



Questioning Christianity

Is it Rational to Believe in Miracles?

The "Challenge" of Miracles

- Most Christians read the Bible and joyfully accept miracles as part of the Christian faith without concern.
 - The belief in miracles flows from an understanding of the world wherein God interacts with his creation.
 - The resurrection, the belief of which is required for faith (1 Corinthians 15:17), is itself the most significant of all miracles (apart from creation).
- Miracles "look to offer a veritable *argument* for God's existence, or at very least, they serve as good evidence for it: miracles (the thinking Christian might say) point to God in just the way that any effect points to its cause."¹
- However, skeptics (naturalists, materialists, agnostics, atheists) reject that premise from different angles:
 - Miracles only point to God *if miracles exist*. So, some skeptics make arguments that seek to refute the existence of miracles *at all*, thereby nullifying the claim.
 - Others may concede that miracles are possible, but assert that they're not necessarily caused by God.
- To make the argument that miracles support the existence of God to work, it must "be possible to determine that something is indeed a miracle without first supposing God exists"² to avoid the logical fallacy of "begging the question."
- As far back as Augustine, thinking Christians thus approach the question of miracles through the lens of two questions:
 - What are miracles?
 - On what grounds would one be rationally warranted in believing that there are miracles?

¹ Murray, Michael J. 1999. *Reason for the Hope Within*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 346.

² Ibid.

Miracles Defined³

- The word “miracle” is used to describe a variety of occurrences in modern vernacular:
 - Things that go against expectations in a course of events.
 - “It was a miracle he wasn’t injured in that crash.”
 - “Coincidental” alignments of events that produce a favorable outcome.
 - “That last minute bonus right before my HVAC system went out was a miracle.”
 - “My friend from college was randomly placed right next to me on a plane ride – it was a miracle!”
 - Surprising progress in healing against the expectations of medical professionals.
 - “His recovery was a miracle.”
- While we as Christians expect such acts of providence in the economy of God (and are, in fact, evidence of his care and intervention), and while these events do strengthen our faith and demonstrate God’s power, such events might still be viewed as having some natural explanation (even if it is difficult or elusive).
 - Skeptics may say, “just because we haven’t yet discovered the explanation doesn’t mean such a natural explanation doesn’t exist.”
- For clarity, we’ll choose a more direct case: The resurrection of Lazarus in John 11. What sort of event is this?
 - It was *contrary to the natural order*. Dead people don’t, in the natural course of events, come back to life.
 - It was *caused by God either directly or through some divine agency*.
 - Since it’s theoretically possible for something contrary to the natural order and/or a violation of nature’s laws to have a cause outside of God, our definition must include God’s direct activity.
- **Miracle, defined:**
 - It violates at least one law of nature, and
 - It is caused by God either directly or through some divine agency.
- Or, phrased differently, an event is a miracle if:
 - It’s an anomalous event (AE), and
 - It has a divine cause (DC).
- The main issues between a believer and a nonbelieving skeptic: whether miracles are good evidence for belief in God, and whether there is good, rational evidence for miracles in the first place.

³ Adapted from Murray, 348-351.

Common Objections to Miracles

- **The Humean Objection⁴**

- David Hume was an atheistic, Scottish philosopher of the 1700s whose writings have significantly influenced questions of epistemology, reasoning, and metaphysics in the world of philosophy.
- His argument against miracles:
 - We can't know laws of nature *a priori* (independent of experience), and thus all natural laws are proved based on repeated, empirical evidence of uniform and regular occurrences.
 - When confronted with a supposed miraculous event (like Lazarus raising from the dead), we should stack evidence against evidence.
 - Since testimonial evidence for a miracle can never outweigh repeated observational evidence for a law of nature, no evidence will ever allow us to rationally believe in a reported violation of that law.
 - Thus, belief in miracles is always irrational.
- Addressing the argument: Two important weaknesses.⁵
 - **Weakness 1:** Hume's argument supposes that the only kind of evidence one may have is testimonial evidence. However, just like a crime scene is first reported to the police as testimony and then corroborated with other kinds of evidence, so too miracles can be supported by other kinds of indirect evidence.
 - **Example:** It was the testimony of women that first reported the resurrection of Jesus to the disciples, later corroborated by an empty tomb, burial clothes, overpowered Roman guards, etc.
 - **Weakness 2:** Hume's argument is actually *too strong* to work. In his view, the evidence of past experience for some regularity in nature will always be weightier than new, contrary evidence, and thus makes such contrary evidence irrational to believe. This would rule out *all scientific innovation* where new information is discovered that revises our understanding of the laws of nature – something scientists do *all the time*.

- **The Wrong Laws Objection⁶**

- The argument:
 - When an anomalous event occurs, what if a law of nature hasn't been violated at all? When something appears to go against the laws of nature, it's more rational to assume that:

⁴ Murray, 352-353.

⁵ Murray, 356-358.

⁶ Murray, 354-355.

- ...what we took to be a law of nature turns out to not be a law of nature in the way we previously conceived, and
 - ...that we don't understand the laws of nature correctly.
- Thus, nothing has happened contrary to the truth or the expected laws of nature that requires divine intervention.
- Addressing the argument:⁷
 - We'll grant, for the sake of argument, the demand for theistically neutral evidence for a law's violation (though, as we'll see later, this isn't necessary).
 - Suppose a group of biologists see Lazarus alive after four days of his being in the grave. Simply put, the accepted laws of natural science cannot explain such an occurrence, and an effort to discover new laws that would permit such occurrences would prove unfruitful.
 - The wrong laws objection requires that there must be a law that would allow for an anomalous event that would, by necessity, *upend our entire understanding of all natural laws*.
 - In other words, it's more rational to believe something supernaturally anomalous has occurred rather than assert that all relevant, established scientific knowledge is in error, at least in the case of the anomalous event.
- **The Non-Miraculous Anomaly Objection⁸**
 - The argument:
 - Let's suppose that there was an anomalous event as defined above.
 - Even with an anomalous event (AE), one need not assume that there was a divine cause (DC).
 - Phrased differently, it may be that spontaneous and uncaused anomalous events are possible that don't have a divine origin (laws of nature we don't yet understand, etc.).
 - Addressing the argument:⁹
 - This objection requires that the only available argumentative route to a conclusion is a *deductive one* in the form of a genuine proof.
 - However, this is not a requirement for arriving at true information in other arenas; in law and science, much reasoning is non-deductive, making inferences to the best explanation.
 - For example: Astronomers realized that the orbit of Uranus deviated from what their calculations predicted it should be. The only reasonable explanation, given everything else we know

⁷ Murray, 366-368.

⁸ Murray, 355-356.

⁹ Murray, 368-371.

about the solar system, was that there must be a gravitational force affecting its orbit; it was the search of this answer that led astronomers to discover Neptune.

- In the same way, while a positive “argument from miracles” may not be available to prove the existence of God, it is *more reasonable* to claim that an event has a divine origin rather than to claim it’s uncaused, inexplicable, or spontaneous.
- Furthermore, beyond the event itself, there is often *more evidence* that suggests a divine cause. For example, the ordering of events and direct cause-effect connections often accompany miracles:
 - Consider Elijah on Mt. Carmel; is it more rational to believe that a cloudless sky produced fire immediately after Elijah called upon God in an uncaused, completely coincidental way than believing that God caused it?
 - Consider Lazarus; is it more rational to believe that some unknown biological process that runs against all known science undid the decay of his body in an instant immediately following the command of Jesus than it is to believe that God did it?
- It’s not irrational to arrive at the conclusion of a divine cause following an anomalous event when the nature of the miracle and the evidence, aligned with the character and power of God, support it.

- **The Naturalistic Objection**

- Argument: The world operates under fixed, natural laws, and miracles, by definition, violate those laws. Since science cannot confirm miracles through experimentation, there’s no reason to believe they happen.
- Addressing the Argument:
 - While natural laws *describe* what normally happens, they don’t *prescribe* what must always happen. C.S. Lewis addresses this by noting that natural laws still exist when miracles occur, but are either suspended or operate under new conditions.¹⁰
 - The naturalistic argument cannot rule out a divine being’s ability to suspend or amend the very laws He created.
 - Naturalism’s argument defeats itself: “If naturalism is the “whole show,” then everything, even our reasoning process, can be explained from within the whole system of nature. But then it is difficult to see how our knowledge can be anything other than the result of natural processes. So why should we assume that naturalism is true? After all, we have good reasons to believe that our experience of reasoning, moral oughtness, and beauty point to transcendent realities.”¹¹

¹⁰ For Lewis’s full treatment on miracles, see his book, *Miracles: A preliminary Study*.

¹¹ <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/c-s-lewis-on-miracles-why-they-are-possible-and-significant/>

- **The Questionable Testimony Objection**

- Argument: The testimony of many miracles arises from ancient, unscientific people who lacked the ability to describe what was happening.
- Addressing the Argument:
 - This assumes that the ancients were gullible people without the same rational faculties we possess today. Contrary to this view, while science has progressed in its ability to explain the world around us, archeology has repeatedly demonstrated the ancient world to be just as rational, inquisitive, and ingenious as anyone in modernity. In fact, even we don't know how they accomplished certain feats from the past given their lack of technology!
 - Furthermore, even unscientific people knew that sick people didn't miraculously get well, virgins didn't give birth, and dead people didn't come to life.
 - These claims were also supported by *multiple witnesses*.
 - Lastly, this argument doesn't address miracles that happen today!

An Apologetic Reality Regarding Miracles

- Christians who seek to positively make an argument *from miracles* for the existence of God run into a humbling reality: there is no argument that can force someone to believe in miracles and that those miracles are evidence for God.
 - See Jesus's own ministry; Scripture itself records that miracles performed in front of his detractors hardly silenced their questions or quelled their doubts in his identity.
- This reality has often caused Christians to shrink back from using miracles in their witness or testimony, leveraging other aspects of Christianity that seem more accepting to a naturalistic world (like God's love, the beauty of Jesus's teachings, etc.)
- However, the rationality of the Christian faith does not stand or fall with the success or failure of positive arguments proving the existence of God:
 - "Well, you can't *prove* God exists, so he doesn't."
 - "You can't *prove* a miracle happened, so that means it didn't."
- To avoid miracles in our witness is to cede ground to a naturalistic world that is itself grounded in the same fallacy of which they accuse us: the assertion that there is no God (a positive case for which *they* have no proof).
- Our aim in apologetic replies is to *defend* the rationality of the Christian faith, but it's the Spirit that must transform hearts and minds.
- While we cannot force people to believe in miracles, there isn't any reason – logically or otherwise – to shrink back from seeing miracles as they're recorded in Scripture as evidence of God's revelation to His creatures.

- When confronting people who are troubled by the Bible's inclusion of miracles, consider the following:
 - Don't take their assumptions at face value; ask thoughtful questions meant to draw out their own reasoning (similar to the content of this lesson).
 - A: "Well, the Bible is clearly not credible because it includes miracles, and we know those could never happen."
 - B: Help me understand, how do you know miracles could never happen?
 - Lean into miracles (especially the resurrection!) as evidence of Jesus's divine authority.
 - A: "I think Jesus was a good moral teacher, but beyond that, it's hard for me to believe that he's God."
 - B: "Have you ever considered the evidence of the resurrection? If I provided some for you that presented a compelling case, how might that change your view?"