

## Philosophical Perspectives: Third Paper Topics 2

*Now with miracles!*

4 March, 2006

Write a five page paper on one of the following topics. Papers are due by 1pm on Friday, 10 March. On the fourth of March, I added topics on miracles. They start with number six. Good luck!

1. Suppose someone said, “Malebranche and Hume basically agree that neither human reason nor the senses can tell us how causes produce effects; they only disagree about whether this fact gives us reason to believe in God, whose omnipotent power does offer an explanation.” Why would someone say that? Explain Hume’s best reason for disagreeing with Malebranche’s claim about God.<sup>1</sup> How might Malebranche reply? What might Hume say in response? Which one has the superior position?
2. According to Hume, the term “cause” may be defined as “*an object, followed by another, and where all the objects, similar to the first, are followed by objects similar to the second.*”<sup>2</sup> That is not what most of us mean by “cause.” What seems to be missing from Hume’s definition? How would Hume defend his definition? Does Hume show that his definition of cause is equivalent to our ordinary meaning? What do you think: is this an acceptable definition of “cause?”
3. Bishop Bramhall’s second proof of liberty drawn from reason (§14, pp. 4–5) contains two arguments.
  - a) One argument is that laws would be unjust if the will were causally determined: “rewards and punishments” are “undeserved if there be no liberty” and the laws would “prohibit that which a man cannot possibly shun.”

---

<sup>1</sup>See Hume, paragraphs 21–25 of §7, part 1, pp. 141–3.

<sup>2</sup>Hume, §7, par. 29 (second to last paragraph), p. 146.

- b) The other argument is that it would be pointless to make provisions for the future if everything is causally determined: “all consultations [making plans] are vain if everything be either necessary or impossible ... in vain we labour, in vain we study, in vain we take physic [medicine], in vain we have tutors to instruct us, if all things come to pass alike, whether we sleep or wake, whether we be idle or industrious, by unalterable necessity.”

Explain *one* of these arguments. How would someone who holds that our behavior is causally determined, like Hobbes or Hume, reply to the argument? What would Bramhall say in response? What do you think: would the causal determination of the will make punishment unjust or providing for the future pointless?

4. Bramhall points out that we would not hold Nathana responsible for hitting Sean if her arm was moved by a stronger person. He argues that the case is the same if one person controls another's will. If Lucretia is given potions that make her want to satisfy Tarquin's lust, she is no more responsible for doing so than if she had been ravished by force (§20, pp. 9–10). Why does this pose a problem for Hobbes's claim that “a free agent is he that can do if he will and forbear if he will” (§33, p. 39).<sup>3</sup> How might someone like Hobbes or Hume respond to this objection? How might Bramhall reply? What do you think: has Bramhall found a problem with this definition?
5. Suppose someone said “I agree with Hume that we say people do things because they were motivated to do them: they get lunch because they are hungry, go to class because they want to learn, and so on. But I don't think that their behavior is causally *determined*. After all, I can both want to stay in class and want to go to lunch at the same time. When I choose to stay in class, it's my choice that determines what I do, not these competing desires.” Explain that objection to Hume's position. How might Hume respond to this objection? How would the person raising the objection reply? What do you think?
6. Suppose someone said “Hume's claim that there is always ‘a uniform experience against every miraculous event’ assumes his con-

---

<sup>3</sup>See also Hume, §8, par. 23 (third to last paragraph of part 1), p. 159.

clusion that no one really witnesses a miracle.<sup>4</sup> What does that mean and why might someone think it? How might someone defending Hume respond? How would the objector reply? What do you think, did Hume simply assert the conclusion his argument was supposed to establish?

7. Suppose someone said “Hume’s definition of a miracle makes his arguments irrelevant. Laws of nature concern relations among natural events like ‘the cue ball hits the eight ball’ and ‘the eight ball moves’. But the miracles people believe involve *supernatural* causes of natural events, such as ‘God wills that Jesus rise from the dead’ and ‘Jesus rises from the dead.’” Why might someone think that is an objection to Hume’s claims about miracles? How might someone defending Hume respond? How would the objector reply? What do you think, are Hume’s arguments irrelevant to the most widely accepted miracles?
8. Suppose someone said “if we accepted Hume’s arguments about miracles we would never believe reported observations that are inconsistent with what we take to be the laws of nature and scientific progress would halt in its tracks.” Why might someone think that shows Hume’s position is objectionable? How might someone defending Hume respond? How might the objector reply? What do you think, are Hume’s rules for judging miracles inconsistent with scientific progress?
9. What was Hume trying to do in Part 1 of §10, “Of Miracles”? Some people think he was trying to show that it is impossible to have good enough reason to believe anyone’s testimony to have witnessed a miracle. Others think he was trying to establish a standard for determining whether to believe testimony about miracles. These others think that Hume only tried to dismiss particular reports of miracles, in Part 2 of §10, rather than trying to show that it could never make sense to believe a reported miracle. Give what you regard as the best evidence in favor of each interpretation. Explain how each side would respond to the other’s evidence. Draw your own conclusion: what do you think Hume was trying to do?

---

<sup>4</sup>See Hume §10, par. 23 (second to last paragraph of part 1), p. 173.