

Cumulative Argument for Miracles

Miracles are events that God uses to let us know he is there and what he wants of us. They are opposed by sceptics who think they sound too much like magic. A miracle is something that nature cannot do such as make Jesus' mother appear in a grotto in Lourdes in 1858.

The evidence is totally problematic which is why some believers try to make a cumulative case for a miracle being real. Unbelievers say you need hard evidence and there never is any.

Sometimes a piece of evidence on its own is weak. But suppose other pieces of evidence appear that are similarly weak. Each item is not worth much but together they form sufficient reason to believe something. The evidence can accumulate in favour of a certain conclusion.

Some such as Swinburne say that miracles are like that. They make a cumulative case for miracles.

But is there such a thing?

Suppose there is cumulative evidence that Jesus came to life after being dead a week.

But what if you are starting with the conclusion and then looking for the evidence? That means your assessment of what is evidence and what it points to or may point to is unfair. We tend to assess evidence so that we see it as pointing to what we wish to believe. This is the problem of confirmation bias.

Cumulative evidence leads different people to different conclusions. And some people will work out that the evidence does not point to one conclusion but to a number.

You cannot put somebody in jail over cumulative evidence for it is too open to interpretation. The resurrection of Jesus is too big of a claim to be justified as believable on the basis of cumulative evidence.

And if the cumulative evidence might indicate that Jesus rose, the problem is that it might indicate other things too. If you think aliens raised Jesus you will accept the evidence. If you think the evidence is that something happened to make it look like Jesus rose you will accept the evidence. If you think it was a satanic hoax or down to some rare psychic phenomena and not down to God you will accept the evidence. If you think the evidence only points to a man who may or may not have been Jesus claiming to be the resurrected Jesus you will accept the evidence.

People talk about cumulative evidence for the resurrection but in reality there is no such thing. There is only cumulative evidence that people seemed to have believed in it. That is a much weaker claim.

Cumulative evidence can point to a conclusion that is in fact wrong.

Cumulative evidence can contain snippets of evidence that should not be in the mix at all. People who agree there is cumulative evidence for x will not agree that everything presented as evidence really is evidence. There will be items that are considered to be possible evidence but which could equally possibly be non-related.

Cumulative evidence is always open to revision. As more evidence comes to light, the conclusion will have to be updated or changed or discarded.

Some or much of the cumulative evidence will consist of human testimony. The problem becomes then a question of what testimony you are going to accept as correct.

The Roman Catholic does not consider cumulative evidence for a miracle by itself. He slots it into the Catholic worldview and its philosophical assumptions. He tries to connect the things he says he knows from his faith to the evidence. He says there are other ways to know what is believable - its not just all about evidence. The evidence then is not examined by itself but shoved into a context. With that approach, any religion can claim miracles and argue that there is a cumulative case for these miracles and their having showed the religion to be true or believable.

The New Testament and religions like Catholicism make it a duty to believe in miracles such as the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Suppose there is only cumulative evidence for the resurrection. Then it is simply bullying to insist

that it is a duty to believe. Cumulative evidence is not good enough, its too hazy, thus it is not a basis for inventing and creating a duty.

The argument that cumulative evidence is good enough to justify believing that Jesus rose is nonsense. We would be gullible idiots if we believed in magic or miracle that easily.

If cumulative evidence points to the magical or the impossible then something is badly wrong.

Religion says we should not assume miracles are nonsense. It says we should assume they can happen. In fact, we should not assume they may happen unless sufficient evidence says they may. That is the only fair and unbiased approach. But in practice it is not possible. You have to assume miracles happen before you can take the evidence as pointing to them. So you end up in a vicious circle. Religion will say that you have to assume they do not happen before you can say the evidence for a miracle does not point to a miracle. They point out that the critic has a vicious circle too.

If there are two vicious circles then which one must we accept? The one that denies that evidence for miracles really is for miracles. Better to guess that miracles never happen than to guess they do for then you open the door for guessing all kinds of insane things such as that the pope is actually a resurrected Pol Pot in disguise.

Different religions report miracles and this causes much confusion for the religions and miracles have much that is conflicting.

The cumulative case for miracles is ruined if miracles are happening in contexts that are not religious or interested in evangelising a faith.

Hindus report miracles that seem to show that God is doing them as signs of approval of their doctrines. Catholics report miracles that seem to show that God is doing them as signs of approval of their doctrines. Protestants report miracles that seem to show that God is doing them as signs of approval of their doctrines. So the miracle accounts from different religions cancel each other out.

Some ecumenically minded religionists reply that the miracles may still be real and that the religions may be wrong in claiming them as signs of their own specific doctrines. They think God can do a miracle to comfort and encourage belief in God among Hindus and Catholics and Protestants while caring little for the other doctrines of these faiths.

Then how can the miracles really be from him when he knows people will use them to back up their religions? He doesn't need to do miracles to bring them to himself.

Others say that the miracles of other religions do not cancel out the miracles of their religion because their religion has the real miracles while the others are just hoaxes or mistakes have been made.

This is simply a bigoted lie pure and simple for there have been miracles such as those involving Daniel Dunglas Home the spiritual medium that are more convincing than the resurrection of Jesus Christ. At least we know who the witnesses were and the written evidence is better.

Religion says that a cup of tea turning into cranberry juice would not be a miracle for it has no religious importance. There are testimonies that such events occur. Religion ignores these. Yet it says its miracles should be believed in because there is solid testimony. This is inconsistent and hypocritical. If silly and random miracles happen it could be that the miracles of religion are random too for it must be some random power that is doing the non-religious and the religious miracles. In that case, religion could not use miracles as evidence for its doctrines being true.

If you take miracles as signs that your religion is true, you do so because of your prior beliefs. If you take a miracle as confirmation of the existence of God, it is because you have already taken for granted that there is a God. If you assume a miracle is just a strange thing you see it merely as a strange thing and it has no religious significance for you. Clearly miracles encourage and feed upon the fallacy of confirmation bias. They are useless as objective evidences for religious truth. Those who endorse them are endorsing an unfair bias.

It is biased but less biased to see them merely as anomalies than to see them as signs from God. Do not give in and copy the bigotry of those who wish to put that bias in you. A bias is never simply against an idea but against those who adopt the idea. It is personal.

When something invites you to argue, "I cannot know what it is like for the world to suffer. Ever. Yet I will see this suffering as agreeable with the love and omnipotence of God", that something needs to provide outstanding evidence. Otherwise you are no better than an insensitive person who condones the evil done by a tyrant. Miracles are an insulting

effort at evidence but they are not evidence. If higher powers are doing them then they are not laudable powers.

Conclusion

The philosophical proof that miracles should be discarded as superstition and harmful is unassailable. Instead of saying that there is cumulative evidence say for the resurrection of Jesus you must say, "I think there is cumulative evidence but if you say different that is fine. It is a matter of interpretation." You cannot get from that to as in the creed, "On the third day he rose again from the dead." That is a denial that there is a cumulative argument or that such thing is much of a help. A book that refutes cumulative defending of the Christian faith is Geisler's Christian Apologetics. Warranted Christian Belief by Plantinga is another. But many including Geisler say that you can use a cumulative case to show that a religion or worldview is untrue or unlikely but not that anything like that is true. That is the problem.

Further Reading ~

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