

Miracles and rational belief

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Ever since David Hume proclaimed that “no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion”,¹ the subject of miraculous events has been of fascination to philosophers. Have any miracles ever occurred? It would seem on the face of it that such a question can only be answered by a careful analysis of the evidence for specific cases. Yet Hume and others argue that such inquiry is pointless from the start. It is argued that it is impossible even *in principle* to have sufficient evidence for a miracle. Moreover, even if we can establish a certain event has taken place, we can draw no supernatural conclusions, hence we cannot establish that it is ‘miraculous’ in any interesting sense. Rather than defend the occurrence and significance of any particular miracle, my focus will be on these preliminary philosophical issues. My purpose is to defend the appropriateness of empirical investigation of miracle reports by

1 David Hume, *On Human Nature and the Understanding*, Collier books, New York, 1962, p. 133.

arguing that we can, in principle, have sufficient evidence to establish the occurrence of a miracle, and that such knowledge can provide evidence for religious beliefs.

First we should be clear on the sort of events we are concerned with. But let's note that there is little to be gained by sceptics or believers fussing over the definition of the term 'miracle'. When all has been said and done about defining the term 'miracle', nothing has been said about what has or has not actually happened. The question of whether or not, given certain definitions of terms, the bodily resurrection of Jesus is labelled a 'miracle' is insignificant—you can call it a 'banana' if you wish—what is interesting is *did it actually happen?* And this cannot be answered by playing with words.

For instance, it is often suggested that for an event to count as genuinely miraculous it must involve the violation of a law of nature by an act of direct intervention by God.² This has led to much confusion and pointless discussion. For instance, you can come up against logical impossibility. You can define a miracle as a violation of a law of nature, and then argue that since true laws of nature describe what actually takes place, miracles by definition do not occur. While this very conveniently removes the possibility of the miraculous (on this particular conception of miracles) it tells us nothing about whether Jesus rose from the dead. It merely tells us that the term 'miracle' can be so defined as to be logically incoherent, like 'square circle'. Such a definition adds nothing to our discussion of whether particular claimed events really took place. I propose to sidestep these conceptual issues by focusing on a paradigm case of a miracle rather than offer any definition. The resurrection of Jesus surely counts as a miracle if anything does, and it is events of this type that we are concerned with in any serious debate about miracles.

It has been suggested by others that although miracles

² This definition derives from Hume's classic discussion in *On Human Nature*, *ibid.* Interestingly, Hume sees no conceptual difficulties with this definition. He is concerned with our evidence for the events themselves, rather than the conceptual and metaphysical issues.

are not *logically* impossible, they are *physically* impossible. That is, it is claimed that miracles necessarily involve overriding true laws by a supernatural power. *But*, it is then argued, how can we know that any event is really an act of God, and not something which nature could bring about *unaided*, so to speak? Antony Flew presents the point in this manner:

The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for proclaiming that the particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden. On the contrary, the new discovery is simply a reason for his conceding that he had previously been wrong in thinking that the proposition thus confuted, did indeed express a true law; it is also a reason for his resolving to search again for the law which really does obtain.³

It is, however, not true that the scientist has “no ground whatever” for coming to conclusions about the supernatural in such a case. It may be that to salvage the natural law requires just too many *ad hoc* adjustments. For example, the natural law that people die and stay dead may be amended by the clause ‘except when the person’s name begins with the letter J, he claims to be God and founds a major western religion.’ Then the scientist may proclaim, ‘So there, it is not really a miracle after all, for it fits well with the laws of nature!’ In practice, of course, a competent scientist will find it extremely difficult to make such a bizarre amendment; or to amend such general laws at all, without overturning vast amounts of well-established theory.⁴

3 A. Flew, ‘Miracles’, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 1972, vol 5, p. 349.

4 This point has been developed further by several philosophers including R. Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, Macmillan, London, 1970, pp. 23-33; M. Boden, ‘Miracles and scientific explanation’, *Ratio*, 1967, 11, pp. 137-44; and R. H. Holland, ‘The miraculous’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1965, 2, pp. 46-51.

Objections such as these have led to a type of double-dealing in arguments about miracles. Broadly speaking, there have been two main arguments levelled against the belief in miracles. Firstly, there is the epistemological problem raised by Hume: that miracles by their very nature are so improbable that no amount of evidence could possibly justify belief in one (we will be examining this problem shortly). Secondly, it is argued that science is advancing, so what may now seem to be an inexplicable event will one day be explained scientifically, and shown not to be improbable in the circumstances.⁵ Many philosophers have seen these problems as the two horns of a dilemma which makes rational belief in miracles impossible. The believer in miracles is thought to be in a real fix. Caught between, on the one hand, the inductive strength of scientific evidence ruling out miraculous events, and on the other, the onward march of science and its ability to explain all phenomena no matter how strange, there seems to be no place left for miracles. This leaves the sceptic with a happy ‘heads-I-win-tails-you-lose’ argument against the miraculous. Events which *do* seem miraculous can be dismissed as being too improbable to be rationally believed to have occurred; and if they have occurred, well, science can explain them anyway.⁶

However although either one of the above arguments may apply to a *particular* event, they cannot *both* apply to the *same* event. The following illustration should make this clear. Suppose a friend were to say to me “I saw a faith healer last night and my back is feeling a lot better!” Although I am sceptical that a supernatural event has taken place, I am hardly going to respond “No! I can’t believe that your back feels better”. I have no doubt that her back feels better, but I do not believe this is a miracle. Given our modern under-

5 See for example G. Robinson, ‘Miracles’, *Ratio*, 1967, 9, pp. 155-66; and M. L. Diamond, ‘Miracles’, *Religious Studies*, 1972, 9, pp. 307-24.

6 The heads-I-win-tails-you-lose approach is a surprisingly popular one. See for example Flew ‘Miracles’, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-50; Mackie *op. cit.*, pp. 13-29 and J. Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1956, pp. 450-54.

standing of psychosomatic illness, the event is far from inexplicable and in fact quite probable, and it is for this reason that I have no doubt that it happened. But now suppose tomorrow she says to me “I flew to the moon and back this morning by flapping my arms”. In this case it would be ludicrous to say “Did you? I’m sure there is an adequate scientific explanation for that”. Rather, I would be extremely sceptical that the event took place, and the reason for the scepticism is precisely that not only is there no scientific explanation for it, but it seems highly improbable that there could even be one, given our present understanding of physics. If I believed it at all likely that such an event falls under the scope of our present or future scientific understanding (in such a way as to increase its probability), then I would have less reason to be so sceptical about it.

The fallacy of the ‘heads-I-win-tails-you-lose’ argument should be evident. We simply cannot have it both ways. If I am to be sceptical about my friend flying to the moon, I do so on the basis that I have extremely good scientific evidence that it could not happen. As I am presented with more testimonial or empirical evidence that it did happen, I will stubbornly maintain that it is more likely not to have happened, given the scientific evidence against it. The further I am pushed with evidence supporting the event, the stronger must be my insistence that such an event could not be naturally explained, if I am to retain my scepticism. Now *if* (and this is a big if) the evidence became so strong that it was more rational for me to conclude that the event had in fact taken place, then I could not simply leap to the other end of the spectrum and say, “Well yes, so you did fly to the moon, but there must be a perfectly adequate natural explanation for it”. For if it were at all probable that such an event could be explained, then I would have no basis by which to be so stubbornly sceptical of the event.

The focus on violations of physical law and divine intervention seems misguided. First, given the statistical nature of modern physical theories it is not at all clear that ‘miraculous’ events do strictly contradict physical laws—but this renders such events not the least bit less astonishing.

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A person rising from the dead, or water turning into wine, is highly unusual and amazing however you describe it. Second, it is not clear what is the relevance of the notion of divine intervention. On one view of the relation between God and creation, God is continually controlling and sustaining every part of creation. On this view *every* event is an act of God. All talk of 'overriding of laws' or 'interventions into the natural order' assumes a conception of God and the world which has little relevance in this context. The laws of nature, whatever else we might say about them, can be seen as descriptions of the regular ways in which God acts in the world. A miracle, then, is not a supernatural event in contrast to 'nature'; it is God acting one way as opposed to all the other ways in which he acts. God does not have to poke his fingers into the natural mechanisms of the world to perform a miracle, he merely acts in a way different from the usual course for a specific purpose.

At any rate, we need not dwell on these matters. Christians assert first and foremost that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead. The metaphysical details of how this occurred are entirely secondary. There are no interesting difficulties here to pursue. Clearly if there is a God who created the universe and gave human beings life, he would have little difficulty in giving life to a man after his death. Once again, the interesting question here is whether this actually happened and what we can conclude from it.

Objections to miracles

Let us turn then to consider our first serious objection to belief in miracles. In David Hume's classic discussion, we find an intriguing argument that we could not possibly have sufficient evidence that a miracle has occurred. Hume's argument is a matter of balancing probabilities. When we consider testimonial evidence for a miracle, there are broadly speaking, two possible conclusions to draw: (1) The person giving the testimony is lying or has been deceived, or (2) the testimony is correct and the miracle occurred. Now miracles are extremely improbable, so (2) is doubtful; but people are known to lie and be deceived, so (1) is more likely. Hence, as "a wise man...proportions his belief to the

evidence",⁷ he should, on the balance of probabilities, believe (1).

But are these probabilities correctly assigned? The crucial aspect of Hume's argument is the use of observed relative frequencies of events to assign probabilities. According to Hume:

All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments...we must balance the opposite experiments where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence.⁸

Taking the case of the resurrection, we know the following two propositions:

- (a) All observed dead people have stayed dead
- (b) Most, but not all, people tell the truth

These two propositions give a certain probability for the following two:

- (a') Jesus stayed dead
- (b') The disciples spoke truly

Statement (a) confers an extremely high probability on (a'), whereas (b) confers a slightly lower probability on (b'). Hence (a') is more probable, and should be believed.

This is Hume's argument in a nutshell. It is one that cannot be easily dismissed. Note that Hume's argument is epistemological (dealing with what we can know). He is concerned with the conditions under which it is *reasonable to believe* that a miracle has occurred. He is not making the silly claim that we can know that miracles such as the resurrection are *impossible*. Indeed Hume would be the first to deny this. We should also note that we all do dismiss most reports of miracles for the very reason that, all things considered, it seems more likely that the reporter is deceitful or

7 Hume, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

8 Hume, *ibid.*

deceived than that the event occurred. The question is whether it should *always* turn out that the weight of evidence falls on (1). If that were true, then we need never again consider the evidence for a claimed miracle, as it would always be more likely that people were lying or deceived—although to conclude that we need not look at the evidence would be rather ironic after agreeing that “a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence”.

How do we determine whether the balance of probabilities will always lead us to conclude (1)? We need to understand how Hume went about assigning probabilities. The idea behind Hume’s approach is that in assigning probabilities to (say) the outcome of an event, we should consider the event as a member of a certain class of similar events, and ask in what proportion of the events of this class was there an outcome of the relevant type. That is, out of all the times this thing was tried, how many times did it happen? The more times it happened in the past, the more likely it is to happen again. This principle has a certain limited application. My confidence that my car will start when I turn the key, should be based in part upon the frequency with which it started upon turning the key in the past.

But Hume’s claim that this is all there is to the assignment of probabilities is hopelessly simplistic. The major problem is that of finding the appropriate class of events with which to judge the frequencies of outcomes. Every event is a member of any number of classes of events. Depending on the class, there will be different proportions of a certain type of outcome occurring. So Hume’s method does not give us a definite probability for an outcome of an event.

For instance, suppose I am trying to decide whether to take up hang-gliding or lawn bowls. I want to know which is more dangerous, so I determine how many people from each sport have died. It turns out that a greater proportion of people who play lawn bowls have died each year than of those who do hang-gliding. It is more probable, I conclude, that I will die if I take up lawn bowls than if I take up hang-gliding.

However I may be considering the wrong class of events. It might be pointed out that if I take a narrower class of events—namely, a person under thirty playing lawn bowls—only a small proportion of these will be accompanied by death. However, it may turn out that no one under thirty has tried lawn bowls, in which case we will have no data to work with. Of course we want to insist that *if* people under thirty *were* to play lawn bowls, most would survive. But where will our evidence for this come from? Not from statistical data of under-thirty-year-old lawn bowlers, if there are none. Even so, how do I decide that ‘under thirty’ is the relevant category? It may be important to note the low fatality rate among people under thirty in general, but this alone will not distinguish between the hang-gliding and lawn bowling cases. At any rate, it is not clear whether I should consider the people under thirty throughout the world, or in my house, or those with red hair, or those that don’t smoke, and so forth. Clearly our judgements as to which classes of events are relevant for assigning probabilities must involve judgements about the *causally* relevant features of an event. But then of course our judgements concerning causal relations are based in part on observed statistical regularities. In any realistic case, the matter gets exceedingly complex and there is no simple formula for making judgements of probabilities.

My purpose in the preceding discussion has been merely to bring out some of the complexities involved in using observed frequencies of event outcomes to make judgements of probability. Given that there is no systematic method for drawing probabilistic conclusions from frequency data,⁹ and indeed it is doubtful that there even could be, it becomes extremely implausible that a conclusion as general and as strong as Hume’s could possibly be defended. At any rate,

9 Perhaps there is a notion of probability which is defined in terms of actual relative frequencies of event outcomes. But the notion we are concerned with is that of a *degree of reasonable belief* in the light of evidence, for we are in the end concerned with the rationality of belief in miracles. It is bridging the gap between frequency data and rational belief which is a subtle and complex matter.

How to
decide whether
a miracle
is plausible

Hume has certainly given us insufficient grounds for accepting it. We cannot conclude that it is always more likely for people to lie or be deceived, than for a miracle to have occurred.

Hume, then, fails to show that we could not *possibly* have sufficient evidence that a miracle has occurred. That is, he has not shown it is *always* more likely for people to lie or be deceived. This is not surprising, given the strength of the claim; it is hard to prove that anything is *always*, without exception, the case. Nonetheless, the sceptic may still argue that it is extremely *difficult* to establish the occurrence of a miracle. To thoroughly address this point we would need to look at specific cases. Here I will just make some general points about how to approach the matter.

1. Is it likely that a miracle would happen?

If we are presented with a report of a miracle, can we take the report seriously? Is it ever probable that such a thing would be true? The important factor here will be our theological presuppositions. The likelihood of an event such as the resurrection varies greatly relative to different sets of background beliefs. Certain background assumptions, such as the existence of God, may raise the probability of miracles significantly. If I have reason (on other grounds) to believe that Jesus was no ordinary man, my expectancy of his fate after death will be affected. We must take this seriously, for it is often glossed over in discussions of miracles (it is not taken seriously by Hume). It is in an important sense quite unrealistic to discuss whether a miracle happened, without reference to anything else. For *if* God is real, and *if* he promised a messiah who would not be held by the grave, *then* the claim that one particular person rose from the grave becomes more likely. The background beliefs that a person holds make a real difference to assessment of the likelihood of a particular event.

It is only reasonable, then, that an atheist should consider the resurrection extremely unlikely, a theist somewhat

more likely and someone who already believes that Jesus was God incarnate should find the event plausible even before considering further evidence (note such judgements have nothing to do with statistical regularities of past events). The *truth* of whether Jesus rose from the dead is not in any sense relative to what people believe—he either did rise or he didn't. But there is an important sense in which the *rationality* of a person's belief that Jesus rose is relative to her background beliefs. Of course we might raise questions about the truth or rationality of these background beliefs—or we may want to begin to persuade a person to take on certain background beliefs. In any case, we can ask, *given* that she believes this and that, what attitude should she hold to the resurrection?

There are two consequences to this. First, while consideration of the views of others is important in any inquiry, ultimately your judgements must be based on your own background beliefs not anyone else's. This might seem trivial, but one implication is that your success or lack of success in convincing others of your own views should have little bearing on what you come to believe. In special cases, such as when everyone around disagrees with me on one point while we agree on so many others, I might be forced to wonder if my reasoning has gone astray. But this is not the case in most discussions. I might have available to me more information than those around me. We typically find that there are a wide variety of views and people are coming from vastly different backgrounds. It is sometimes insisted that the *burden of proof* rests on those who affirm that miracles have occurred. It is not clear just what this amounts to, but if it entails that one should be able to convince others of a view before one accepts it then this is clearly wrong. My inability to convince someone may be due to a failure to find points of agreement on which to begin discussion. I may simply not know of any argument for my position which begins from assumptions which others accept. Either way, this is of no concern to me in figuring out what is true.

We often speak of *objectivity* as a virtue in inquiry. If by this we mean not being swayed by prejudices and emotions

which we know are not aimed at the truth, then this is good advice. But there is an important sense in which an appropriate line of reasoning is relative to the subject who is reasoning. My judgements are formed by integrating new data into my own view of the world and having it face the tribunal of my own set of background beliefs. These background beliefs are certainly open to revision, but such revisions are made in the light of my overall view of the world. If I believe there is a God who created and controls all of nature, if it strikes me that Jesus was no ordinary man, these claims can and should play a role in my judging the likelihood of Jesus' resurrection. It may be appropriate to question these beliefs, but we should be under no illusion that my judgements of the likelihood of a miracle should take into consideration only those facts that are uncontroversial.

The belief that the world was created and is continually controlled by an almighty being not only makes the occurrence of a miracle more probable, it provides one with an entirely different framework in which to consider the case. For when we are dealing with the actions of a *personal* agent, and not merely the blind forces of nature, such features as the *purpose* and *significance* of the event become relevant. If I were to hear that a friend has quit university and has been living in a tree for some weeks, I might find the story too hard to believe. The problem is not that she could not do this, it just seems unlikely given her behaviour in the past. But when I hear that she is protesting the logging of rain forests, the story makes more sense and is far more plausible. The analogy is loose, but in a similar way God has no difficulty in bringing about any event at all, but an understanding of the *purpose* that God might have in bringing about a miracle, can make such an event far more believable.¹⁰

The second point to draw from the relativity of rational belief which I have been stressing, is that we should have a modest view about the force of our *arguments*. On the one hand we have Christian evangelists insisting that they can

10 For further discussion on this point see C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, Fontana Books, London, 1967, pp. 111-67.

prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus rose from the dead, and on the other, sceptics insisting that they can completely demolish such a claim. Both have an unrealistic view of the issue. Sometimes our arguments fail to convince others due to their stubbornness, ignorance, irrationality or fear of the consequences. But often it is just that considerations that we find compelling are not so to someone with a radically different set of background beliefs. We might try to challenge these other beliefs but we will face the same problem again. This is not to suggest that discussion on these matters is not worthwhile. Arguments help draw our attention to logical relations between various propositions and hence guide us in adjusting our overall view of things in a coherent way. The cumulative effect of such discussions, together with various experiences and learning, may be that someone changes her views in a radical way (such as to believe in the resurrection) but we should not overestimate the significance of a set of arguments alone.

2. Can we have evidence that a miracle happened? Let us turn now to the other side of the evidence: the testimonies and other external historical details which support the occurrence of a miracle. I want to consider the force of such evidence even for someone with no prior belief in God and hence for whom miracles are extremely improbable. According to Hume, the probability of the miracle having happened will be low, and the probability that the witnesses were wrong will be high. Is that true?

First note that we cannot afford to be too sceptical in general about knowledge based on testimony, for so much of what we believe comes to us this way. Indeed even our evidence that miracles are improbable is largely based on what we have been told. Very few of us have directly observed what happens as people die, nor do many of us understand the biological process of death. What we do know comes largely from what our parents or our teachers or our textbooks told us. So any general scepticism about the reliability of testimony would tend also to weaken the case *against* miracles.¹¹

Moreover, we must be aware of the relevance of different pieces of evidence. It is true that a great many bridges have collapsed throughout history and throughout the world, yet this does not make me doubt the reliability of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Knowledge of features specific to *that* bridge might support an extremely low probability of it failing. Similarly, factors specific to a particular set of reports might give them much greater credibility than reports in general. In determining how likely it is that a report is accurate, it is often useful to consider what it would take for the report to be false, in *this* particular case given the specific details we know. Might the reporters have lied? Did they have a motive to, or did they have a motive not to (say, if they were under threat of persecution)? Were they just mistaken? How might such a mistake have come about? It is not that we must be able to tell a convincing story about *how* the reports could be false, in order to conclude that they are. But by focusing only on the improbability of the miracle we can fail to notice just how improbable the alternative is also.

Furthermore, there is not only testimonial evidence to consider, but further historical facts which require explanation. One example often cited in the case of the resurrection is the astonishing emergence of Christianity in Jerusalem, shortly after Jesus' crucifixion—a faith which seems to have been founded on belief in his resurrection. Events such as these (about which there is no doubt at all) may lend support to the overall case for a miracle. For such an event is improbable on the assumption that the miracle did *not* occur—but it is to be expected on the assumption that it did. That is, if there was no resurrection, the emergence of Christianity is highly improbable; but if there was a resurrection, the emergence of Christianity is very likely. What we have overall is a complex web of facts and hypotheses,

11 C. D. Broad makes a similar point in 'Hume's theory of the credibility of miracles', in A. Sesonske and N. Fleming (eds), *Human Understanding: Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume*, Wadsworth Publishing Co., California, 1965, pp. 95-6.

with various evidential links of the form 'if A happened, then it is most likely that B'. So each hypothesis we consider will be in tension with other elements of the web.

We might reason for instance that if it were the case that Jesus' body was still rotting in the tomb, then it is most likely that the authorities would have displayed it in order to crush the Christian faith (for they had every motive to). And if they *had* produced the corpse, then it is almost certain that Christianity would have been destroyed (for the early Christians believed in nothing less than the literal bodily resurrection). Given that the faith was not destroyed, it is implausible that his body was still in the tomb. Of course there is a whole lot more to consider than this. Our inquiry should aim at achieving a theory with the best overall explanatory coherence. Looked at in this way, we can see just how inadequate was Hume's account of the balancing of probabilities.

A final point to note concerning evidence is just how powerful the cumulative effect of independent pieces of evidence can be. It is a familiar point in the case of forensic evidence, that while the individual facts considered in isolation lend only meagre support to a case, their combined effect may be great. There are good theoretical grounds for the phenomenon. A crucial factor in the force of a piece of evidence for a hypothesis is the *prior* likelihood of that evidence. The prior likelihood is how likely it is that the evidence would have happened in any case, whether or not the hypothesis is true.

When we are considering eye-witness accounts as evidence for an event, we need to ask how likely it is that the account would have been made if the event actually did not happen. If the reporter has a reputation for always saying the same thing regardless of the truth, then his reports have a high prior likelihood. That is, the reporter would have said what he said anyway, regardless of what actually happened. On the other hand, if there is no reason to think he has lied, or if it is extremely unlikely he would have lied, then the report has a lower prior likelihood. The same goes for any piece of evidence. If it would have happened anyway, we

don't take it as evidence for the event. If it is extremely unlikely it would have happened without the event, then we take it as strong evidence for the event.

Now whatever the prior likelihood of each particular piece of evidence may be, the prior likelihood of *all* of them obtaining (say, of several people reporting the very same event) will often be extremely low.¹² That means if there are several independent pieces of evidence, they can add together to make a very strong case for the event.¹³ Contrary to Hume, then, there is no guarantee in advance that the probability of the miracle, given our total evidence, will be low. If we want to be sure whether a miracle occurred, we have no choice but to look carefully at the evidence.

Can a miracle
provide evidence
for religious
belief?

Finally, we turn to consider whether the occurrence of a miracle can provide evidence for religious beliefs. If we can demonstrate that a miracle happened, does that give us grounds for accepting (say) Christianity? Much of the discussion about violation of the laws of nature which I earlier dismissed addresses this point. It is argued that if miracles are not in some way contrary to natural laws, then they are not significantly distinguished from everyday events, and there is no special reason to believe that a supernatural power is involved. Even if we could demonstrate that this

12 This will depend of course on how independent we take the various pieces of evidence to be. If there is some suspicion that the reports were copied, their combined effect is diminished.

13 Using the calculus of probabilities we can see why this is the case. If for simplicity we assume that the elements of our set of evidential statements $\{E_1, E_2, \dots, E_n\}$ are entirely independent, then the probability of a miracle M on this total evidence is given by the formula

$$P(M|E_1 \ \& \ E_2 \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ E_n) = \frac{P(M) \times P(E_1|M) \times P(E_2|M) \times \dots \times P(E_n|M)}{P(E_1) \times P(E_2) \times \dots \times P(E_n)}$$

The crucial point here is that the value of the denominator $P(E_1) \times P(E_2) \times \dots \times P(E_n)$ will become very small very quickly as we increase n , regardless of the individual probabilities of the evidential statements. Hence the value of the expression will increase dramatically as we obtain new pieces of independent evidence.

‘miracle’ happened, there is no reason to say it is supernatural; it is just another (albeit strange) instance of the natural world. Antony Flew argues that

It is only and precisely insofar as it is something really transcendent—something, so to speak, which nature by herself could not contrive—that such an occurrence could force us to conclude that some supernatural power is being revealed.¹⁴

In a similar vein, J. L. Mackie¹⁵ argues that the believer in miracles is stuck with the awkward task of not only arguing that a particular event occurred, but also that this event violated a genuine law of nature, if he is to claim that the event is of some supernatural significance. And these two tasks are difficult to achieve together.

First of all, we note that both Flew and Mackie are assuming a dichotomy between natural and supernatural that is not necessary, as already discussed above. Moreover, regardless of whether we are “forced”, what we want to know is what conclusions the occurrence might *support* and how it might support them. And if we step back for a moment and consider a specific case, the objections of Flew and Mackie are not compelling. Surely it is just plain obvious that *if* we were to know that Jesus rose from the dead, this would provide some support for the truth of Christianity.

Ironically, the fact that miracles provide evidence for religious hypotheses follows directly from a principle which Mackie himself has defended, and requires no assumptions about violations of natural laws.¹⁶ The principle states that a piece of evidence raises the likelihood of a hypothesis

14 A. Flew, ‘Miracles’, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1972 ed., vol. 5, p. 348.

15 J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982, pp. 13-29.

16 J. L. Mackie, ‘The relevance criterion of confirmation’, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 1969, 20, pp. 27-40. More concisely, the principle is $P(H|E) > P(H)$ if and only if $P(E|H) > P(E)$. This discussion is about the philosophical principles concerning evidence as support for hypotheses; it does not address the biblical issue of whether miracles were meant to provide evidence for the supernatural (see ‘Addendum’, p. 29).

whenever that evidence is more likely given the hypothesis. The principle follows from the axioms of probability and is central to commonsense reasoning. Footprints in the dirt confirm that someone has been walking there since the footprints are more likely to be there given that someone did walk there. The sound of the siren suggests that there is a fire nearby, for a siren is more likely to be heard when there is a fire nearby.

Flew and Mackie both agree that while miracles are extremely improbable, their occurrence is more likely on the assumption that God exists. And as we discussed above, more specific religious beliefs may raise further the likelihood of a miracle. So it follows from Mackie's criterion of confirmation that the occurrence of miracles may confirm religious beliefs. For instance, since the resurrection of Jesus is far more likely on the assumption that he was divine, the resurrection, if we knew it to have occurred, would confirm Jesus' divinity. Of course it does not *prove* it, but it does provide substantial support.

To sum up then, the philosophical objections to miracles fail. We can, in principle, have sufficient evidence to believe that a miracle has occurred. And if we did, this could provide evidence for religious beliefs. Nothing I have argued should increase our credulity about miracles in general, before considering specific evidence. It may well turn out that there is insufficient evidence for miracles. Or it might not. I have merely sought to remove some of the philosophical mistakes which can impede a serious investigation of the evidence. As to whether any miracles have occurred—let the reader be the judge. ❀

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