

Dr. James S. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 13, Miracles Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 13, Miracles, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Jim Spiegel's Philosophy of Religion session focuses on the concept of miracles, a central tenet of Christian belief exemplified by the resurrection of Jesus. The discussion distinguishes between contingency and violation miracles before examining David Hume's influential critique against believing in miracles. **Hume's arguments, both metaphysical and epistemological, suggest miracles are either impossible or never rationally justifiable.** Spiegel counters these objections by highlighting issues with Hume's reasoning, such as its circularity, over-reliance on probability versus evidence, and internal inconsistencies. **The session further addresses secondary arguments by Hume, including the lack of educated witnesses and the prevalence of miracle claims in other religions.** Spiegel refutes these points by citing examples of credible testimonies and suggesting alternative explanations for miracles in different contexts, including the possibility of counterfeit miracles.

2. 21 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 13 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology → Apologetics → Philosophy of Religion).



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3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 13, Miracles

Briefing Document: Philosophy of Religion - Miracles

Overview: This document summarizes the main themes and arguments presented by Dr. Jim Spiegel in Session 13 of his Philosophy of Religion course, focusing on the concept of miracles. The session explores the significance of miracles within the Christian worldview, distinguishes between different types of miracles, and critically examines David Hume's influential arguments against the belief in miracles.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. The Centrality of Miracles in the Christian Worldview:

- Spiegel emphasizes that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the "central and key claim of the Christian worldview" and "the most important miracle in all of human history."
- Belief in miracles extends beyond the resurrection to include numerous events described in the Old and New Testaments, such as the parting of the Red Sea, healings, and Jesus turning water into wine.
- Orthodox Christians "must affirm that miracles are real, that they have happened, and most Christians would say that they continue to happen today."

2. Defining and Categorizing Miracles:

- Spiegel defines a miracle as a "special divine act where God performs a sort of wonder that may or may not be an exception to or a contradiction of a law of nature."
- He distinguishes between two categories of miracles:
- **Contingency Miracles:** These result from an "extraordinary coincidence of a constellation of events" that are highly improbable but do not necessarily violate natural laws. He uses the example of Bill's job application to illustrate this point.
- **Violation Miracles:** These involve an "apparent violation of a law of nature," such as spontaneous recovery from a terminal illness or a person surviving a seemingly fatal fall unharmed.

3. David Hume's Critique of Miracles:

- Spiegel identifies David Hume as the "most significant critic of miracles in philosophical history," focusing on his argument presented in "An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding."
- He outlines two interpretations of Hume's argument:
- **The Metaphysical Argument (Hard Interpretation):** This interpretation posits that miracles are "impossible in principle" because they are defined as violations of the "unalterably uniform" laws of nature. Spiegel critiques this as a "circular argument" that "assumes what it purports to prove." He states, "It's just another way of saying that miracles cannot occur, to say that the laws of nature are unalterably uniform."
- **The Epistemological Argument (Soft Interpretation):** This interpretation argues that while miracles might be possible, it is "never rationally justified to believe that a miracle has taken place." The argument proceeds as follows:
 1. A miracle is a rare occurrence.
 2. Natural law describes a regular occurrence.
 3. The evidence for the regular is always greater than that for the rare.
 4. Wise people base their beliefs on the greater evidence.
 5. Therefore, wise people should never believe in miracles. Spiegel notes the significant implications of this argument for religious belief, stating that it "certainly would gut the Christian faith because it would mean the resurrection of Christ is something we should not believe in."

4. Responses and Criticisms of Hume's Argument:

- Spiegel presents several counterarguments to Hume's epistemological critique:
- **Probability vs. Evidence:** He argues that Hume's argument deals only in probabilities and neglects the importance of evidence. He uses examples like rolling five of a kind in Yahtzee and the 9/11 terrorist attacks to illustrate that highly improbable events can have "strong, overwhelming evidence."
- **Hume's Critique Proves Too Much:** Spiegel contends that if it's always irrational to believe in the highly improbable, then we should not believe in well-

documented but statistically unlikely historical events like Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak.

- **Hume's Inconsistency:** Spiegel points out an irony in Hume's philosophy, noting that elsewhere he "argues that we can never know that nature is uniform," thus undermining the very laws of nature he appeals to against miracles. He calls this one of the "howlers in the history of philosophy."

5. Addressing Other Objections to Miracles:

- **Insufficient Testimony from Intelligent People:** Spiegel counters this by highlighting the testimony of numerous "intelligent and highly educated people" who have attested to miracles, citing the Apostle Paul and contemporary scholars like Craig Keener, whose "two-volume text on miracles is now the standard."
- **Miracle Claims Among the Ignorant and Uncivilized:** Spiegel argues that the prevalence of miracle claims in such contexts does not invalidate genuine miracles. He emphasizes that "the question is not who believes that certain miracles have occurred, but what is the objective evidence for these claims?"
- **Conflicting Miracle Claims in Rival Religions:** Spiegel suggests several possibilities to address this objection: (1) miracle claims in some religions may be false, while those in others are reliable; (2) the one true God might be responsible for miracles in various religious contexts (e.g., visions of Christ in the Muslim world); (3) some seemingly miraculous events could be the result of "demonic activity" or "counterfeit miracles," referencing biblical precedent and sharing an anecdote about a converted occult practitioner.

Key Quotes:

- "The central and key claim of the Christian worldview is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He was dead, buried, and on the third day, he rose, and that's a miracle. That's the most important miracle in all of human history."
- "Naturalists challenge these claims and maintain that either miracles are impossible or that, in any case, one is never rationally justified to believe that a miracle has taken place, even if miracles are, in principle, possible."
- "A miracle is a special divine act where God performs a sort of wonder that may or may not be an exception to or a contradiction of a law of nature."
- "The second premise [of the hard interpretation of Hume] really assumes the truth of the conclusion. It's just another way of saying that miracles cannot occur,

to say that the laws of nature are unalterably uniform. So, it's a circular argument."

- "Wise people should never believe in miracles." (Hume's conclusion in the soft interpretation)
- "The evidence for what is regular is always greater than that for what is rare." (Hume's premise)
- "If probability is all that matters, then we should never believe that that ever happens [highly improbable events with strong evidence]."
- "Elsewhere in his inquiry concerning human understanding, he argues that we can never know that nature is uniform. We can't know that the future will resemble the past. So, there, he's calling into question our belief in the laws of nature, which is ironic because he's appealing to the laws of nature in this context to try to undermine belief in miracles."
- "Keener's recent two-volume text on miracles is now the standard. It's the standard go-to scholarly volume or volume on miracles, which I highly recommend."
- "There is the possibility of counterfeit miracles."

Conclusion:

Dr. Spiegel's lecture provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophical considerations surrounding miracles, particularly within a Christian framework. He highlights the foundational role of miracles in Christian belief and carefully dissects David Hume's influential critique. By offering counterarguments focusing on the importance of evidence, the problem of Hume's sweeping generalizations about probability, and inconsistencies within his own philosophical system, Spiegel defends the rationality of believing in miracles. He also addresses common objections related to the nature of testimony and conflicting religious claims, offering nuanced perspectives that acknowledge the complexity of the issue while affirming the possibility and reality of divine intervention in the world.

4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 13, Miracles

Miracles: A Study Guide

Key Concepts:

- **Miracle:** A special divine act where God performs a wonder that may or may not be an exception to or a contradiction of a law of nature.
- **Contingency Miracle:** A miracle that results from an extraordinary coincidence of a constellation of events without necessarily violating a law of nature.
- **Violation Miracle:** A miracle that results from an apparent violation of a law of nature.
- **Naturalism:** The philosophical belief that only natural laws and forces operate in the world, excluding supernatural or spiritual explanations.
- **David Hume:** An influential Scottish philosopher who presented a significant critique against the belief in miracles in his "Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding."
- **Metaphysical Argument (Hard Interpretation of Hume):** The view that miracles are impossible in principle because they are defined as violations of the unalterably uniform laws of nature, making the concept contradictory.
- **Epistemological Argument (Soft Interpretation of Hume):** The view that even if miracles are possible, one is never rationally justified in believing that a miracle has occurred due to the overwhelming evidence for the regularity of natural laws compared to the rarity of miracles.
- **Uniformity of Nature:** The principle that the laws of nature are consistent and will operate in the future as they have in the past. Hume himself questioned our ability to know this principle definitively.
- **Testimony:** Evidence provided by individuals who claim to have witnessed an event, including miracles. Hume argued that testimony for miracles is generally insufficient.

- **Rival Religious Systems:** Different religions that often have their own accounts of miracles, which Hume argued undermine the credibility of any specific religious tradition's miracle claims.
- **Counterfeit Miracles:** Events that may appear miraculous but are attributed to non-divine supernatural forces, such as demonic activity.

Short-Answer Quiz:

1. What is the central miracle claim of the Christian worldview, and why is it considered so important within the faith?
2. Explain the distinction between a contingency miracle and a violation miracle, providing a brief example of each based on the provided text.
3. According to the "hard interpretation" of David Hume's argument against miracles, why are miracles considered impossible? What is the primary criticism of this argument?
4. Describe the core premise of the "soft interpretation" of Hume's argument regarding belief in miracles. What is the main conclusion of this epistemological argument?
5. What is one of the primary criticisms discussed in the text against Hume's argument that we should never believe in miracles due to their improbability? Provide an example used in the text to support this criticism.
6. How does the text explain the inconsistency in Hume's own philosophical views regarding the laws of nature and his argument against miracles?
7. What is Hume's argument regarding the insufficient number of intelligent and educated people testifying to miracles, and how does the text respond to this claim?
8. Explain Hume's argument that miracle claims in rival religious systems undermine one another. What are two counterarguments presented in the text?
9. What is the concept of "counterfeit miracles" discussed in the text, and what example is used to illustrate this idea?
10. How does the text ultimately assess the rationality of believing in miracles in light of the arguments presented?

Answer Key:

1. The central miracle claim of Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is considered the most important miracle because it is at the core of the Christian faith, validating Jesus' claims and offering hope for eternal life.
2. A contingency miracle results from an unlikely combination of natural events, like Bill's job application reaching the bank in an improbable way without violating natural laws. A violation miracle involves an apparent breaking of a natural law, such as a sudden recovery from a terminal illness.
3. According to the hard interpretation, miracles are impossible because they are defined as violations of the laws of nature, and these laws are considered unalterably uniform with no exceptions. The primary criticism is that this argument is circular, as the premise assumes the conclusion that miracles cannot occur.
4. The soft interpretation of Hume argues that while miracles might be possible in principle, we are never rationally justified in believing they have occurred. This is because the evidence for the regularity of natural laws is always greater than the evidence for the rare occurrence of miracles.
5. One primary criticism is that Hume's argument deals only in probabilities, not evidence. The example of the 9/11 terrorist attacks illustrates that highly improbable events with overwhelming evidence should be believed despite their low probability.
6. The text points out that elsewhere in his "Inquiry," Hume argues that we can never truly know that nature is uniform or that the future will resemble the past. This is inconsistent because his argument against miracles relies on the assumption of the reliability and uniformity of natural laws.
7. Hume argued that there is an insufficient number of intelligent and educated people who have testified to the occurrence of miracles, which should make us doubt them. The response is that many intelligent and highly educated individuals, such as the Apostle Paul and scholar Craig Keener, have testified to and investigated miracles.
8. Hume argued that since different religions make conflicting miracle claims, these claims essentially cancel each other out, leading to the conclusion that no religious miracle claims should be believed. Counterarguments include the possibility that one religion's claims are true while others are false, or that the

same God might be responsible for seemingly miraculous events in different religious contexts.

9. Counterfeit miracles are events that might appear to be miraculous but are actually produced by non-divine supernatural forces, such as Satanic power. The example provided is the story of the dead dog being seemingly brought back to life by an occult practitioner.
10. The text suggests that while Hume raises important questions, his arguments are ultimately flawed. The existence of overwhelming evidence for improbable events and the testimony of credible witnesses can provide rational grounds for believing in certain miracles, and the possibility of contingency miracles also exists.

Essay Format Questions:

1. Compare and contrast the "hard" and "soft" interpretations of David Hume's argument against miracles. Which interpretation do you find more compelling, and why?
2. Evaluate the criticisms presented in the text against David Hume's epistemological argument against believing in miracles. Which criticism do you believe is the strongest, and how effectively does it counter Hume's position?
3. Discuss the significance of the distinction between contingency miracles and violation miracles in debates about the rationality of belief in the supernatural. Can contingency miracles offer a less controversial basis for such belief?
4. Explore the implications of rival religious systems making miracle claims for the overall credibility of miracles. How might one respond to the challenge that inconsistent miracle claims undermine all such claims?
5. Analyze the role of testimony in establishing the occurrence of miracles. What factors should be considered when evaluating the credibility of miracle claims based on eyewitness accounts?

5. FAQs on Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 13, Miracles, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions on Miracles

1. What is the central miracle within the Christian worldview, and why is the belief in miracles important for Christians?

The central and key claim of the Christian worldview is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Christians believe that Jesus was dead, buried, and rose again on the third day. This event is considered the most important miracle in human history and sits at the core of the Christian faith. Belief in miracles is essential for orthodox Christians, as it encompasses not only the resurrection but also the numerous miracles described in both the Old and New Testaments, including healings, nature-defying acts, and the Exodus. Many Christians also believe that miracles continue to occur today.

2. What distinction does the source draw between different categories or kinds of miracles?

The source distinguishes between two categories of miracles: contingency miracles and violation miracles. Contingency miracles result from an extraordinary and seemingly coincidental constellation of natural events that are highly improbable but do not violate any laws of nature. The example of Bill's job application being delivered through a series of unlikely natural occurrences illustrates this. Violation miracles, on the other hand, involve an apparent suspension or contradiction of the laws of nature, such as spontaneous recovery from a terminal illness or a person surviving a fall from a great height without injury.

3. Who is presented as the most significant philosophical critic of miracles, and what are the two main interpretations of his argument?

David Hume is presented as the most significant philosophical critic of miracles. His argument, found in "An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding," has been interpreted in two main ways: the metaphysical argument (or hard interpretation) and the epistemological argument (or soft interpretation). The metaphysical argument posits that miracles are impossible in principle because they are defined as violations of the laws of nature, which are considered unalterably uniform and without exception. The epistemological argument concedes that miracles might be possible but argues that it is never rational to believe that one has occurred due to their rarity compared to the regularity of natural laws.

4. What is the main flaw identified in the "hard interpretation" of Hume's argument against miracles?

The main flaw identified in the hard interpretation of Hume's argument is that it is considered circular. The premise that the laws of nature are unalterably uniform essentially assumes the conclusion that miracles, defined as violations of these laws, cannot occur. In other words, the argument presupposes what it seeks to prove, making it logically invalid.

5. What is the central premise of the "soft interpretation" of Hume's argument, and what are the main counterarguments presented against it in the source?

The central premise of the soft interpretation of Hume's argument is that because miracles are rare occurrences and natural laws describe regular occurrences, the evidence for what is regular will always outweigh the evidence for what is rare. Therefore, wise people should never believe in miracles. The source presents several counterarguments:

- **Probability vs. Evidence:** Hume's argument deals only in probabilities, not evidence. Highly improbable events, such as rolling five of a kind in Yahtzee or the events of 9/11, can have overwhelming evidence supporting them.
- **Proves Too Much:** If it's always irrational to believe in the highly improbable, then we should not believe in well-documented but statistically unlikely historical events, like Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak, despite the strong evidence for them.
- **Inconsistency with Hume's Own Principles:** Elsewhere in his work, Hume argues that we can never know that nature is uniform or that the future will resemble the past, which contradicts his appeal to the uniformity of natural law to undermine belief in miracles.

6. What are some of the secondary arguments Hume offers against belief in miracles, and how does the source respond to them?

Hume offers several secondary arguments against belief in miracles:

- **Insufficient Testimony from the Educated:** Hume argues that throughout history, not enough intelligent, educated people have testified to miracles. The response is that many intelligent and highly educated individuals, such as the Apostle Paul, scholar Craig Keener, and contemporary physicians, have testified to the reality of miracles. Keener's extensive research is cited as a significant scholarly resource.

- **Miracle Claims Among the Ignorant:** Hume suggests that the prevalence of miracle claims among the ignorant and uncivilized undermines their credibility. The response is that the source of a belief is less important than the objective evidence for it. Many true beliefs are also held by those considered ignorant.
- **Conflicting Miracle Claims in Rival Religions:** Hume argues that miracle claims in different religions contradict and thus undermine each other. The response is that it is possible that the miracle claims of some religions are false, while others (or even specific claims within different religions) might be true, potentially originating from the same God or even from counterfeit (demonic) sources.

7. How does the source address the issue of conflicting miracle claims from different religious traditions?

The source addresses conflicting miracle claims from different religious traditions by suggesting several possibilities. First, it posits that the miracle claims of some religions may be false, while the claims of another religion might be reliable. Second, it suggests that the one true God could be responsible for miracles occurring even within different religious contexts, perhaps to lead people to the truth. The example of Muslims having visions of Christ is given. Finally, the source introduces the concept of counterfeit miracles, suggesting that some seemingly miraculous events could be the result of demonic activity, as illustrated by the story of the occult practitioner and the dead dog, drawing parallels to biblical accounts of Moses and Pharaoh's magicians.

8. What implications does the discussion of miracles have for religious belief, particularly for Christianity?

The discussion of miracles has significant implications for religious belief. For Christianity, in particular, the belief in miracles is foundational, with the resurrection of Jesus Christ being the central tenet. If miracles are deemed impossible or if belief in them is considered irrational, it would profoundly undermine the core claims of Christianity. The source highlights the challenges posed by philosophical critiques like Hume's but also offers responses that aim to defend the rationality and plausibility of believing in miracles, emphasizing the importance of evidence and distinguishing between probability and actuality. The discussion also underscores the need for discernment regarding miracle claims from various sources, including different religions and the possibility of supernatural deception.