

# Miracles AO1 Handout

## Part 1

### **The Possibility of Miracles**

1. One definition of a miracle is “An event brought about by God”. By God is meant the God of the Christians, Jews and Muslims. The defining properties which Christianity, Judaism and Islam ascribe to are very similar – e.g. omnipotence, omniscience, all goodness etc. Therefore it seems valid to say that Christians, Jews and Muslims worship the same God. However, that is not to deny that they hold different further properties. For instance, Christians unlike Muslims believe in the Trinity.

If we do define miracles in this way then it is of course logically necessary (that is, necessary in virtue of the meaning of the terms used) that there can be no miracles unless the Christian God exists. Thus there cannot be miracles which are evidence of his existence because accepting a description of an event as a miracle commits a person to accept the existence of God. The problem is that miracles are said to occur in the context of other religions, whilst others argue that beings other than God could have brought these about. But this is not possible if the definition of a miracle is an event brought about by God. For these reasons to require that a miracle be an event brought about by God seems to place a restriction on the use of the term that is not justified. Possibly the definition should be widened to include any agent, not necessarily God, to work miracles. But can a human being perform a miracle? In the Bible it suggests that various Apostles such as Peter and Paul did miracles. But it might be argued that God did the miracle in response to being asked to do it. It was God who did the miracles not the Apostles.

(adapted from The Concept of Miracle by Swinburne)

2. A miracle has been defined as “an event brought about by God”. This suggests that naturalism (the belief that nothing exists beyond the natural world) leaves no room for miracles whilst a theistic position that affirms the existence of a creator of the natural order does allow for miracles. This then implies that any argument from miracles to the existence of God can only succeed if there is some prior reason to assume the existence of God. Only then can the idea of a miracle make sense.

Some argue that some reported events, such as the resurrection of Jesus, do infer the existence and activity of God since it is the best explanation of the occurrence of the event. Also appeal is made to the classic arguments for the existence of God. So when evidence supporting “miraculous events” is offered, it is valid to refer to them as possible miracles. The concept of a miracle should make perfectly good sense to critics of theism. The idea of an exception to the laws of nature by a creator of nature makes sense. So the question arises – does the naturalistic scheme or the theistic scheme offer the best account for our total experience of the world? It is no use arguing about whether miracles can occur until that question has been settled.

(adapted from In Defence of Miracles edited by Geivett and Habermas)

3. A miracle is defined as “an event above or contrary to nature which is explicable only as a direct act of God.” However, the definition is such, that whatever scientists may say, it can be doubted whether miracles have in fact occurred. If the scientist has claimed that a certain event “is inexplicable in terms of natural causes and must therefore be ascribed to supernatural agents,” she is speaking as a philosopher rather than a scientist. She may say that it is inexplicable in terms of the laws of nature and so not explainable by natural agents - though that is doubtful. But to say that it must be ascribed to supernatural agents is to say something that no one could possibly have the right to affirm on the evidence alone. To offer an explanation is very different from reporting the evidence of an occurrence of an inexplicable event. No matter how strange an event someone reports, the statement that it must have been due to a supernatural agent cannot be part of that report.

(Adapted from *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* edited by Flew and MacIntyre)

## Part 2

### Laws of nature

1. The task of the theoretical scientist is to set forth the laws of nature. In any field he will have a number of observational results. He seeks the most natural generalisation or extrapolation of those results, or, as I shall put it, the simplest formula from which past results can be deduced.

Sometimes the scientist will be able to see no simple formula, that is formula of sufficient simplicity, compatible with a collection of data in some field, and in that case will not feel justified in adopting any one formula and making predictions on the basis of it. This means that laws of nature do not just describe what happens. They describe what happens in a regular and predictable way. When what happens is entirely irregular and unpredictable, its occurrence is not something describable by natural laws.

Given this understanding of a law of nature, what is meant by a violation of a law of nature? Hume seems to mean an occurrence of a non-repeatable counter-instance to a law of nature. This assumes that the operation of a law of nature is logically compatible with the occurrence of an exception to its operation. However, some may argue that a universal law has the form “so-and-sos always do such- and- such” which seems incompatible with a counter-instance reported by “this is a so-and-so and did not do such-and-such.” It is argued that both statements cannot be true together and so the law is wrong. However, if it could also be the case that if we left the law unmodified, we have good reason to believe it would give correct predictions in all other conceivable circumstances, then it seems valid to claim that there is a law of nature and in this one instance it has been violated. Hence the idea of a law on nature being violated is coherent.

(adapted from *The Concept of Miracle* by Swinburne)

2. Alastair McKinnon argues that laws of nature do not in any way constrain the course of nature. They exert no opposition or resistance to anything, not even to the odd or exceptional. They are simply highly generalised shorthand descriptions of how things do in fact happen. Hence there can be no suspensions of natural law rightly understood. It would be better to replace the phrase “natural law” with “the actual course of events”. In

this understanding, nothing in the definition of natural law would exclude such events as the resurrection of Jesus. Hence, to define miracles as a violation of a law of nature is a contradiction in terms.

In this view, no question of miracles can therefore arise. Whatever happens must be included in his understanding of natural laws. Since miracles are unique events, not necessarily repeatable in the same circumstances, a “natural law” about human death would have to take the form “when human beings are dead, they stay dead, except Jesus, Lazarus, the son of the widow of Nain etc”.

(adapted from In Defence of Miracles edited by Geivett and Habermas)

3. 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. Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die suddenly: because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle...

....the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events arise from their concurrence, than to admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature.

(On Miracles by Hume)