

"I BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY BECAUSE IT IS IMPROBABLE"

Christianity, the faith of miracles, says miracles are improbable. It says however that the evidence is good enough to justify believing in them. A miracle might be improbable but as you get evidence and testimony the probability that it happened increases. The improbability decreases. It can be very improbable that a testimony to a miracle is wrong. So if miracles are inherently improbable, there are other concerns that might reduce that improbability.

So evidence overrides improbability. Actually it is evidence that says a miracle is improbable. You weigh this against evidence that it happened.

At this point people talk about theoretical improbability. This is a fancy term for something that does not look likely. That is very subjective.

Evidence stripping away the improbability of something is not the same thing.

And if there is a theory, the miracle should be the one making the theory. "I am improbable but look how I happened." That avoids the subjectivity problem we met earlier.

So a miracle is only an issue for theoretical improbability if it says it is. But no miracle says that. Even Jesus didn't say, "Dead men don't rise but look how I did it?" He made no comment on whether people have started rising more than anybody in his company realised.

Theoretical improbability is outweighed by evidence when the evidence is sufficient and of reasonable quality. But that fact is actually irrelevant here.

We are not talking about theoretical improbability here at all. We are talking about evidence saying miracles are improbable and then evidence turning up that a miracle has happened. We are not theorising about what is probable but basing our belief in probability on what evidence indicates.

With everything that is reported, there is always misinterpreted evidence or absent evidence or overlooked evidence. No matter how good a witness is or how careful it will not be as good as seeing it for yourself. And that is the case for miracles and magic more than anything else.

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.

Evidence from a person who has manipulated evidence

If a fraudster gives you evidence it is possible the evidence is real. But because there is evidence he cannot be trusted it follows that the evidence has to be given the status of alleged evidence. This is not an ad hominem argument. Ad hominem means you attack the person making the argument not the argument. It is not that. It is evidence of untrustworthiness decreeing that the evidence may not be solid.

Genuine believers in miracles would attempt to verify and promote them regardless of any religious underpinnings. We would have Catholic books arguing that the pagan idol Ganesh drank milk (if it did) or that some breatharian really did manage to live on fresh air and who was not trying to make a religious sign out of it. It would not matter what the miracle implies or says. They would just check it out and declare it plausible if it is indeed plausible.

Yet what you get is everybody choosing miracles to suit their prejudices and worldview and presenting them in such a way that it look as if the wonders are defending a specific religious system system or collective religious doctrine.

A miracle that is only promoted and defended because it can fit a specific religious worldview is being abused. Alarmingly that remains true even if it does seem to promote the miracle. Lots of miracles can look like or seem to support lots of different and contradictory religious ideas. The miracle is manipulated yes but it is really about manipulating the believers and the public.

A miracle should be checked because it is a reported miracle and for no other reason.

Science should be able to determine that something does not fit known natural laws. Religion by saying miracles have been verified is doing science. Except it is rogue science!

There is no evidence for miracles. There is only alleged evidence.

The Intuition that Strong Miracle Evidence is Needed

When there are two or more competing explanations of the available evidence, accept the explanation that is the simplest for the simplest one is most likely to be true and reject any inadequate ones. This is Occam's Razor. It is essential if one wants to be sane or stay sane. Life would be worse than Hell if we keep inventing explanations for things instead of seeking out the simplest explanation. Occam's Razor can only work if you stick with natural explanations.

Once you bring in the supernatural it becomes useless.

Once you discard the Razor, the potential for error becomes very great. People can apply the principle wrongly but the principle in itself is flawless. Even if the principle could make you err, not having it would make you err more!

Evidence is the only way to test what is said to be true. We cannot believe anything, not even revelation from God, without having some evidence for belief or grounds for belief.

David Hume reasoned that miracles are so improbable that we need to go beyond a normal amount of evidence to verify them or make them believable. Hard evidence is hard to get so it can be considered sufficient. It is not that normal though it does happen.

This is obviously correct.

Most believing people even in the Catholic Church have a weak belief in some miracles. They do not agree with Hume fully but they agree to a large level. They agree with him when they meet a miracle claim they do not want to believe.

Nobody agrees on exactly what was a miracle and what was not. Some Christians are suspicious of the resurrection of Jesus. People implicitly imply that testimony to a miracle is not enough and more is needed. Hume would have agreed.

Nobody believes in miracles for the exact same reasons as somebody else. The reasons are more important than the belief. Believing in the miracles of Lourdes because your parents told you they happened is really just believing your parents. It is trusting them not God. Hume criticised this kind of approach as superstition. It would not be superstition to believe in Lourdes if the evidence was satisfactory but to believe it on hearsay would be risky and superstition. If you believe the truth because of hearsay you are not honouring truth. Your reasons for accepting it are wrong. And tending to have the wrong reasons is a dangerous habit.

The person who believes the truth for the wrong reasons is no better than a person who believes lies for the wrong reasons. He or she is still not recognising the truth as truth. To see your mother when your glasses are distorted means you don't know if you really see her or not.

Those with any faith at all - little or large - may not hold on to it very long.

The vast majority of people do not take miracle claims as seriously as they do say claims that the VAT rate will rise etc. They agree with Hume more than what they may think.

What Hume reasoned is intuitive. Religion is trying to skew our thinking and feelings by brainwashing us to feel and see it differently.

You can't settle for an alcoholic's testimony that Charlie murdered Sheila. The testimony, however hard to lend credence to, is evidence but it is not enough. You need a better testimony than that. For example, the testimony of forensics that Sheila's blood was under Charlie's fingernail. The more serious and the stranger the claim the better the quality of evidence that is needed. And a claim coming from an alcoholic liar is a strange claim by default!

A religious claim is both serious and strange.

Religion says that when it checks miracles such as apparitions from Heaven, it ensures that the visionary really believes they are seeing Jesus or Mary or whatever. But that is not proof that we should believe them. It may only indicate the possibility that they are sincere - not that they are right. Sincere but incorrect testimonies were rife during the Jack the Ripper investigations in London 1888. Any piece of evidence for a miracle is not evidence for a miracle at all. It is only evidence for the faith and belief of the people involved in experiencing the miracle.

Hume said that we need miraculous evidence to justify believing. Evidence that is naturally good can only back up natural events. Evidence that is magically good is the only kind of evidence that can back up supernatural events. For example, if Jesus really rose from the dead we should find a miraculous CCTV recording of it preserved for us for two thousand years.

This would not be absolute proof. There would still be room for scepticism. But it is the very least we would expect in order to believe.

The case in favour of Hume then is watertight. But Christians try to undermine it nonetheless. If people in authority tell you often enough that the truth is to be doubted they can stop you feeling and seeing the full force of what Hume said. And Christians deploy that tactic. They desensitise themselves and others.

We take things for granted

We take it for granted that princes do not turn into frogs. We take it for granted that dead men do not rise again after three days in the tomb. We take it for granted in other words that the magical events called miracles are based on errors and fraud and that what happened is natural, not paranormal or magical or supernatural.

Religion opposes this intuition. Christianity claims that Jesus rose from the dead after being killed by crucifixion and lying three days in a tomb. Islam teaches that God supernaturally revealed a book written by God to Muhammad. There are all kinds of examples of alleged miracles.

Catholics reason that their religion is true because God did miracles to show it is the right religion and his creation not man's. This claim is arrogant for the evidence itself is based on the vice of belief in miracles. The evidence would be taken as referring to something strange and you would leave it there. You only take that strange thing as a miracle if you assume or believe in miracles in the first place. The vice is you are using the evidence as an excuse for believing in miracles you already believe in. It's a lie and an abuse. Indeed, if the faith is really from God he will be expected to do miracles to show that it is from him. He will not need lies and tricks to do that.

Religion uses miracle claims as part of its propaganda to get power and money and influence. There is no buzz better than the buzz of getting people to believe your ridiculous doctrines on your authority. Religious missionaries must be motivated by this buzz.

High Probability and Evidence

Hume is right that we need better evidence than what we have got for saying, for example, that Jesus miraculously rose from the dead. Jesus needs to appear to top world doctors and let them test him. For some sceptics this will

still not be enough. But that is their right. For many it will be enough. For enough of people it will be enough. The claim, "God will not give us better evidence for so many people won't believe anyway," is a rationalisation. People are insulted for the sake of a religious doctrine.

The Christians lie and try to obfuscate the truth. They say Hume is assuming that the evidence will never suffice. They say it can and does. For example, they say its true that it is very improbable for dead people to rise but the evidence says there was one exception: Jesus. It is more respectful to demand more evidence than to be satisfied with less in the case of a miracle. And that is what we sceptics do.

The believers say they believe that we need the evidence to tell us what to believe and evidence does at times show improbable claims to be true. That seems quite fair. But that is a superficial fairness. Why? Because it covers improbable natural events such as a middle aged woman looking like she is 20. But the supernatural is a totally separate question.

They have not dealt with the problem but sidestepped it. The problem is, what is naturally improbable must be believed if sufficient evidence says it happened but we need an even higher level of evidence for the supernatural. The evidence would need to be the best of natural. Not anti-natural. Not unnatural. But the best of natural. For example, we would find the witnesses of an apparition of Mary would have a perfect memory of exactly what happened every second of the day they experienced the miracle.

Evidence tells us what is probable and improbable

We should only believe things when there is the highest degree of probability that they are true. Hume said that. And we agree. We do not believe that there are ten thousand year old queens running kingdoms in Egypt no matter how good the evidence is that there are.

The believers say that probability and evidence are not the same thing. They are different. But they are extremely closely related. Probability is what we think is likely to happen based on the evidence. It is evidence that tells us what is probable. For example, we know that drinking a mug of cyanide will probably kill us. That is because we have seen the evidence that cyanide is poison and kills people.

The Christians talk as if improbability is independent of evidence. It is not. Evidence makes probability and it makes improbability. Therefore if the evidence says that x is improbable it is stupid to say, "Oh its improbable but the evidence says it happened".

Sometimes evidence comes up showing that the improbable has happened. But if you agree with the probable you have to admit that the improbable can happen. That is what probable means - what is most likely to happen not what is certain to happen. So you have to acknowledge and recognise the probable before you can acknowledge and recognise the improbable.

The lottery objection

Religion argues, "It is very improbable that I will win millions on the lottery yet it happens so miracles may happen." But miracles may be impossible and I can still win. Its just not the same thing!

You cannot say that though the chance of you winning a lottery is very low that you saying you won it is an extraordinary claim. Somebody has to win a lottery and its routine.

It would an extraordinary claim if:

- + you were saying you won it when there is no evidence that you did
- + when the papers clearly name the winner which is not you!
- + that you won it and demons are hiding the proof and evidence
- + that you won it and a time warp ret-conned so that now the winner is or seems to be somebody else
- + that God did a miracle to make you win it

What about evidence?

What if I lie that I won? Christians will believe me without evidence apart from my testimony - which is not enough for an improbable claim. They are lying if they say that they believe in improbable things such as the resurrection of Jesus if the evidence is good enough. And just because they provide evidence does not mean it has led them to believe. Sometimes people make up their own minds before looking at the evidence and then use the evidence to make themselves look concerned about evidence and truth.

Probability and Miracles

The more probable a miracle is, then the less the evidence that is needed for believing in it.

If your philosophy tells you that you need a saviour to suffer and die for you for the forgiveness of your sins then its probable in your view that that might happen or have happened.

The resurrection of the saviour from the dead might be probable. But that does not mean we will be allowed to know that it has happened. It may be enough to know that it is needed and probably happened. It would not necessarily encourage faith in Christianity with its Jesus who rose from the dead.

What assumptions we make about what is probable determine what kind of events we will regard as true miracles. For example, the Mormon may think that Mormonism is the one true faith and that God hates all other faiths. This makes the Mormon regard Catholic miracles as so improbably true that if there is evidence for such miracles then it does not justify faith or belief.

Naturally Improbable and Supernaturally Improbable

For religion there is naturally probable and supernaturally probable.

For religion there is naturally improbable and supernaturally improbable.

We must assume that there is only naturally improbable and naturally probable. We have no experience of supernaturally improbable and probable.

Natural to assume its not a miracle!

If there is wonderful evidence for a miracle, we still cannot believe. There are things we cannot be expected to believe. If miracles and magic don't fall into that category then nothing does. If we cannot be expected to believe in them, people must not promote belief in them. It demeans us.

The less good evidence there is, the more we cannot believe. And the more we insult ourselves and others by opposing our friend, reason.

Christianity commands faith in miracles and it has no right to do do that. Asking would be fine but it says its God commands it to command others to believe.

The view that it is most likely that a miracle report is down to a mistake or delusion and not a real miracle seems to forbid you from ever believing in a miracle. The view that you can believe in the miracle or just equally believe it is a mistake forbids you from making your belief in the miracle serious. It is not serious if you can legitimately just assume one or the other.

If you lost a finger and God gave it back to you, would you have to conclude that your belief that you lost it was a delusion? The finger is there so should you assume you never really lost it and the memory that you did is false?

Religion says, "No. That would be going too far. Something being unlikely doesn't make it impossible. Its unlikely you really lost a finger and had it restored but it is not impossible."

We say, "It is easier for a miracle or supernatural event to make you think something happened when it did not rather than it really restore your finger. Miracles do not give us confidence in ourselves."

So if it we should avoid assuming miracles then if we have to then we have to do the next best thing. Assume the miracle is causing an illusion or making a false impression on your mind.

We talked about how religion says that something being very unlikely in theory can be shown likely after all if the evidence is good enough. Religions that are ardent chasers after miracles do not put evidence above theory but use evidence to work out what the theory should be. For example, if six children claim that they see the Virgin Mary and she raises the whole graveyard from the dead as a sign, but the Virgin teaches absurdities, nobody will believe in the apparition.

So here the evidence cannot override the theoretical improbability. Religion if it wants to say that the theoretical does override the solid and good evidence should just say Hume was right and be done with it. It should say it is okay to dismiss evidence for the supernatural.

This is not philosophy on the part of religion. It is ideology.

One individual case like that is enough. It means the evidence is saying theory comes first. This is not in just the individual case. It is in general.

The case is hypothetical as well meaning religion admits it can happen but does not. That means that we can now admit that not only does logic say the theory comes first but they also, logic or not, are putting it first anyway. Right or wrong that is their attitude.

Believers say that Hume was right to say that in his experience the way nature works makes a miracle story too unlikely to be believable but that does not give him the right to say that it is the same for anybody else. But most people are in Hume's position so most people should not believe in miracles!

FINALLY

There is nothing nonsensical in saying that an event that is intrinsically very very improbable becomes probable if the evidence says so. But that is down to the fact that we know from other cases that there is evidence that such things happen. Nothing tells us when something is a miracle or not. Natural but unexplainable reasons could be why we think we see a miracle. Perhaps the coincidence is not what we have seen but how our memories changed the truth. We cannot call a hugely unlikely event a miracle even if it looks like one. That is just unnecessary and therefore ideological.