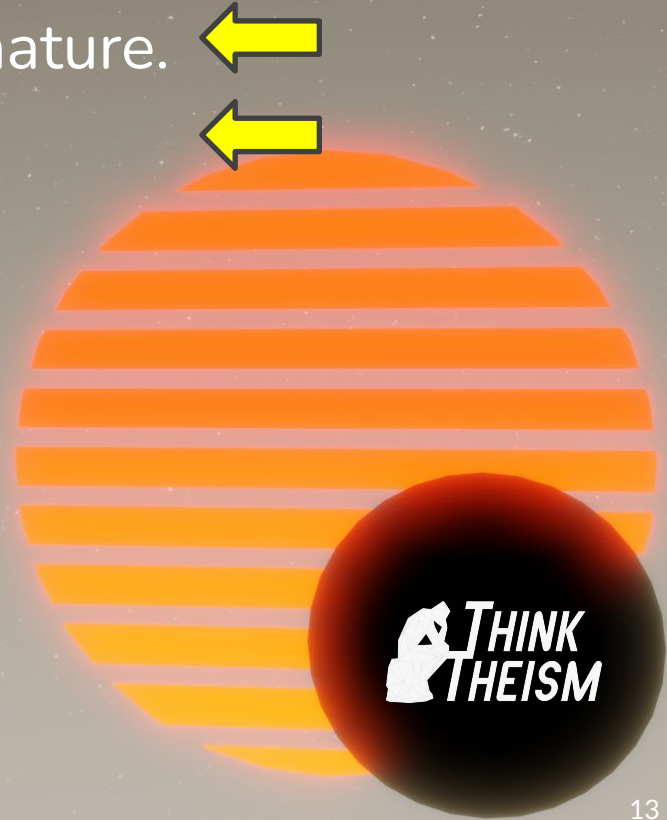
Hume's Argument, Try #1

“A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined...There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation.”



Hume's Argument, Try #1

P1. A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.
P2. The laws of nature are never violated.
C. Miracles never happen



Hume's Argument, Try #2: Probability

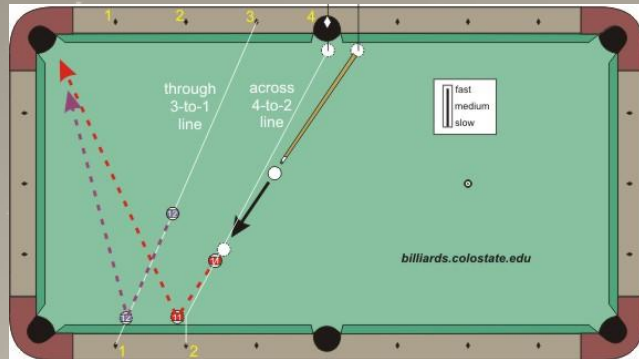
“Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die on a sudden: because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country.”



Hume's Argument, Try #2: Probability

We learn from experience that all A's are B's and that no A's are non-B's. Thus, we form a presumptive "law of nature" that all A's are B's.

- P1. A miracle is a violation of a presumptive law of nature.
- P2. Experience confers a probability that approaches 1 on the presumptive law (by induction).
- C. Thus, the probability of a miracle approaches 0.



Problems with Hume's argument

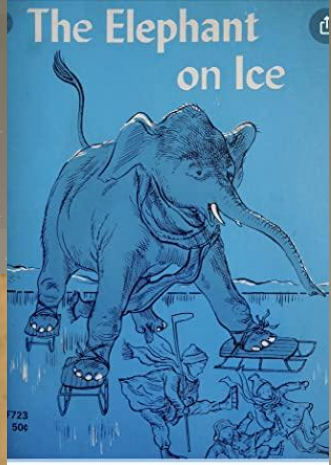
- Does that leave room for...new experiences?



Problems with Hume's argument

John Locke's story about the King of Siam and the Dutch Ambassador:

...any thing like it, the most unlearned Greatness will scarce be able to find Belief. As it happened to a *Dutch* Ambassador, who entertaining the King of *Siam* with the Particulars of *Holland*, which he was inquisitive after, amongst other Things told him, that the Water in his Country would sometimes, in cold Weather, be so hard that Men walked upon it, and that it would bear an Elephant, if he were there. To which the King replied, *Hitherto I have believed the strange Things you have told me, because I look upon you as a sober fair Man; But now I am sure you lye.*



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Problems with Hume's argument

John Locke's story about the King of Siam and the Dutch Ambassador:

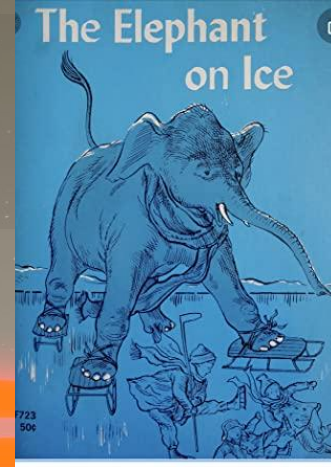
What would Hume say?

This example doesn't count because the King isn't taking all human experience into account.

What would a scientist say?

"All human experience" isn't enough to warrant total skepticism, Einstein.

The King is wrong because he isn't recognizing that there is a parameter that is changing (T). Thus, the prior data isn't enough to warrant skepticism.

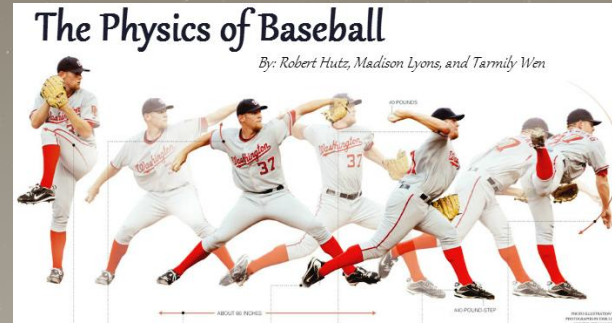
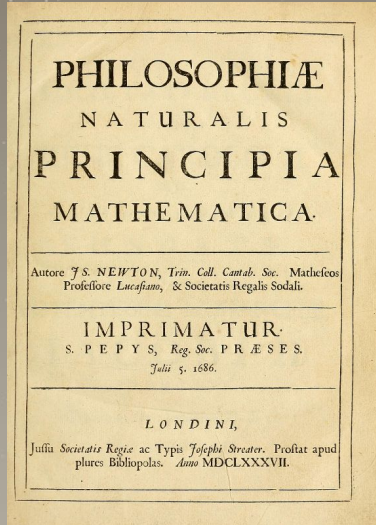
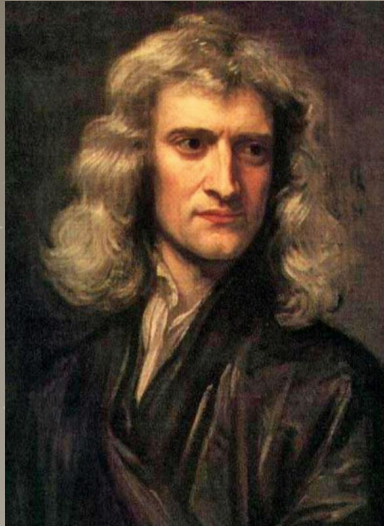


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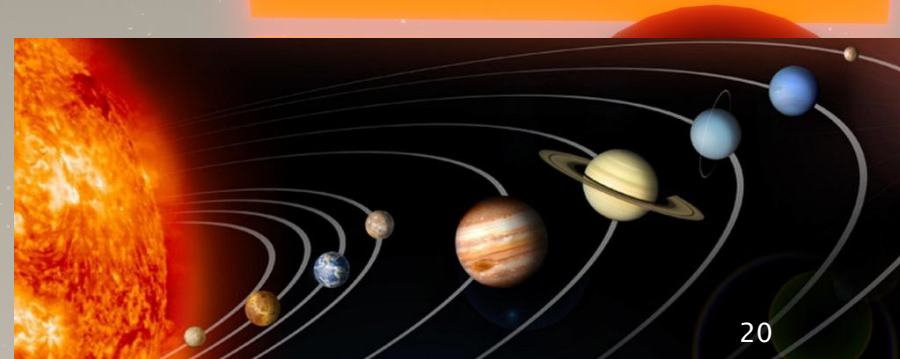
2. The Enlightenment and Miracles



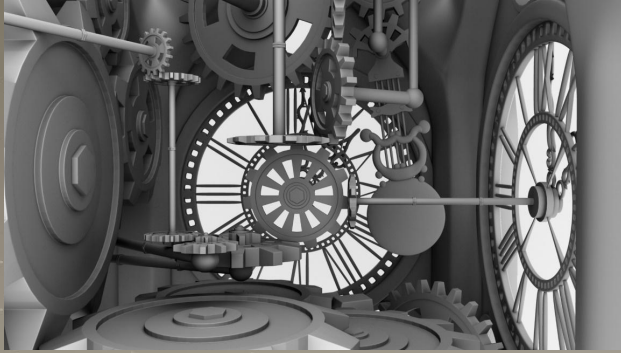
The success of Newtonian Physics



These equations can predict the motion of everything!



“The world is a clock (that doesn’t need interventions!)”



“la machine du monde”



Laplace: “Je n'ai pas eu besoin de cette hypothèse.”

“I have no need of that hypothesis”

**What hypothesis?
Divine intervention**

Deism

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“Science and God are compatible as long as the latter is content to stand on the sidelines once the universe has begun.”

- Alan Lightman, MIT



The “Scientific Argument” against Miracles

Premise 1: Natural forces cannot cause a dead person to be resurrected. (Science says so!)

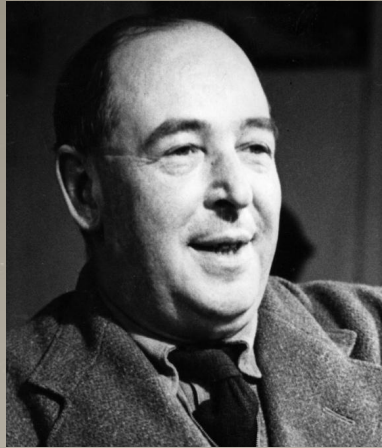
➔ Premise 2: There are only natural forces in play.

Conclusion: A dead person cannot be resurrected.



Miracles are not natural, they're supernatural

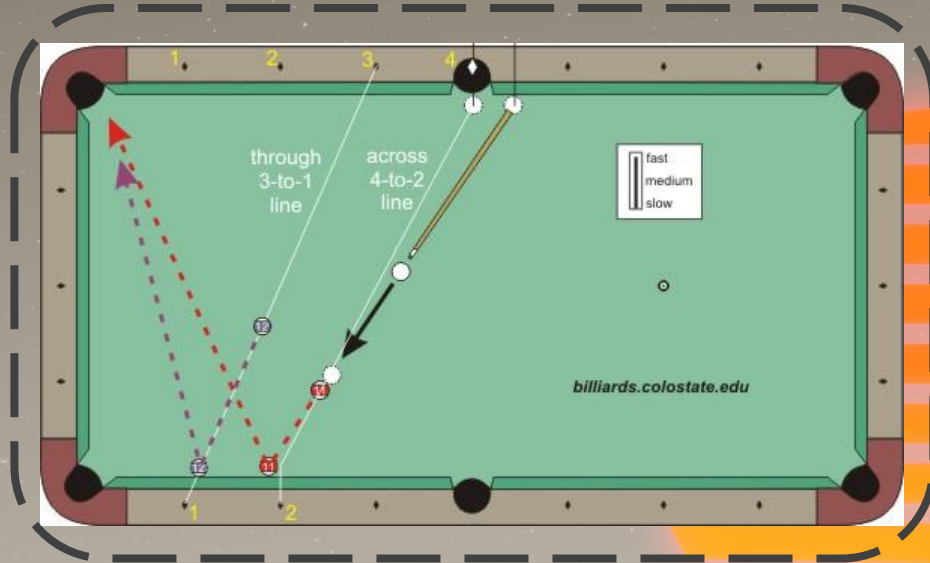
Science deals with a description of the natural world; a miracle involves **MORE** than the natural world.



C. S. Lewis, 1898 -1963



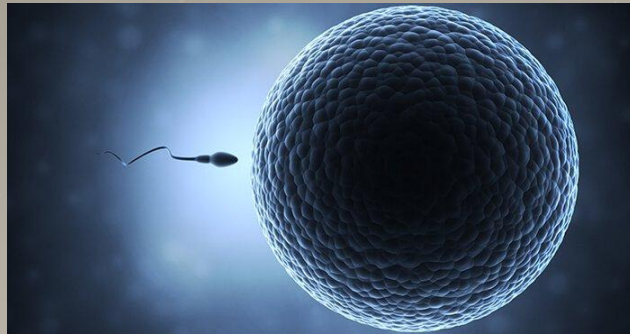
Hume and Lewis



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Arthur Peacocke:

Modern cell biology has “radically undermined” the credibility of the virgin birth because it would require God’s making a Y-chromosome out of nothing in Mary’s ovum.



Don't we have to assume that miracles are impossible in order to do science?

No: Miracles are not random. God is not capricious. He doesn't send miracles to mess up your experiment.

Miracles have a religious context.



Categories to distinguish miracles

**Natural
Causes**



**Special
Providence**



Miracle



WAIT. Maybe we're wrong to talk about "what nature can do on its own."

- Is it Biblical to think of God as "outside the system," only occasionally reaching in?
- **The truth is that God is the sustainer of the universe; it's by His will that every little atom continues to act in a regular, predictable way.**
- **Heb 1:3. Christ is "upholding the universe by his word of power."**
- **Acts 17:28. "In him, we live and move and have our being."**
- This is why science is possible!



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A corrective to the Deists: Providence

Matt 5:45 “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

~~Natural Causes~~
God’s providential
ordering &
sustaining of the
natural world



Special
Providence



Miracle



Hume and Witnesses:

Argument Against Believing in Miracles on the basis of witness testimony

$$p_{\text{miracles}} < p_{\text{error}}$$

“ Inferior.” When any one tells me, that he saw a dead Man restor’d to Life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this Person should either deceive or be deceiv’d, or that the Fact he relates should really have happen’d. I weigh the one Miracle against the other, and according to the Superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my Decision, and always reject the greater Miracle. If the Falshood of his Testimony would be more miraculous, than the Event, which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my Belief or Opinion.

“I would not believe such a thing even if it were told me by Cato himself.”

Hume's "Diminution" view and the jar of marbles

- N marbles in a jar
- 1 marble is a "earth marble"
- Witness randomly picks out a marble and reports what's on it
- How big would N have to be for you to disbelieve the witness who reports the earth marble?
- What if you have concerns about the witness' credibility?
- Hume says the "earth marble" is a miracle, and N is huge!



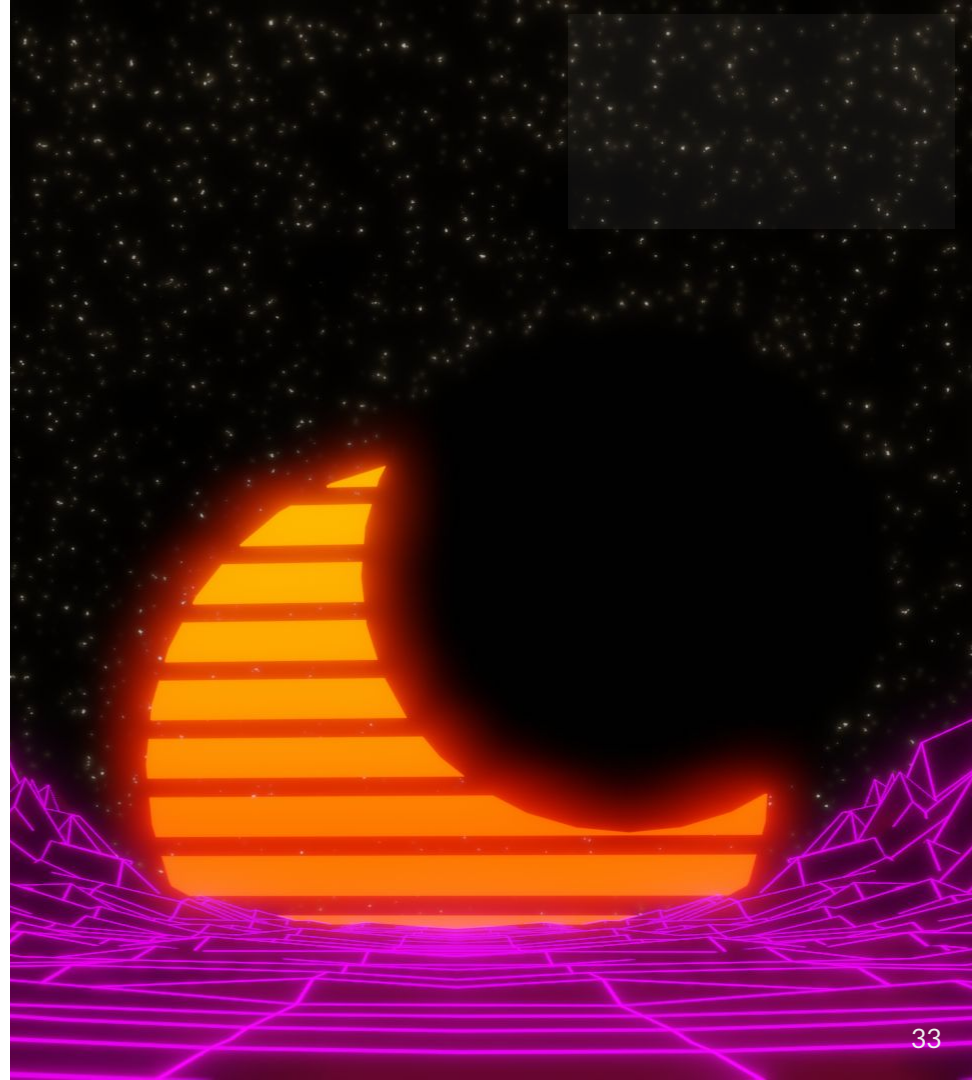
Answer:

$$p_{\text{miracles}} < p_{\text{error}}$$

- What if you have multiple, independent, reliable witnesses? (less likely for witnesses to be confused or deceptive)
- This is still treating the witnesses' claim as a natural accident. A miracle claim is not natural and random: We don't really know p_{miracles}

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Hume and Comparative Religion



Hume and Comparative Religion

Hume's final argument:

- Many conflicting religions claim miracles
- There's no good reason to accept some but not others (aside from prejudice)
- So either all the miracle claims are credible, or none of them are.

This argument only works if the different miracles are seen as confirming conflicting religious claims.



Hume and Comparative Religion

Hume's final argument:

- Many conflicting religions claim miracles
- There's no good reason to accept some but not others (aside from prejudice)
- So either all the miracle claims are credible, or none of them are.

**This is a good challenge for all of us.
Are we unduly skeptical toward
some miracle claims and credulous
toward others?**



Summary

Hume's arguments

- Miracles are violations of Natural Laws, and Natural Laws are (statistically) never violated.
 - **Answer: Is a miracle really a violation of Natural Law? (Draw the dotted line!)**
 - **Science is still possible because miracles are not capricious**
- There are never sufficient credible witnesses sufficient to establish a miracle. "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."
 - **Answer: This is still treating miracles as mere statistical anomalies.**
- Everyone is a skeptic about most miracle claims. Why not be skeptical about all of them?
 - **Answer: You actually have to weigh the witness testimony and evidence in each case.**

The “Scientific Argument” against Miracles

Premise 1: Natural forces cannot cause a dead person to be resurrected. (Science says so!)

Premise 2: There are only natural forces in play, if we’re doing science.

Conclusion: A dead person cannot be resurrected.



A useful exercise: UFO abductions

- What's the prior probability of a UFO abduction? Zero?
- How many witnesses are there to UFO abductions?
 - Are they independent?
 - Is it possible that they are confused? Deceptive?

