



truth. For example Newtonian physics was accepted throughout the West for over 200 years as **fact** and Newtonian laws were often referred to as **laws of nature**. But then Einstein came along and it was realised that Newton in many ways was wrong.

Einstein's theories are now widely accepted. However, this does not mean that these are now **the laws of nature**. They are simply nearer to the truth than the previous theories of Newton because science proceeds by giving versions of the truth, which each generation refines by demonstrating that previous versions are inadequate.

Now Hume's case against testimony to a miracle is that it undermines the **proof of the laws of nature**. However, this **proof** is clearly weakened if we now accept that our understanding of these laws can often be completely wrong.

**(4) A VIOLATION OF WHAT WE KNOW OF NATURE'S LAWS?**

Hume's definition of a miracle can of course be refined to **A Violation of what we know of Nature's Laws** and many believe that this definition offers a stronger argument against the possibility of accepting that miracles have occurred.

For example, it is now possible to accept that a certain event took place (John hovering with the seagulls) but that it was not a violation of any natural laws because it is now possible to argue that John hovering in the sky is in fact governed by **a law of nature which we have not yet discovered**. And so, when something extraordinary happens there is no need to describe it as a miracle. Instead, we simply need to say that if our present

argued that the argument against a supernatural and miraculous cause for life has collapsed because if repetition of **similar** events is the key to our understanding of the past then a super-naturalist could argue that a belief in a miraculous cause for life is also based on a repeated observation of similar events. For example, all present observational evidence indicates that the non-living never produces the living and so in short, repetition in the present gives us a firm basis for believing that life on this earth was not spontaneously generated but was miraculously caused by Divine life (God).

(4) The argument therefore is that the principle of **repeatability**, which is used to dismiss miracles actually ends up supporting the miraculous because to use Hume's terms we have **uniform experience** to base a belief in the miraculous origin of life.

**(3) A VIOLATION OF THE LAWS OF NATURE?**

Hume's definition of a miracle is that it is a **Violation of a Natural Law**. However, if an adequate account of natural law cannot be given then it wouldn't be possible to say that an apparent event had violated them. The problem is that Hume seems to assume that we have an adequate knowledge of these laws, that this knowledge is secure and cannot be shown to be false.

However, it is clear that scientific knowledge is not secure and is simply our current version of the

understanding of the laws of nature do not explain it then it simply means that we have yet to discover the law which allows for this event.

However, Richard Swinburne ("Miracles and Laws of Nature", in Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, pages 424-429) argues that on occasions the best explanation of an event is that it actually violates a law of nature and that it isn't simply a case of not having yet discovered the law. For example, if a man (like John) were to levitate it would be more economical to describe this as a violation of the law of gravity because if we say that this event can still be explained in terms of some law of nature then we will obviously have to revise all our theories about natural law and this would play havoc with a vast amount of scientific theory (See Occam's Razor page 8).



**(5) HUME'S DEFINITION IS WRONG?**

Some critics of Hume have maintained that his definition of a **miracle** is incorrect and that all of his key criticisms can be dismissed if we simply adopt a different one. Here are some of these different definitions:

(a) A miracle is a change for the better that can take place in a person in even the most unlikely situation.  
 (b) A miracle is an event or occurrence, which the believer considers to have religious significance, even though it is not in fact due to a creator God.



(c) A miracle is an event caused by the action of an everlasting or timeless God. The event is either in accordance with the normal laws of nature, or else brought about by a human being, in which case God will be the primary cause whilst the person will be the secondary cause.

**For a full explanation of these different definitions read Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God* (HarperCollins, 1990), pages 175-183.**

**(6) HUME AND TESTIMONY**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was much debate about whether the **testimony** of the Apostles to the resurrection of Jesus was overwhelming evidence that Christianity was true and all other religions false. For example, Thomas Sherlock (Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection 1729) argued that the testimony of the Apostles was sufficient to establish the resurrection of Jesus as a historical fact and that this miracle was designed to show the superiority of the Christian religion. Now Hume's response was to argue that:

(a) The miracles in different religions cancel each other out.

(b) Testimony to a miracle can never be a proof (**unless the falsehood of this testimony would be more miraculous than the event which is being related**) because a weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger one, i.e. the **proof** of a testimony will be either outweighed or matched by the **proof** of the laws of nature.

**RESPONSE**

(1) Richard Swinburne ("Miracles", *Philosophical Quarterly* 18, 1968) makes the point that miracles apparently occurring in different religions do not necessarily cancel each other out for it could be equally argued that evidence of a miracle in one religion is only evidence **against** the miracles occurring in others.

(2) Others have pointed out that today (unlike the 18<sup>th</sup> century) there is within most religions a pluralistic approach, which accepts that the same God is being worshipped and that God will occasionally perform miracles within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism etc. In other words there is no need to see each religion as making competing claims to be the Truth and