

BEING SENSIBLE WITH MIRACLE CLAIMS

If faith in a religion or a god or a miracle is a choice then there should be no social or religious stigma against the person who chooses not to accept them. The person is punished with disapproval at the very least. The human cost is a good enough reason for looking into this subject.

A miracle can be defined as that which is naturally impossible but still happens for there is a supernatural bigger than nature to do it. But why bigger than nature? There is no need to assume anything of any magnitude. What happens is that a person is naturally dying and their illness vanishes. Then nature picks up then again and continues as if the illness had never been there in the first place. So out of countless billions of moments there is only one. In fact what this says is that nature is far more powerful than the supernatural. The supernatural then in a sense is an anarchist that has to charge up enough to act. This points to magic not miracle in the allegedly dignified Christian sense. Of course the first thing we realise is that if power is going to charge up it is evil how it is not used say on a sick child for a miracle cure but instead wasted on keeping religious pharisees happy with apparitions of Mary and spinning suns.

If a miracle is naturally impossible and there is no supernatural to do it then there is no such thing as a real miracle,

Those who say it is just naturally impossible and so miracles do not happen are assuming there is no supernatural to do them. If a real miracle happens their answer should be, "I don't know what happened. I don't have to explain everything and indeed who can?" That is an agnostic stance.

Those who say it is naturally impossible yes but there is a supernatural are assuming as well. But they too and even more have to say, "I don't know what happened. I don't have to explain everything and indeed who can?" That is an agnostic stance.

Believers in miracles are really agnostics who won't admit it and who condemn those who do admit it. They are not believers either!

CS Lewis said that when God does a miracle that "the laws at once take it over. Nature is ready." For example, if a tumour vanishes the laws of nature will carry on as if there had been no tumour at all. It is as if the miracle itself says nature is regular again. It is as if nature is saying there was no miracle and the cure was natural. It is not A then B then C. Or A causes B and B causes C. It is this one time instead of (say) B it will be something else. It has been described as feeding a new event into a pattern. So there is as much respect for nature from a miracle as there is from a natural event. The miracle then respects nature so much so clearly if there was a choice between, "I risk wrongly taking a nature event for a miracle" and "I risk wrongly taking a miracle event for a nature event" the first is what you are to take. Not doing so strangely enough implies disrespect for how miracles respect nature.

Each miracle looks like an accident. In fact they are bigger accidents than car crashes. They happen less often. Why can't they be supernatural accidents? Believers always invest them with a purpose that in fact may not be there!

David Hume said simply that miracles are so rare and many are strange that it is best to assume the witnesses may have indeed seen a true miracle but that we believe (not know!) that it is more likely they have made a mistake or told lies or both.

It seems unfair to ask that miracles be very rare so that you know they are miracles or claimed miracles and then to say that the reason they are rare is why we cannot believe in them. This is the error Hume is accused of. But it is no more unfair that finding that most claims of finding extinct animals are false and that it is rarely true enough to justify lending credence.

The refutation of Hume is summarised thus:

A miracle contradicts how we know and see nature to work.

We cannot prove that nature always does what we think it does. Hume himself says natural law cannot be verified by observation as fixed. Hume for example said you cannot prove cause and effect.

Thus nature may not be as fixed as we think. [You may point out how Newton was considered right absolutely until Einstein came along!]

Thus miracles may indeed happen

We still only get to a may. We get to no reason why we cannot investigate why some bird in the Amazon does something worth investigating and keep investigating natural things INSTEAD of investigating rare and alleged contraventions of nature. Commonsense still says ignore miracles no matter how much the reporter of the miracle tells you it has an important message and calls out for checking and for belief.

Hume did say we cannot prove cause and effect but this is irrelevant for we are meant to assume them. A miracle is still cause and effect – just not natural cause and effect.

The best answer the believers can come up with is that we should not assume nature is as fixed as it seems to be.

The principle argument against the Hume view, “We cannot believe in miracles for most of the time nobody sees alleged miracles or exceptions to the law of nature” is that we pay attention to very little and all of us don’t observe very much of how nature goes on. You would need to see the whole picture to see if nature is so uniform that miracles never happen. But if so then those who suppose uniformity or something looser than that are just guessing. So miracle believers are not really miracle believers so much as miracle guessers. It means you may as well be sceptic for all the practical and theoretical difference it makes.

Tests show that no matter how accurate you are capable of being or how honest, you can fall victim to how time and other influences distort your memory. Some might say that it seems to be a miracle how that could happen so much and how influences, inside and out, can be so adept at fooling us.

John 3:12 has Jesus saying that if he tells you mundane things, things of this world, and gets disbelieved in response it is impossible to expect anybody to listen to him when he speaks of the things of God and heaven. This says that you must believe in the natural and mundane to believe in the supernatural or in specific supernatural claims such as the resurrection of Jesus. In a sense nature has to testify to the miracle and the supernatural has to testify to the validity of nature. Let us explore this.

People will claim that a miracle story is true for they were there. It is natural and inevitable for others to testify that this miracle claim is not true for they were there too or know of something suspicious. You may think they are just saying that but what if they really do know something? To listen to a miracle claim and give it credence is denying how it is natural for people to say it has not happened. Nature may hint in some way that the claim is false. Jesus says you need to believe in the things of the world for if you do not you will not know when or if to trust anybody who speaks of the supernatural. In that way he puts the natural first. That explains why in John, Jesus does a few big miracles and that is all and does not waste time doing smaller ones. For Jesus, miracles are rare for they respect nature and unmistakable.

It is true that not all miracle claims are equally relevant or equally persuasive. Sceptics are accused of prejudice for saying the good exceptions are irrelevant or not good enough. There is no reason why a Hindu idol can not have a better verified or witnessed miracle than Jesus can have. After all, two living witnesses carry more weight than a two thousand year old letter saying Jesus rose from the dead can and does.

All miracle makers even fakes say critics are never satisfied. This is the fundamental thing for believers. They start with that. Evidence can be faked. The evidence is that faked evidence happens a lot in relation to the supernatural. There is nothing unfair then about dismissing miracles when they happen so rarely and when faked ones are so frequent.

Is it prejudice to presume a statement in a historical record is true until you know different? No as long as you are not using the wrong reasons or thin reasons for your assumption. What if the statement says a miracle happened? You don’t need to go down the road of big claims need big evidence to answer this. It is a matter of rights. You have the right to assume the account is mistaken or somehow wrong. You don't even have to be sure why for there are many things you believe and you don't know why.

If a healing reverses an illness the healing will be seen as a miracle. But is it? What if the healing has not happened? What if the healing is just the cessation of a miracle illness? What if the miracle is the illness not the healing? What gives a miracle believe the right to say what the miracle is for that is never clear? You may know something happened but that is as far as you can go. The appeal of belief in miracles is not down to miracles but the assumptions you come to them with.

A miracle is a declaration that a God has the moral right to get belief from you and obedience. But this is not true. It is the assumption that is behind the search for miracles.

A miracle is often a hole filler for a gap in our knowledge. The gaps in our scientific knowledge are what science not religion deal with. There were always gaps so science gets to work to learn more and thus close them up. To fill a gap with God or miracle is anti-science and telling it not to bother. Science talks about laws of nature but only as descriptive laws. A descriptive law just tells us how things work. It is descriptive how the sun is hot. There is no law telling it it should be hot. That would be a prescriptive law. Religion talks about descriptive laws but it means these laws are also prescriptive. For religion, it is seeing what God has prescribed. Being prescriptive and descriptive are compatible. For religion seeing a law just as descriptive is seeing it as something that came from something mechanical and disinterested in what is best for us. For this reason, religion and science may overlap but overlaps do not imply they agree. Overlaps in this case imply disagreement. Miracles endanger science in principle even if not in practice. However, they are very destructive in practice as well. I wouldn't thank God for a healing miracle when that is the price!