

CONFIRMATION BIAS: MIRACLES IN THE LIGHT OF HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY

We must always seek to hold beliefs that have okay confirmation which means we must not let ourselves get stuck in a belief but always be open to ones that have better confirmation than the ones we have. While we cannot directly help what we believe we can do a lot about it indirectly. For example, we could read books that challenge our minds and thinking. We can only control our beliefs by seeking information and evidence. Act until you think - not act because you think.

Thought experiment

If seeds a hundred years old cannot grow and that is a scientific fact and you put them in a pot and one seed grows then if verified that is a clear instance of a miracle. But nobody cares. That shows that despite the pretence at caring about evidence people do not care. If evidence mattered the growing seed miracle would be regarded as important as one where somebody returns from the dead. It is not about the evidence but about wanting to believe a religious narrative. Even if miracles are evidence God cannot do them when human nature does not care what they are but only cares for what it can get out of them. There is no true respect for miracles even among believers.

Miracles are not treated as evidence at all and those who say they are are lying

The supporters of miracles declare they have happened and then claim to be unbiased. They are biased. They have got no tests done to see how reliable people are if they think they see a miracle. You need trials.

Even without this problem, believers would still be capable of seeing only what they want to see.

Psychologists know that our memory is schematic (page 68, 50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology). That knowledge is based on the fact that our memory does not record and reproduce what exactly happened, it reconstructs it (page 67, *ibid*). We might make an image similar to something we seen but it is not exactly the same. It will never be. Even if part of it is exactly the same, it may mean this is just a coincidence. It does not necessary prove that it is a reproduction. For example, the artist painting you from memory may only imagine that your hair is a particular shade of brown.

We know it too. We just like to forget it. We all can think of times when we could have sworn something happened a certain way until it was confirmed that it didn't happen that way.

Our memories we know are schematic. For example, we know from past experience that you don't run cars on milk. They run on petrol or diesel. A powerful example of schematic memory is the way stereotyping works.

A miracle is an action carried out by God that looks like magic. For example, the Virgin Mary enrobed in light appearing to a young girl. It is a miracle how she sees the Virgin and its a miracle how others who are there will see nothing.

A miracle believer has to agree with the following, "I believe miracles have happened. I can never prove them beyond all possible doubt. Belief is not knowledge - its based on probability. It is possible though unlikely that I am wrong to believe. It is likely that God did the miracles. It is less likely that the miracles were caused by some kind of unknown psychic force." Thus belief in miracles forces a person to be more open to belief in psychic power. But what if the believer does not believe in the claims of parapsychologists that psychic forces exist? The believer only believes - he is not totally sure. So he has to admit the possibility of being wrong. He admits it by the mere fact that says he believes.

But surely the unbeliever in miracles is no better? The unbeliever just believes the other person's beliefs are wrong. He is not 100% sure either and must admit the possibility that psychic powers and forces exist. True. But he is inclined more to scepticism than the believer. Thus the possibility for him is smaller.

The sceptic of miracles does not say they don't happen but that they are not believable. She says they are suspicious at best and false at worst.

Believers will jump in with, "But that is biased". Its not biased. Its only fair. This is really an *ad hominem* attack. It is attacking the sceptic not the argument of the sceptic. The sceptical argument only says that you need exceptionally good evidence to eliminate lies and mistakes and then you can believe in the miracle. The argument is plainly and obviously right. And yet believers are so biased they have a problem with it. Miracles and bias are inseparable.

Many who say they believe in the paranormal do not. They feel a fear of it that makes them act like they believe. You can know Satan does not exist and still feel fear. Our emotions are sometimes influenced by reason and knowledge and sometimes they are not. Sometimes they are just there.

If people expect to see something, they tend to believe they see it even if they don't. This expectation influences and corrupts their perception to varying degrees. Some people are less prone to it than others but all are prone in some way. Confirmation bias is when you convince yourself that something happened because you want to believe it happened. It is like remembering something a certain way because that is the way you want to remember it. Confirmation bias is a very powerful thing when people think they see a miracle. Confirmation bias is strongest in relation to miracles.

Studies have shown that if a person is told that someone has committed a crime and that person investigates the person will find things that seem to confirm this even if the accused is innocent (page 119, 50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology).

The Church is well aware of the power of confirmation bias. If a person expects to behold the Virgin Mary in a vision and sees her, the Church does not take this person seriously as it suspects confirmation bias is at work. It looks for evidence and then it will consider accepting that the person believed they saw Mary and it may permit others to believe the person was right.

The Church does not realise how confirmation bias casts doubt even on visions that started off unexpectedly, that seem to have had a spontaneous origin. A person may see something strange - perhaps an illusion, a trick of the imagination, or whatever. The person may decide this was an appearance of Mary. The person may unwittingly remember a brief illusion as having lasted longer than it actually did. He may feel that he forgot things he experienced or was told and suddenly "remember" them. Rather than immediately assuming that the person who reports an apparition or vision has had a hallucination, it is good to remember that memory can be wittingly or unwittingly corrupted and distortion and exaggeration could be behind the report.

Many apparition stories are about encounters in which one or two things indicate that it seems supernatural. You hear ghost stories wherein the entity seems to be a normal human being but it suddenly disappears or something and only then is it thought to be a ghost. Or a being behaves like an ordinary person but only a strange luminosity seems to give it away that the person is a ghost or vision. The more the supernatural is in a report, the more likely it is that false memories are putting in an input. Even believers make allowances for the fact that a miracle report or a report about a vision may contain exaggerated elements.

What if a person through false memories thinks they have experienced an apparition. The person may start to expect at least some further appearances and they happen. Or the person's desire to have experienced more plays tricks on them and they think they remember these new appearances.

Miracles that few want to believe in are soon forgotten. If people want to believe, that is when the miracle gets attention. And the Church and the investigators may come along to check out the miracles if the attention is great enough and publicised enough. The more people want to believe or the more people who want to believe, the greater the chance of self-deception. Even the most honest of people sometimes want to fool themselves and be fooled. You can never even partly tell if a person is telling the truth about experiencing a miracle. All you can do is assume. You can't just assume a miracle report is true. You need evidence.

Miracles going public may put great pressure on the miracle-worker or visionary to think he or she really is experiencing miracles or has experienced them even if the opposite is the truth. It turns on the self-deception faculties. When people who can't sing are urged on, they will believe so strongly that they can sing that they may even go on a show like Pop Idol or the X Factor. The pressure makes them delude themselves.

Religion needs to reject or at least ignore the testimony of miracle believers who do not understand the following cardinal religious doctrine, "God comes first. He forbids all lies. Thus if our telling the truth, hurts people that is sad but God comes first and its a necessary evil to hurt them. Lying is never right or necessary." The Roman Church has never checked out its miracle witnesses knowledge of the doctrine. Knowing the doctrine would not prove that the person is telling the truth. But it is better to heed the person who takes the doctrine seriously than a person who doesn't even know about it or understand it. The person who does know it and denies it would be a dubious character. There is a bias that prefers heeding people to God. For example, religion claims to be revealed by God. But religion chooses to believe what prophets and witnesses to miracles tell it about God. That is not the same as hearing God himself. Its hearsay.

Most people say they have a right to their opinion. That is a ploy to stop you challenging them or helping them to see if they are in error. Opinion matters more than truth to them. Most use the ploy when their spirituality or religion is queried or questioned. That shows that religious people have a tendency to not want to see the truth in relation to miracles. In relation to miracle claims, healthy scepticism then is in order!

Nobody can ever prove an event was a miracle. The best they can do is maybe prove that there is a strong possibility that it was a miracle. And its only some who will see it as such. People who know far more about it may disagree about how

strong the possibility is. Believers often mistake their opinion that a miracle took place for a belief. A belief and an opinion are not the same thing. Opinion being so often mistaken for a belief proves that people who believe in miracles may be biased and only see whatever they think supports their belief.

If there is no supernatural, a testimony that is reliable and good will be dependable. If there is a supernatural, that testimony will be less dependable. For example, maybe the person's memory was magically altered to make them think they saw a statue coming to life or whatever. Religious people will however treat supernatural testimony as being as strong as the testimony of a non-supernatural world. That is dishonest and unfairly biased of them. They assume that the miracle happened the way they want to believe. They believe in miracles that happen the way they want them to. For example, a child sees the Virgin Mary in a vision. They believe the miracle is the child seeing the vision. But what if the miracle is actually something that hides the fact that the child has had a hallucination? The believers cannot know where and what the miracle was even if it is clear a miracle of some kind has happened. Miracles increase the propensity to confirmation bias.

If you need exceptionally good evidence in order to rationally believe in a miracle, how can you get it when human memory is not as reliable as people like to think? You also need an exceptionally good ability to avoid having any prejudice that inclines you to believe.

Proving that something is plausible/probable is desirable but proving something plausible/probable does not prove it is true. A plausible/probable miracle is always under threat from a contradicting one that is equally or more plausible/probable. If miracle believers were honest the focus would continuously be on the evidence for plausibility/probability not on the miracle.

Being more logical and thoughtful may not save you from being biased but saves you from others who put the bias in you. The consolation you have is that if you are careful with your reasoning bias becomes less sweeping and less of a threat and will not afflict you for too long.