

Miracles

(for students at AS level)

[Rough notes for a lecture given in London, April 27th 05. They are based on the relevant chapter in *An Introduction to Philosophy and Ethics*. Copyright is retained by the author, but permission is hereby given to use these notes for the purpose of individual study.]

A study of miracles is absolutely key to any Religious Studies course that is related to Western religions. That is because it relates to so many other issues. For example:

- If you believe in miracles, you must believe in a God who interferes in the workings of nature. But what sort of God could that be? If people argue that nature is designed in such a way as to reflect the intentions of a loving God, does that not exclude miracles? If God needs a miracle to put something right, should he not be blamed for getting it wrong in the first place. So an understanding of miracles impinges on our understanding of 'God'. In a well-ordered world, miracles should not be necessary.
- How do miracles square with our understanding of science. Are religion and science opposed to one another? Can a scientist believe in miracles?
- Are miracles moral? If one person is saved when 99 are killed, can that person claim that they were spared through a miracle? And, if they do, does that not imply that the 99 who were killed were victims of God's ill-will or indifference?
- But what do we mean by 'miracle'? We'll look in a moment about how we define a miracle and the difference that makes to how miracles relate to other beliefs.

Clearly, if we are to take the Bible literally, a majority of people at that time believed that events were not determined by fixed laws of nature, but were the result of the action of God or those of the devil, or angels, or evil spirits.

Hence, if something unusual happened, they would naturally ask 'Why did God choose to act in this way?' If everything reflects God's purpose, then the unusual is a most clear example of what he wants to happen. That is very different from a scientific question about the reason for an event.

Even today, religious people sometimes ask 'Why should this happen to me?' when something goes wrong.

I used to work in a hospital, and relatives of seriously ill patients sometimes said 'I don't understand why this had to happen to him. He's such a good, loving person.' And it would have done no good to explain why in terms of genetics, or cancer causing substances in the environment, or the chances of picking up infections. Something has gone wrong and someone must be to blame.

To recover unexpectedly was therefore seen as 'a miracle'. But again, this might or might not have some physical explanation. 'It was a miracle he wasn't killed' might

refer to some daring deed that was life threatening. It does not imply that the laws of nature were suspended in order to save someone's life.

So there is a problem with the vagueness of what is meant by 'miracle'. We'll come on to this in a moment, but let's start with the general problem of how you relate the idea of miracles to science.

Miracles and Science

With the rise of modern science, in the 17th century, the general view of the world was of an ordered mechanism. An argument about miracles that starts with that premise come from David Hume.

Hume was an **empiricist** – in other words, he believed that all knowledge is based on evidence that we gain through the senses, and which the mind then sorts out to give us the information we need.

It is also important to recognise that scientific laws are **descriptive**, not **prescriptive**. In other words, a 'laws of nature' cannot dictate what **must** happen; it summarises what **has been found to happen**. Laws of nature sum up what we have observed.

He pointed out that people did not refer to things that happened in the ordinary course of events as miracles, but only those that went against what people would normally expect. Hence he defines a miracle as **'a violation of a law of nature'**.

But he took the view that laws of nature were based on evidence. The more evidence we have, the more certain we are about them. And for Hume, everything is a matter of probability, not certainty. The more evidence, the higher the probability. That is a principle that has been fundamental to science.

If a miracle goes against a law of nature, then it represents a single piece of evidence that goes against all the rest. We observe that everyone eventually dies and stays dead – that is the general observation. If we hear an account of someone coming back to life, that information has to be judged on the basis of probability.

His famous quote on this:

'A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined... The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), 'That no testimony is ever sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish;'

from his *An Enquiry into Human Understanding*

He argues that, since we proportion belief to evidence, there can never be enough evidence to prove that a miracle has taken place. It is always going to be more likely that the person reporting it was mistaken.

BUT NOTICE THAT Hume's argument is **not** that miracles cannot happen, but that – given the amount of evidence that has established and confirms a law of nature – there can never be sufficient evidence to **prove** that a law of nature has been violated.

Inductive arguments

There are two very different kinds of argument: inductive and deductive.

A deductive argument works on the basis that, if one thing is believed to be true, another is 'deduced' from it.

Inductive arguments are based on evidence. Evidence is gathered and a theory to explain it is devised. Based on that theory, it is possible to anticipate what will happen. Observations are made, and if the anticipated thing happens, then it confirms the theory. Mostly, science is based on inductive arguments – that is why the gathering of evidence is so important for science.

Hume's argument is **inductive**, since it is based on the vast number of occasions when a miracle has **not** happened. However, inductive arguments, being based on experience, always lead to **degrees of probability** – which is why Hume is careful to qualify his argument and explain that there can never be enough evidence to prove a miracle, **not** that a miracle can never occur.

Science cannot say that something can never happen, only that it is highly improbable that it will happen. Light, for example, goes in straight lines. But that is not some absolute rule. Near a very strong gravitational force, light rays bend.

If a miracle is a 'violation of a law of nature' then Hume has a good case for not believing an account of any such event. But it cannot be an absolute proof that an unexpected, unique event cannot take place.

A problem – Regularity in the Universe

It might be tempting to think that religion is on the side of a world where miracles (in the form of violations of natural laws) can happen, whereas science with its inductive arguments and gathering of data, leads to a world that is regular, predictable and free from divine influences.

The Cosmological and Teleological arguments for the existence of God were based on the idea of a world which displayed regularity and design – a world which, understood as a whole, led to the idea that it was designed and sustained by God.

The problem is that religious believers appear to want to have it both ways:

1. Given the regularity and predictable nature of the world, they argue that this suggests that it is sustained and guided by God.
2. But they may then argue that events are 'miracles' and therefore directly caused by God, simply because they do not fit the regular and predictable nature of the world.

A key issue therefore is to decide how the particular is to be related to the general, and which of them is the more important for religion.

Some philosophers of religion look to the rational and regular aspects of the world as evidence of an overall intelligent creator. Others look to miracles and religious experiences - particular moments that go against the general experience of the world – as the basis for belief in a God who is able to disrupt the rational and the regular.

The problem is that belief in miracles suggests that the world is unreliable. Things can suddenly happen in ways that are against all that we understand to be the norm. How can science deal with that? But also, how can that accommodate the idea of a purposeful creator?

How do we get round the idea of a miracle as a ‘violation of a law of nature’? Is it possible to have an event that appears to be ‘natural’ but is still called a miracle?

There are two ways in which some events may be described as ‘miracles’ but which do not involve the violating of laws of nature. Both involve timing:

1. A natural event that has been either speeded up or slowed down.

A broken bone will eventually heal itself – but it cannot do so instantly. Equally, a person may recover from a serious disease, but this does not usually happen instantly. Thus it is not **what** happens that counts as a miracle, but **the speed** in which it happens. This interpretation cannot overcome Hume’s criticism, since the speed at which something happens is part of its fundamental nature, and part of what we observe to happen on a regular basis.

BUT that doesn’t really solve the problem. It is no more probable that one of these things is going to happen instantly, than it is for something to happen that goes against what we know of the laws of nature.

2. a natural event that happens at a particularly opportune moment.

You were desperate for money, and suddenly a long-lost uncle dies and leaves you a legacy. Nothing usual in that - it does not involve any change in the way things happen, or the speed at which they happen. The event is normal enough – what appears to make it a miracle is its happening at exactly the ‘right moment’. But what is a ‘right moment’?

But one person’s luck is another person’s tragedy. The bereaved aunt may not feel that it was a miracle her husband died at exactly that moment!

My usual examples:

For the occupants of Jericho, about to be slaughtered now that their defensive walls are down, the earthquake could not have happened at a worse time. Nor would the Egyptian army, bogged down in the mud and about to be drowned, have thought it a good time for the wind to have dropped.

But you could argue that an event is so unlikely (whether good or bad) that it must be the result of some non-natural intervention in the world.

However, we need to recognise that everything is both utterly unlikely and absolutely inevitable at one and the same time.

For every particular event is a unique combination of causes and conditions.

If anything in the world were to be different, everything would need to be different. So many detailed coincidences need to take place in order for you to be sitting here today. But at the same time, given all the causes you know about, it seems inevitable that you should be here.

So it all comes down to interpretation.

However, from what we have already seen about religious experience and religious language, what makes something 'religious' is often a matter of **interpretation**, rather than fact. A violation of a law of nature (i.e. an inexplicable event) need not be seen as a miracle, and may have no religious or personal significance whatever. Science only makes progress because it encounters inexplicable events.

So, for an understanding of miracles from a religious point of view, something else is needed.

To call something a miracle is not to describe it, but to give it value. 'Miracle' is an interpretation of an event, not an event in itself.

In other words, as found in religion, miracles are those events which express the particular will of God in a situation.

So why do some people want to interpret the world as miraculous.

The 19th century philosopher Feuerbach argued that miracles were projections of human desires. They represented the things that people longed for, rather than those that actually happened. So perhaps the idea of miracles is wish fulfilment.

Of course, it is possible to argue that God is everywhere doing miracles all the time. Every birth is a miracle. The problem with this is that it effectively makes the concept of miracle redundant. A religious person may see God acting everywhere, in common events as well as in rare ones. Unless a miracle is **at least** a violation of a law of nature, even if it is many other things as well, then there seems no point in calling it a miracle at all.

Two other problems are linked with this:

1. If God's action is seen as particular – in other words, he intervenes in particular circumstances – then why does he not do that all the time. Here is the problem of evil – Why does a loving and omnipotent God heal every dying child?

2. If God is omnipotent, why should we pray for him to do anything? If he knows about the situation and is powerful and therefore able to sort it out, why does he not do so?

The general problem for belief in a loving God...

If God exists, he should have no need of miracles at all. Why, if the world is designed by God, should he need to keep interfering to put right things that do not work according to his intentions.

TO CONCLUDE

The issues I have just raised show why the question of miracles is so central to Religious Studies. Where you stand on miracles is a good indicator of where you stand on many other topics. Is the world predictable or random? Are there external forces that interfere with nature? Is God the name we give to the regularity and purposeful working of the universe? Or is he some external force that enters the world from time to time to change it?

Where you stand on miracles will be a very clear indication of where you stand on the matter of God, and of religion in general.

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