

12C More on Miracles

Miracles and science

The position of the believing scientist must account for both physical laws and miracles. If only physical laws exist there is no place for Divine interventions. On the other hand, if everything is supernatural we can't depend on fixed scientific laws.

Modern science does not allow for miracles. This has worked very well in producing our technological world. As an engineer, I utilized science my entire career without once taking miracles into account (and I believe in miracles). All of science is based on natural causes, including medicine, weather forecasting, genetics, and all other branches of science. This also holds true when science is used to understand events from the distant past, such as the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius which destroyed Pompeii, or the conclusion that glacial ice sheets shaped the North American landscape. [1]

In the past miracles have been defined so that they are impossible: "A miracle is something that transcends natural law. A natural law is something that cannot be transcended. Hence miracles are impossible." This is simply a word game and proves nothing.

Many scientists appear to have a specific bias against miracles. In a large part this is the result of holding a naturalistic worldview. If miracles are rejected because they are unrepeatable, then we might also reject history as unrepeatable.

The worldview issue is not whether cause and effect can exist but whether we have cause and effect in a closed system (no external inputs possible) or cause and effect in an open system (in which God can intervene).[2]

William Lane Craig comments about this:

On the atheist or naturalistic view the universe is a closed system because it is all there is, and there's nothing outside it. But for the theist we believe that it's not closed because there's a transcendent Creator and Designer of the universe who can act in it...Natural laws describe what happens within the universe. That is to say, they predict what will happen given that no supernatural agent intervenes. But if a supernatural agent does intervene and causes something which does not lie within the productive power of the things in the universe the laws of nature are not violated because they only predict what would happen in the absence of any sort of divine intervention.

The scientific laws have implicit in them ceteris paribus conditions. That is to say they predict what will happen all things being equal... That is to say, given that there is no divine intervention into this system this is how this system operates. So if there is a divine intervention the law isn't violated because the law has built into it these implicit ceteris paribus conditions. So a miracle,

in short, isn't a violation of the laws of nature. Rather a miracle is an event which does not lie within the productive power of nature. [3]

What does a “natural law” actually mean?

Several observations can now be made on the relationship between miracles and scientific laws. First, the term natural laws as usually understood is misnomer. In a strict sense nature does not have mathematical laws, but rather what we may call forces. At present they may be generally categorized as gravitational, electromagnetic, and weak and strong field forces ..We have used the term scientific laws to connote the fact that, although as maps or models they do tell us something about nature, they are not laws in any absolute sense, much less the only true way of describing nature's working. Thus it is hardly “scientific” to rule out miracles because they supposedly break or violate the “laws of nature.” According to the Bible, God does not “intervene” in a semi-independent order of nature; nor is he a God-of-the-gaps working only in cracks and crevices of the universe ...

Our scientific laws and theories do not prescribe (legislate) what must have happened in the past or will happen in the future. They describe (explain in mathematical terms) some repeated events we have been able to observe so far. At best, scientific laws predict what will probably happen in the future – since we believe in the orderliness of God's creation. All they prescribe is our expectations, so that we can make predictions and act accordingly. [4]

The law of gravity does not actually cause or explain gravity. Laws of nature simply describe what normally happens, not why they exist in the first place. God can certainly interrupt the normal flow without “breaking” the laws of nature (which He established in the first place.) We need to be careful not to confuse law/mechanism with cause/agency.

Evidence visible to us is only part of the data that exists.

Not every statement made by a scientist is a statement about science. [5]

In Defense of Miracles

Lee Strobel offers a definition:

Personally, I'm partial to the definition offered by the late Richard L. Purtill, professor emeritus of philosophy at Western Washington University: “ A miracle is an event (1) brought about by the power of God that is (2)a temporary (3) exception (4) to the ordinary course of nature (5) for the purpose of showing that God as acted in history.” [6]

William Lane Craig adds:

The question is: what could conceivably make miracles not just logically possible, but really, historically possible? Clearly the answer is the personal God of theism. For if a personal God exists, then he serves as the transcendent cause to produce events in the universe which are incapable of being produced by causes within the universe (that is to say, events which are naturally impossible. But it is to such a personal, transcendent God that the orthodox defenders of miracles appealed...

It seems to me, therefore, that the lesson to be learned from the classical debate over miracles, a lesson that has been reinforced by contemporary scientific and philosophical thought, is that the presupposition of the impossibility of miracles should, contrary to the assumption of nineteenth and for the most part twentieth century biblical criticism, play no role in determining the historicity of any event. While many scholars still operate under such an assumption, there seems now to be a growing recognition that such a presupposition is illegitimate. The presupposition against the possibility of miracles survives in theology only as a hangover from an earlier Deist age and ought to be once for all abandoned. [7]

Physicist Stephen Barr writes:

Most scientist would have a hard time accepting the possibility of miracles. Having seen the wonderful perfection of the laws of physics, a violation of those laws almost seems like a rent in that finely wrought fabric. But I think that if there were no miracles human beings might conclude that nothing was superior to the power of nature, and that we were therefore doomed to be crushed beneath that power. Miracles show both God's love for us and His power over nature, and therefore give us hope. [8]

Theologian Craig Keener has authored a scholarly volume on the New Testament miracles as seen in various cultures [9]

(Keener) challenges us to ask—not only as persons of faith, but also as committed academicians—one of the most important questions that we can: Is the natural world a closed system after all? This monumental study combines historical inquiry into late antiquity, philosophical and existential criticism of antisupernaturalism and the legacy of David Hume's epistemological skepticism, and ethnographic study of the phenomenon of the miraculous throughout the Majority World. The result is a book that is important not only for the historical study of Jesus and the New Testament but also for our understanding of our contemporary world beyond the boundaries of our social location and its worldview. [10]

Miracles as Data

Besides the purely physical realm there is also a spiritual realm to be considered in the Biblical Christian position, an unseen world of angels and demons. Interaction between the spiritual and physical realms is limited, so that miracles, or intervention by a spiritual being to suspend a

natural law, are rare. The fact that this realm is inhabited by rational beings, some of which act for good and some for evil, is important for the interpretation of some events.

There is no reason why we can't examine miracles like we examine all other events.

Can we document the conditions before and after the miraculous event?

- When did it occur?
- Where did it occur?
- If it involved a person, to whom did it occur?
- Did it occur in answer to a prayer?
- What specifically happened?

In his book *Supernatural and Strange Happenings in the Bible* [11] R.C. Brenner takes the Biblical accounts at face value and examines miracles as data. He classifies 194 specific incidents in categories of Demonstration of Power over:

- Matter
- People
- Life and Death
- Demons
- Nature
- Animals
- Prophecy

Brenner mentions C. S. Lewis as a brilliant writer who integrated His belief in Christ into all of his writings, including the Narnia novels with “multiple dimensions and passageways into and out of portals.”

Brenner writes:

Our understanding of the world is based on scientific method, a process of observing, modeling, testing, and verification through measurements and experiments. What about the world beyond the space-time continuum? What about other dimensions?

Here we enter the world of the spiritual, a world we cannot see directly. A spiritual realm exists that is invisible to human eyes...In this world different and unique scientific laws apply, and time flows at a different speed. [12]

Naturalistic Explanations

Those who come from a naturalistic worldview usually come up with alternate explanations for Biblical miracles:

- When Jesus fed the 5,000 He simply inspired everyone in the crowd to share their lunch with others by showing the example of a kid who shared his lunch of bread and fish.
- When Jesus walked on water He simply knew where the hidden rocks were under the surface.
- When Jesus rose from the dead after the crucifixion He hadn't really died and simply was revived by the cool temperature inside the tomb and so was able to push the stone away.

Those who take the Bible as inerrant truth believe that a supernatural God did real miracles through Jesus (and can still do them now).

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