too, and doesn't like it. But in the end, there is something different about Vinnie that curbs our sympathy. He doesn't wash his hands when he goes to the bathroom. So the moral of the story? It's three morals, but they all amount to one: Be loyal. It's important. Don't be weak-willed. It will lead you to a bad end. And wash your hands when you go to the bathroom . . . thoroughly; it says more about your character than you may realize.

11

Coke into Pepsi: The Miracle in *Pulp Fiction*

KEITH ALLEN KORCZ

JULES: Don't do that! Don't you fuckin' do that! Don't blow this shit off! What just happened was a fuckin' miracle![1]

—*Pulp Fiction*

So says Jules Winnfield shortly after a man fires six shots point blank from his hand cannon at Jules and his partner Vincent Vega, missing with every shot. But is this experience enough to conclude that, as Vincent puts it, "God came down from heaven and stopped the bullets"? True, it results in a sharp change in Jules's outlook, as he decides to give up his life as an enforcer for crime boss Marsellus Wallace and just walk the earth, "like Caine in *Kung Fu*," "tryin' real hard to be a shepherd." But there have been too many failed predictions from self-proclaimed prophets, too many pious frauds and too many cult suicides to accept just any report of a miracle at face value.[2] Those who *want* to believe find it all too easy. But what about those of us with a more philosophical bent who instead want to *know*? What sort of evidence should we demand before accepting a supposed miracle as a good enough reason, all on its own, to believe in the existence of a particular god?

[1] All dialogue quotes from *Pulp Fiction* are from Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction: A Quentin Tarantino Screenplay* (New York: Hyperion, 1994).

[2] For a fascinating look at some of these, I'd recommend Joe Nickell's *Looking for a Miracle* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1993).

It's a Freak

By far the most famous philosophical attempt to answer this question was written by the great Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776).[3] The main point of his reasoning is pretty straightforward. Suppose a generally reliable and trustworthy friend were to tell you that they left their DVD of *Pulp Fiction* in your living room. Would you believe them? Presumably, yes. This sort of thing happens all the time. Now suppose that your friend were to tell you that an aging boxer was in the process of punching out a leather-clad man named "The Gimp" in your living room. Would you believe him? Now, I don't know what goes on in *your* living room, but I am presuming that this sort of event would be pretty unusual, and that you would assume that your friend was just kidding (at best) or had been conversing a bit too much with Choco the madman (at worst). Finally, imagine what would happen if Mia were to tell her husband, crime boss Marsellus, that she was pregnant, but the baby is definitely not his or that of any other human, contrary to the laws of nature. Rather, she claims that the baby came from God. What would Marsellus do? I suspect that Marsellus would not believe her. In fact, I suspect that Mia and whoever he suspected of being Mia's partner would quickly become grease spots. "No marriage counselor, no trial separation—fuckin' divorced" as Jules's friend Jimmie says in another context. Tony Rocky Horror would have gotten off easy by comparison. If you were Marsellus, would you believe her?

It would be easier to believe that an aging boxer was punching out The Gimp in your living room. However unlikely this is, at least it wouldn't involve the suspension of a law of nature. And this is Hume's point: events contrary to what we take to be well-established laws of nature are about as unlikely as things get.

You are more likely to win two lotteries and then get struck by lightning and survive, all within the space of a few minutes, than you are to witness a suspension of a law of nature. Why is this? It's because of all the evidence we have that laws of nature

[3] David Hume, "Of Miracles," *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999

do not get suspended. Even the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office will not patent a purported perpetual motion machine.[4] They won't do this because they know that a perpetual motion machine would violate a law of nature, hence that such a device can't possibly work. A lot of people have tried, and all of them have failed.

We generally take something to be a law of nature because (a) it has been very carefully and repeatedly tested in controlled conditions and found never to be violated and (b) claims that it has been violated have been found to rest on mistakes or outright fraud. On the basis of these repeated observations, we conclude that this is how nature operates. These are not legal laws which, when violated, may lead to a cold shower in a county jail. Rather, they are observed regularities with regard to how things work in nature. Unlike legal laws, one cannot choose to create or to violate them. The kind of scientific testing involved is far more than any one person could do in a lifetime. The evidence, both testimony and physical evidence,[5] supporting the claim that something is a law of nature is so overwhelming that we know that reports of its suspension are almost certainly mistaken.

Now, being shot at six times without being hit, as happened to Jules and Vincent, need not involve a suspension of a law of nature. Vincent realizes this when he says,

> Ever seen that show *Cops*? I was watchin' it once and this cop was on it who was talkin' about this time he got into this gun fight with this guy in a hallway. He unloads on this guy and he doesn't hit nothin'. And these guys were in a hallway. It's a freak, but it happens.

It's merely a lucky coincidence. Should lucky coincidences be good enough evidence to believe that a god exists? I don't think so. Suppose the odds are one in a billion that some lucky coincidence will happen to someone today. So, it's pretty unlikely

[4] United States Patent and Trademark Office, *Manual of Patent Examining Procedure (MPEP), Eighth Edition*, August 2001, Latest Revision August 2006, subsection706.03(a), http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/pac/mpep/documents/0700_706_03_a.htm#sect706.03a, accessed 4/12/07.

[5] Hume's argument is limited to mere testimony, but can be extended to include physical evidence.

that it will happen to you. But given six billion people in the world, it should happen six times today. Is this good evidence that the gods of these six people exist? If a cat (or a Samoan) falls four stories, through a greenhouse, and survives, the news reports it as a miracle. If a cat falls four stories, through a greenhouse, and dies, the news doesn't report it at all. But if you drop enough cats out of enough windows, some are going to survive. A fortunate coincidence is not necessarily a miracle.

Making the Impossible Possible

Hume recognizes, with Vincent, that you need more than a lucky coincidence to show that a god exists. Instead, you need something only a god could do, such as suspend a law of nature. If a law of nature gets suspended, you know you are more than just lucky. Thus, we can think of a miracle as a suspension of a law of nature brought about by some supernatural being.

Vincent seems to have a sense of this point when, in response to a question from Jules in the coffee shop, he says that an act of God is "when God makes the impossible possible. And I'm sorry, Jules, but I don't think what happened this morning qualifies." Jules replies:

> Don't you see, Vince, that shit don't matter. You're judging this thing the wrong way. It's not about *what*. It could be God stopped the bullets, he changed Coke into Pepsi, he found my fuckin' car keys. You don't judge shit like this based on merit. Whether or not what we experienced was an according-to-Hoyle miracle is insignificant. What is significant is I felt God's touch. God got involved.

Hume agrees with Jules on one point: the event does not need to be dramatic for it to be a miracle. As Hume puts it:

> A miracle may either be discoverable by men or not. This alters not its nature and essence. The raising of a house or a ship into the air is a visible miracle. The raising of a feather, when the wind wants ever so little of a force requisite for that purpose, is as real a miracle, though not so sensible with regard to us.[6]

[6] Hume, "On Miracles," p. 173n23.

But notice that Jules's argument now has shifted. The argument is not now that a miracle occurred, and that this is good evidence that God exists. Rather, the argument is that the apparent miracle has occasioned a feeling in Jules that God has touched him. But we won't pursue this issue here.[7] I mention it because it's not uncommon for a person to present one argument and, in response to objections to it, shift to another without realizing that they have done so.

A Moment of Clarity?

Jules's experience doesn't seem to count as a miracle because it's apparently merely a coincidence that he was not shot. But what about Hume's argument? Hume claims that it's probably never going to be reasonable to believe that a genuine miracle has occurred because a genuine miracle involves a suspension of the laws of nature, and claims that laws of nature have been suspended have almost invariably been shown to be mistaken. As Hume says, when faced with a person claiming to have seen a miracle, "I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened."[8] Hume thinks it's clear that it's always going to be more likely, based on our past experience with such claims, that the person was mistaken than that a law of nature was actually suspended.

Philosophers have disagreed about whether Hume is right. Here are some of the more common reasons given for thinking that Hume was mistaken.

There have been times when scientists thought that something was a law of nature but discovered that they were mistaken. If Hume is right, how could this be? How can we ever discover that we were mistaken about what we thought was a law of nature?

Well, there are a couple of ways we can imagine this happening. One way involves a wholesale rejection of a law of

[7] An argument for the existence of God along these lines has been defended by the contemporary philosopher Alvin Plantinga in Part Three of his book *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[8] Hume, "On Miracles," p. 174.

nature and all, or virtually all, of the observations which support it. Someone, for example, might argue that there is nothing like a law of gravity, and all of our apparent experiences of things (including Samoans) falling down rather than up, let's say, were really hallucinations. Obviously, this is never going to happen. Mistakes about the laws of nature tend not to be this dramatic. But even if this did happen, one would have to be able to describe repeatable experiments showing that it were so for it to be reasonable to believe. For instance, perhaps one could show that it were true by explaining the mechanism that caused the hallucination, and then showing how anyone could come to see how things really are by being given an antidote to whatever is causing the hallucination. In this case, the quality of the evidence for the claim that we hallucinated might well outweigh the quantity of evidence we have that something like gravity is at work. I don't think this is at odds with the spirit of Hume's argument. After all, we are simply weighing the evidence, and taking into account its quantity and quality, as Hume suggests.[9]

But revisions to laws of nature don't usually work this way nowadays. What is more likely to happen is that we discover that what we thought was a regularity throughout nature is only a regularity in less than extreme conditions. Scientists do not reject a law of nature by discovering situations where the law ordinarily does hold, was suspended once or twice, but still holds. Rather, they discover new conditions under which what was thought to be a law never holds, and where this can be shown repeatedly.

Compare Jules's experiences with giving ladies foot massages. In Jules's view, "Foot massages don't mean shit." Vincent continues:

Vincent: Have you ever given a foot massage?
Jules: Don't be tellin' me about foot massages. I'm the fuckin' foot master.
Vincent: Given a lot of 'em?
Jules: Shit yeah. I got my technique down man, I don't tickle or nothin'.

to the quality of testimony in "On

Vincent: Have you ever given a guy a foot massage?
Jules: Fuck you.

Jules interprets his past experiences with foot massages to apply to *all* foot massages, and Vincent realizes that this isn't so. It won't be so whenever it is a man rather than a woman being given a foot massage.

As with Jules, sometimes our past experiences don't tell us what will be the case in very different circumstances. For example, prior to 1919, let's suppose, our experience with light did not suggest that gravity would bend it. In 1919, an experiment is done that indicates that the gravitational field of the sun bends the light of distant stars such that, during an eclipse, we can see the shift in the apparent position of the star. This test, actually performed in 1919, was taken to be an important step in confirming Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, which predicted such a shift. It also helped overthrow some very long-standing views about the nature of our universe. But we don't take our previous-to-1919 experience with light to undermine the claim that light can be bent by gravity because our previous experience with light did not involve viewing light as it passed through such a strong gravitational field. The testimony we have that light here on Earth does not appear to bend outside of a very strong gravitational field does not undermine the testimony that light bends as it passes through a very strong gravitational field. It's not as if it were discovered that light sometimes bends in a strong gravitational field and sometimes does not, as would be the case with a miracle. Rather, it's that light always bends in a gravitational field, and this can be shown repeatedly.

If someone does an experiment showing how Coke can be spontaneously turned into Pepsi, we can ask how the experiment was done and try it for ourselves as often as we like. With enough careful observation, we can, if needed, revise our understanding of the laws of nature to account for what we observe. There is not a lot we can do, however, to determine whether water was turned into wine by God two thousand years ago. There is no way to check repeatedly to see whether he really did, and asking him to do it again so we can check tends not to work. Hume's point is not that it is impossible that miracles occur, but rather that the evidence against their occurrence is always going to be overwhelming

Zed Is Dead

Sometimes it's argued that if we have good reasons to believe that a god who performs miracles exists, then we shouldn't be at all surprised when people report having seen one. Rather than thinking it's unlikely that they are correct, we should expect that there is a good chance that they witnessed the real thing.

The problem here is that the appeal to miracles, all by itself, was supposed to be sufficient evidence to believe that a god exists. If we already need good reasons to believe that a god exists for the appeal to miracles to work, then we don't need the appeal to miracles at all.

But what if two hundred atheistic scientists witnessed an apparently miraculous, non-repeatable event? Or you witness one yourself? Shouldn't you then accept that a miracle has occurred?[10]

In a famous line, Hume says that a wise man "proportions his belief to the evidence."[11] So, I think Hume's answer to these questions would be "No." After all, what if, fifty years ago, two hundred atheistic scientists saw the Empire State building disappear? Then they would likely have thought it a miracle. Now we know it's just David Copperfield. When our ability to collect or evaluate the evidence is very limited, it still seems more reasonable to withhold judgment as to whether a miracle occurred than to accept something that appears highly unlikely.

No doubt Jules was strongly affected by his experience. Perhaps it will even change his life. Is this evidence that it was a miracle? Well, whether it was a miracle or not does not seem relevant to the effect on Jules. His belief that it was a miracle is causing the change, and it would do so whether or not his belief is correct.

Hume, with characteristic wit, concluded his essay by writing that, "The Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one."[12] That's a bold statement, but I think he was on to something.

[10] Richard Swinburne, "For the Possibility of Miracles," *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology, Fourth Edition*, edited by Louis P. Pojman (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003), p. 272.
[11] Hume, "On Miracles," p. 170.
[12] Hume, "On Miracles," p. 186.

12
Quentin Tarantino and the Ex-Convict's Dilemma

RICHARD GREENE

A common occurrence in most Quentin Tarantino films is what has come to be known as a "Mexican standoff." This refers to a situation in which two or more persons have weapons (usually firearms) pointed at one another, such that the persons are essentially paralyzed. They *can* act, but their doing so, no matter what they do, will likely result in either serious injury or death. I'm not going to use the term "Mexican standoff" in this chapter because (1) there is some question as to whether the term is racist in origin, and, more importantly for our purposes, (2) there may be a more apt description of the scenario as it appears in Tarantino's films. Instead, I'll use the term "ex-convict's dilemma."[1] I'll refer to any scenario involving an ex-convict's dilemma as an "ECDS."

In this chapter I'll argue that the ex-convict's dilemma is a special instance of what philosophers, economists, and decision theorists typically refer to as a "prisoner's dilemma." I'll further argue that the most popular solution to the prisoner's dilemma—the group rationality solution—cannot be applied to the ex-convict's dilemma. This, of course, shows that the solution under consideration is lacking; a good general solution to a philosophical puzzle or paradox ought to be applicable to all or nearly all instances of the phenomenon. Tarantino's frequent employment of the ex-convict's dilemma is interesting in that he

[1] I don't mean to suggest that only ex-convicts find themselves in these scenarios, but, at least in Tarantino films, ex-convicts tend to be involved.