

MIRACLES, WHY WE CANNOT BELIEVE

Being an analysis of the philosophy pertaining to miracles in the books:

OCR Philosophy of Religion for AS and A2,

Matthew Taylor, Editor Jon Mayled, Routledge, Oxon, New York, 2007

A miracle is an event that does not match the way nature usually works. For example, if a cow suddenly got wings out of nowhere that would be a miracle. Or if a dead man rises from the dead when dead people stay dead. Religion attributes miracles to the supernatural power of God and argues that through miracles God is trying to tell us something.

Miracles Accuse God of Being Arbitrary

Miracles happen rarely. To us we can see no purpose or pattern to them. This suggests that it is not God that is doing them but some imperfect and arbitrary and unpredictable being (page 83).

Religious believers answer that God cannot intervene all the time to do miracles. If he healed everybody we would not be able to help the sick and learn. They say too there would be no order, just chaos if God say miraculously prevented knives from entering the body during stabbings for example. They say deep down we want to make mistakes and that is not mistakes we fear but not being able to resolve them.

The reply to this is that God could intervene very seldomly but he could set up a pattern. The way he does miracles leaves us without blame if we assume he must be arbitrary. An arbitrary source of miracles could not be a God. A god that claims to be perfect and all-good cannot do things for the heck of it. If God is arbitrary we have no reason to assume he is the one doing the miracles. You would have to deal with the problem of evil, a good God allowing evil though in possession of the power to stop it, before you could have the right to say, "God, Johnny is dying of cancer. I praise you for you are perfect in all that you do. I by implication praise you for not taking his cancer away." To deny this is to deny the seriousness of the cancer. Belief in miracles certainly encourages this evil denial.

Religious believers say that God does miracles for a mysterious purpose so they are not arbitrary but from our limited vision and knowledge we only think they look as if they are.

Then God is not considering the fact that miracles need to look at least as if there is a pattern and not arbitrary for our sake. How things look comes first until we have proof that we should think about them another way.

Conclusion: Miracles accuse God of being arbitrary. If there is a God he is not doing them or they do not happen at all but belief in their credence is based on lies and mistakes.

Miracles are Improbable

David Hume said that nature has laws and these laws cannot be broken (page 84).

He said that when people report a miracle they are denying this. A miracle after all is an event that is not naturally possible. It is supernatural.

He concluded that it was more likely that the people were lying or mistaken than that a natural law was broken. He would say bricks never turn into people and that is an example of an unbreakable natural law.

The religious reply to this is that Hume is assuming miracles are impossible. He has made up his mind before he has looked at the evidence for miracles. He is being biased or unfairly disposed against belief in miracles and has prejudged the evidence. No evidence for miracles then will satisfy him.

But in his conclusion he says it is an issue of probability. He is saying that miracles maybe do happen but that they are so unlikely that we cannot be expected to believe in them. If we amend his first assumption that nature has laws and these laws cannot be broken to that he is saying violations of nature would be so rare as to be practically unbelievable we make it fit this conclusion better. Hume was NOT making up his mind beforehand that miracles are impossible. He was saying natural law cannot be broken but he was saying miracles do the impossible and break that law. That is not necessarily a denial that

miracles can happen. His argument is about how unbelievable miracles are even if they do happen. Hume is not saying miracles are impossible but that they cannot be believed in.

Hume saying that natural law must be considered unchangeable or unbreakable is not as rigid as it sounds. If there is an unknown law that can make a man rise from the dead then that is a natural law too. It is unchangeable natural law for the man to rise under certain conditions. The view that Hume believed natural law was too fixed for bizarre things to happen - and everything is bizarre the first time it happens is just a slur on him and his non-belief.

Hume did say that if a testimony to a miracle seemed more miraculous than believing in the miracle reported then the miracle should be believed in. He did not say that we must consider miracles impossible in the sense that they cannot happen. This is nothing more than the commonsense view that the more extraordinary the claim is the more extraordinary the evidence you need to believe it must be.

Incredibly books which accuse Hume of having a rigid view of natural law (page 77) still admit that Hume saw miracles as possible but the chance of anything being a true miracle was extremely low (page 332). he said the chance was low but it was a chance all the same.

David Hume said we could believe in a miracle only if the people lying or being wrong would presuppose a bigger miracle. People who don't believe in miracles say that it has never been known for it to be more miraculous for people to be lying or mistaken than for them to have experienced what they said they experienced. He was right. The claim that he is merely saying, "Miracles are fiction for miracles can't happen so no evidence for them is good enough" is a distortion. He is not merely assuming. He has given us reasons for not believing.

Conclusion: To say you don't believe in miracles is merely saying that you don't have enough evidence for them.

Extraordinary claims need extraordinary evidence. You are not saying there is no evidence for miracles but you are saying it is not enough. Miracles are so strange and rare that you would need very strong evidence. Even for natural and non-miracle strange claims such as that the Neanderthal is still alive would need extreme evidence such as finding a body and going to extremes to eliminate any possibility of fraud.

Swinburne's Definition of Miracle

Richard Swinburne when thinking about Hume allegedly saying natural law was fixed decided that Hume was wrong. Swinburne stated (page 89):

A - Laws of nature are generalisations for the sake of simplicity. For example, we say it is a law of nature for a dead man to stay dead but a tiny minority of dead people may revive. So Hume had too rigid an interpretation of what law of nature means.

In addition, the laws of physics indicate that the laws of nature are not as rigid as some people think (page 326). Quantum laws tell you not what will happen but what will probably happen. The extremely small quantum particles behave in an indeterminate way. That means they behave in a way that is not totally knowable or explainable (page 335).

Also, Swinburne says that our belief in laws of nature does not say that the laws are fixed. Our belief is that the laws of nature are probabilistic (page 325). He points out you could put a red grain of sand on a beach. Though it is very unlikely, you could ask somebody to randomly pick up a grain of sand and they could pick up the red one. He says then that this is extremely unlikely. He compares it to miracle. Miracle is extremely unlikely to happen but it is still possible.

In reply to this, we say that unbelievers in miracles will be able to hold that the laws of nature are indeed probabilistic which seems, so Swinburne says, to allow for miracles being possible. But laws of nature working a certain way is infinitely more likely and more probable than an exception in the form of a miracle happening. Swinburne thinks it helps the case for miracles and or their believability to say natural law is probabilistic. It does not help at all.

Deniers of miracles agree with Swinburne that somebody could pick the red grain. They too know that bizarre and very unlikely but natural things can happen. They would say the resurrection of Jesus if it happened was not supernatural in their belief. They only say it is their belief - they are not saying there is no chance a man might rise from the dead by supernatural power. Christians will say that all other explanations for the resurrection fail but the supernatural one. Yet the Christians believe like everybody else that bizarre things happen. Sometimes mistakes are made that make miracle reports look believable when they would not be seen that way if all the facts were known. The Christians say the gospels do not err and no explanation for the resurrection should be considered if it contradicts them in any way. In other words, their entire faith is built on their own assumption that unknown error could not be in the gospels and adding to the credibility of the gospels. They build their faith and its alleged believability on their own arrogance.

For Swinburne to claim that finding the grain would be comparable to a miracle is dishonest. A miracle is a non-natural or supernatural occurrence. Finding the grain would be extremely unusual and you would need a vast pile of evidence or near perfect evidence that something so extraordinary happened. You would need more or stronger evidence than that to hold that a miracle such as a bleeding statue had taken place starting with seeing it with your own two eyes.

B- A law of nature is corrigible. That is, we say something is a law of nature but some new discovery might mean this law will be changed or modified. For example, the law that one side of the earth must be in darkness when day reigns on the other side will be changed if a mirror is put up in space to reflect the sun unto the dark side of the earth.

The reply to this is, that this is not implying that the laws of nature are changing. It is only learning about other laws. It used to be natural law that some people died of certain diseases. But thanks to some other natural laws that were discovered, it was possible to override that natural law. The natural law was not changed or altered. It was not suspended or broken. It was overridden. If you have to shoot somebody to stop him killing somebody else that is not saying the law against murder is wrong. It is only saying that the law is right but another law had to be respected instead and that this was the law that innocent life must be saved. Point B is just a pile of drivel from somebody that knows better but who has to put rubbish on paper to make it seem that a rational person can believe in miracles!

So Swinburne from his two stupid assertions then concluded that a new definition of miracle was necessary. He described a miracle as an occurrence of a non-repeatable counter instance to a law of nature. He does not mean that miracles violate or conflict with nature. He means that a miracle must be very uncommon to fulfil the non-repeatability criterion. He doesn't draw attention to the gospel of Matthew then which reported loads of returns from the dead during the brief ministry of Jesus Christ for his criterion contradicts the validity of these miracles.

The resurrection of Jesus would be an example of a miracle. A man rises from the dead against our understanding of the laws of nature. The event is a once-off and unrepeatable so it does not prove that the law that dead men stay dead to be false from now on. Swinburne believes that if the law is that all crows are black and a white crow is found that does not prove the law wrong. He says it would be foolish to say a law of nature was wrong because of one exception to it being found (page 89, OCR Philosophy of Religion for AS and A2, Matthew Taylor, Editor Jon Mayled, Routledge, Oxon, New York, 2007).

But the white crow is not an exception. It contradicts the law. How many white crows do we have to have before the law must be rejected? If the law is that 1 and 1 is two and a case is found where 1 and 2 add up to four then that means all of maths is wrong. You wouldn't say it is just the once so the laws of maths stand as firm as ever. Belief in miracles requires that we SHOULD shelve our respect and regard for the laws of nature. The belief is evil.

Again, Swinburne ignores the fact that a major New Testament gospel has it that resurrections were routine at the time of Christ. He must admit that if the gospel is true then the law that dead men stay dead is contradicted by the number of these resurrections and by the resurrection of all human beings that ever existed on the last day.

Swinburne says that we can think of the relationship between miracles and the laws of nature like parents who teach truth telling as strict laws and who are always truthful. It is like a law that the parents are so honest. But when it comes to getting their child to her surprise party they will lie. They suspend the law for grave reasons. So God can suspend the law that dead men stay dead in order to raise Jesus from the dead. Swinburne reasons that the parents make a law out of truthfulness but that does not mean they always tell the truth. So he reasons that this is not a violation of truth. In the same way miracles are not a violation of nature (page 335).

Some people do in fact experience a loss of trust in those who lie to them for the sake of the surprise party. They see it as reasonable to wonder what other lies those people are telling them and certainly makes them question how well they know them.

And the parents did lie and broke the rule of truth. They might claim they had a reason for it. But that makes no difference for it wasn't that serious of a reason. And all liars believe they have reason to lie. They lie to protect themselves in some way. They see it as justified at least at the time.

The parents rejoiced in the lie. They did not see it as an evil they had to do for a greater good with regret and horror.

The parable of the parents and the party if we may call it that certainly proves that miracles do indeed insult and seek to trample on the laws of nature. They invite believers to join in that trampling to insult the laws is to insult the laws that give us being. If we are consistent we will soon have no morals left.

Now a miracle is God revealing himself in a sign in Swinburne's thought. But the reason you believe in a miracle is because you have reports that appear credible and irrefutable that a miracle has taken place. You believe because of human

testimony or the testimony of your own eyes or experience. You don't see why God has done the miracle. You don't see why he suspended his law of nature. You don't know his reasons.

Without the reasons you are only assuming that this was a suspension of nature and therefore a true miracle.

Sometimes a child will trust her parents who lie to spring the surprise party on her for she understands the reasons. The reasons are necessary. She needs them if she wants to see their lie as a suspension of the rule that the parents are always truthful. Unless you know God's reasons and you can prove they are sensible reasons and really his reasons, for you a miracle is just a strange event not a miracle. If you say miracles prove God's love or that your religion is true, then clearly you are saying this is your opinion and that religion should be about what you opine. That's far from humility.

Swinburne says if you have a close friend you will believe her or him when they report a religious experience or miracle. That is letting people tell you that God has acted. It is not believing in God so much as in those who say he has done something. Miracles are just what men who form religions for the enjoyment of power over the minds and lives of others need.

Miracles - a violation of nature?

Religious believers today tend to argue that Hume defined miracles as a violation of nature and that this definition is unacceptable. They say it makes miracles sound ridiculous (page 85, 319). If God sets up natural law and then breaks it then God is a changeable God and a fool.

First, there is no reason to believe the following might be wrong, "If anybody reports a miracle they are claiming that a violation of nature has happened. And this is what they are claiming whether they realise it or not." If it looks like a violation then it could be a violation even if it might not be. One is entitled to assume its a violation. Religion and philosophy has utterly failed to convince anybody rationally that one has no right to assume such a thing or adopt such an opinion. Miracles then cannot come across as evidence to the impartial mind that any religious faith is true or that any religious idea is true.

If religion believes miracles do not violate nature it is only guessing it. Most religion these days tends to be embarrassed about the idea that miracles violate nature. If they are right then it is bad enough if miracles violate nature. But belief in them is doing nature more harm than the miracles do. Nature is so important and is our life and breath. To believe it has been violated insults it even if it has been violated. To believe it has been violated when it has not is clearly far worse. Belief in one miracle encourages belief in others and so encourages attitudes that nature has been violated or may have been. Even believers in miracles have to admit if they are honest that they are saying nature may have been violated.

Second, most reports of miracle claim that a violation, or an absurdity, has happened. An absurdity would be a worse way to describe the miracle than a violation. But perhaps a miracle could be a violation without being absurd.

How can I say that most miracle claims and reports are stating that a violation of nature, or an absurdity, has happened? Let me give an example. If it is true that God does miracles, and when he does them he does not violate nature, that means the miracle is only done for extreme reasons. If exceptions prove the rule, then can only do that when the exception is unavoidably necessary. This is the received "wisdom", "An exception will happen in a situation where the general rule becomes unimportant." If so then I report a miracle and even if I am lying, I am putting evidence into the world that a violation of nature or absurdity has happened. I am accusing God of having done a miracle when he didn't do it for there was no pressing need.

Religion is bound to have mistaken some non-miracles for miracles. Miracles must have been mistaken for non-miracles too. Human investigation however good is not bestowed with infallibility. Witnesses are not infallible either. Right or wrong, there is evidence that if miracles happen the bigger part of the evidence says a miracle is a blasphemy, a violation of nature or an absurdity.

Ghosts and many other kinds of miracle have ridiculous elements. Such certainly do attempt violate nature.

Scientists see the idea that God made the sun stand still in the sky at the time of Joshua as declaring an event that is a violation of nature (page 81, 84). Yet this is an accepted Bible miracle!

So most miracle reports are saying that a violation or absurdity has happened. If believers use miracles as evidence and care for evidence at all they will have to say there is evidence that a violation has taken place. They will have to assume that all new reports of miracles are probably violations too.

Third, if miracles are violations it seems that some power lesser than God is doing them for God can't make it law that dead

men stay dead and then raise Jesus to life for that is violating his laws and means his laws become bad though he made them so he has to fix the damage. Violations of nature can happen so miracles being violations of nature does not mean that miracles are impossible.

The Church claims that it is natural law that we use our free will to do good. Yet we violate it and do evil. Satan violated nature and order and law to become the Devil. Hume's understanding of miracles as a violation does not imply that miracles are impossible in his view.

Final Word

Belief in miracles is bad news for it leads to contradictory logic and lies.