

The cogency of any argument for the existence of God based on the occurrence of miracles faces huge hurdles. Philosophically, miracles have proven hard to define. Definitions are problematic unless they include the action of the Deity in the explanation, which therefore fatally flaws any formal attribution of any miracles so defined to God. Even if successfully defined, miracles are relentlessly subjective experiences and, as such, lack convincing appeal to the uninvolved skeptic. Even then, should a skeptic actually personally witness something convincingly miraculous, any attribution to God, without having some prior knowledge of what you suspect God to be, remains tenuous. The problem of evil and the suffering world would mean that any God so proven would be shown to be fickle and mean spirited.

The most massive hurdle is, however, David Hume's devastating critique that it is always more likely that the bearer of evidence of a miracle is mistaken than that a miracle actually occurred.

Hume states:

That no testimony is 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 endeavors to establish.¹

Hume goes on to deny that any miracle has had sufficient attestation by men of sufficient learning, that human nature is attracted to the wonder of miracles, that they abound amongst the primitive and barbarous, and that they are used to promote mutually exclusive belief systems.² He is not saying that miracles could not in theory exist, just that "we never have good reasons for believing that they have happened."³

Not all of Hume's arguments retain their force today. We could usefully refine Hume by omitting the criticism based on the claims of rival religious systems, as faiths have proven able to see truth in each other⁴, and remove the condescension towards other cultures and eras as we appreciate premodern modes of thought and continue to marvel at the modern readings of premodern texts still used to "prove" the miracles in the Bible. Hume would have not, however, been surprised that the global explosion in information dissemination seems to have succeeded merely in bringing Jerry Springer into all our living rooms: our attraction to the extraordinary is showing no signs of waning.

¹ David Hume, "The Evidence for Miracles is Weak," in M. Peterson, W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach, and D. Basinger (eds) *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 417.

² Hume, "Miracles," 418-21.

³ J. L. Mackie. *The Miracle of Theism* (New York: Clarendon, 1982), 19.

⁴ Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, 15.

There also still remains, for the proponents of the miraculous, Hume's convincing core logic that "whatever tends to show that it would have been a violation of natural law tends for that very reason to make it most unlikely that it actually happened".⁵ If it is ordinary it is not a miracle, but anything incredible enough to shake a skeptic into believing requires such a high standard of proof as to be something that would never be worthy of the attribution of credence. When the laws of nature are brought into the definition such difficulties mount, but if left out then little is left to define outside a religious context.

The problem of definition devolves to the choice between hard definitions that risk making the miraculous by definition impossible, and soft definitions, which risk making miracles universal and mundane. McPherson gives a strong definition as "an event in which the laws of nature are broken or suspended" and a weak definition as "an unusual or unexpected event which is seen as having religious significance".⁶ If we define a miracle as an occurrence that is outside the natural law, we have a definition that preserves the special nature of miracle. But since "natural law" is only knowable from cumulative scientific experience, any so called miracle tests that natural law and corrects the natural law so that it is reformulated to incorporate the new evidence. Sweet notes that this leads to the paradox that a miracle is always frustrated in its attempt to violate the natural law, because it would make what it is violating disappear.⁷ This is, in essence, one aspect of the problem of the God of the gaps. As science uncovers more of the mechanism of the universe, many areas that were the province of God in a premodern context and elicited awe and wonder have been shown to be following physical laws. Even the extraordinary and the exceptional become areas for study that will illuminate aspects of the natural law beyond that revealed by the more commonplace. Quantum mechanics reveals truths that are so counterintuitive and non-Newtonian as to seem miraculous, yet have provided reliable tools for further expansion of knowledge. Our understanding of medicine allows us to explain many "miracle" cures statistically. We know, for example, that the prognosis for disseminated lung cancer is appalling and spontaneous resolution unlikely, but survival is not miraculous as such because there is a five year survival of about 1%. So over populations there will be quite a lot of unexpected cancer survivors, which epidemiologically have to be incorporated into the natural law of how cancer works. This leads to research to look at the immune phenomenon that may have caused the cancer to regress in such rare instances. As knowledge increases the areas left to God shrink as the explanations for supposedly miraculous events in psychology, medicine and physics become apparent. Even where the explanation is not obvious,

⁵ Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, 26.

⁶ Thomas McPherson, "Philosophy and Religious Belief," in James Churchill and David Jones, *An Introductory Reader in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: SPCK, 1979), 121.

⁷ Ninian Smart, in Churchill and Jones *Introductory Reader*, 116.

experience has shown the wisdom of deferment of acceptance of the seemingly miraculous, as future experience and research will reveal its origins.

Smart goes on to explore the possible relief from the paradox that the miraculous is by definition impossible, by first postulating a variant on a soft definition, which he feels is unsatisfactory, then restating the paradox as “either all events are caused, in which case the violation of a law of nature seems to be ruled out; or we regard the miraculous as an uncaused – a random – event.”⁸ To make such a random event meaningful requires the introduction of the supernatural. The introduction of God into the definition at this stage to allow meaning prevents any external guarantee of the existence of God from the occurrence of a miracle. The attribution also requires the assumption that somehow you know that it is in the nature of God to use miracles to promote belief. That this is not an attractive proposition gains support from the Gospels where even in a worldview where miracles make sense and abound in the traditions of the early Church, a competing strand despising them survived.

From a practical perspective, should our cancer survivor have gone to a healing service and been “healed” then he will see the presence of God in his cure. The miracle makes sense as a religious experience. These experiences fit under a soft definition of miracles where we are looking at an unusual occurrence in which an individual feels the divine. Since in this case we are talking religious language, a miracle is a revelation because only the recipient is aware of its significance. Questions of violations of natural law become irrelevant because the belief system is already in place and the event brings the participant into the divine. The problem here is that having included God in the definition it cannot be used as proof. If you don’t start with God, you don’t finish with him.

Taking the more likely example of the ninety-nine percent who don’t survive five years, what if the cancer sufferer is “healed” but dies anyway? Does he have the further anguish of knowing he did not have enough faith to be healed? As the human experience has always had significant elements of pain and a hundred percent death rate, our urge for the miraculous is seeking an escape from reality and merely increases the individual tragedy of life and death. Acceptance of the nature of life and death would seem a more profitable exercise in the vast area of our lives where nothing approaches a firmly defined miracle. Choosing to see the miraculous in the response of individuals and communities to the challenge of human existence as a religious miracle has its own validity despite Hume’s cynicism about Christianity.⁹ On a broader scale the God of miracles is so appalling as to

⁸ Smart, “Religious Truth,” 118.

⁹ Hume, 426.

be unworthy of belief. Pailin describes him as like “a doctor in a hospital full of patients in agony who chooses to relieve only a minute fraction of them although quite capable of healing them all fully”.¹⁰

The existence of evil has been seen as a corrective against any divine attribution to miracles. In a remarkable correspondence over 14 years in *Sophia*, David Basinger¹¹ and Robert Larmer¹² debate the nature of miracles. The matter devolves to Basinger’s response to a challenge on a postulated indisputable miracle with the rejoinder that no matter how unavoidable the theistic consequences of a miracle might seem, the counterweight of the existence of far greater amounts of evil in the world would make continuing to reject the miracle as proof of God’s existence not unreasonable.

Miracles can certainly exist as subjective revelation within a framework of individual belief but can never prove God’s existence to a skeptic. Under such “soft” definitions miracles can be described but, since these designations include God from the start, they can never be used to verify the existence of God. Any God that would defy a natural law, presumably of its own design, to prove its existence is inscrutable to be sure. That any such postulated proof would only describe a capricious being that dispenses pain and suffering to the many and bounty to his chosen few makes the failure of the argument no great tragedy. The sort of “hard” definition miracle that might convince a nonbeliever fails to overcome Hume’s critique of miracles that remains, at its base, valid.

¹⁰ David Pailin, *Groundwork of Philosophy of Religion* (London: Epworth, 1986), 132.

¹¹ Basinger, David “Miracle, Evil and Justified Belief: Further Clarification.” *Sophia* 34 (1995) 58-62.

¹² Larmer, Robert A. “Miracles, evil and justified belief: some final comments.” *Sophia* 36 (1997) 79-86.

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