

Can a scientist believe in miracles?

In my first year of university I have already been asked 'How can you as a scientist believe in God?' Unfortunately this is not a unique incidence in the contemporary world. In the 21st century there is a prevailing naturalistic zeitgeist within the scientific discipline which seeks to banish God and the *possibility* of miracles out of credibility. Richard Dawkins encapsulates this succinctly in his discussion with Francis Collins, 'If ever there was a slamming of the door in the face of constructive investigation, it is the word miracle.' (1) The question is 'Is this true?' If I am to be a rigorous and respectable scientist must I relinquish my belief in miracles?

We can all have some sympathy to why some scientists are antagonistic to miracles. Richard Dawkins in his debate against John Lennox (2) branded miracles as a science-stopper. Science operates on an inductive principle. Repeat observations and testing hypotheses that match these observations help us to form laws of nature which describe the physical universe around us. We can then use them to investigate events in the past as well as predict the future. For a supernatural being to arbitrarily supersede these laws can be disheartening to a passionate scientist.

The word 'miracle' has been notoriously difficult to define and has its origins from the Latin 'miraculum' meaning to wonder. (3) Unfortunately, this definition is unsatisfactory as many things provoke our wonder and yet we do not classify them as miracles. No one has been more influential in the definition of miracles than David Hume. In his famous essay, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he states that a miracle is 'a violation of natural law' of which he further states that natural laws are 'established by firm and unalterable experience'. (4) These two main premises form a popular argument against miracles sustained in modern times by sceptics trying to refute the occurrences of miracles.

There are several problems with this line of reasoning. First of all, the assertion that human experience has always been uniform thereby providing the basis for the immutability of natural law precluding the occurrence of miracles is patently unjustified for Hume would have to have access to all of the events in the history of the universe and for all people to have had the same experience without exception. This has already been challenged by many people throughout the ages claiming miraculous events have happened. It would seem that Hume refers only to his own experience of life rather than to factor in the rest of humanity. The counter-charge can be made, though, that all reports of miracles are false. This, however, would be begging the question: miracles cannot happen as all human experience is uniform and show that miracles have never happened and therefore all reports of miracles are false, therefore miracles cannot happen. Take, for instance, the famous story about the Indian prince who had never seen ice in his life. It would be unjustified for him to insist that the Icelandic explorers were lying about the existence of ice because he had never seen ice before.

Secondly, Hume's definition of miracles is provocatively influenced by his naturalism. To say that miracles are a violation of the laws of nature 'strawmans' the opposition by favourably defining the terms. Many theists before Hume's time have defined miracle in a different way and would reject his definition. Thomas Aquinas believed that a miracle is an event beyond the powers of natural order and not a violation of it. In addition, people who sustain Hume's argument misunderstand what natural laws are. They make general descriptions of what normally happens if no intervention is made by an external agent. The laws of nature cannot say what must happen and if there is an external agent who can introduce a new event on which the laws can act upon. It follows that miracles are not inimical to the laws of nature, they need to be in place for us to recognise a miracle.

It must be stressed that if there is a God who created the universe ex nihilo then He is endowed with infinite power for whom miracles are a formality. Furthermore God, by definition, is a maximally great being who has the property of omnipotence. Being able to perform miracles, therefore, must be part of His remit. The laws of nature therefore would be subservient to God and not the reverse.

It seems to me that many a scientist enters the discussion about miracles with a priori naturalism and may be the main reason why they reject miracles immediately. Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin shows admirable candour when he says '...materialism is absolute for we cannot allow a Divine foot in the door.' (5) This means that as a naturalist he regards nature as all there is. The naturalistic argument would then be: Naturalism is true, therefore the laws of nature are supreme, miracles are contrary to the laws of nature and therefore miracles cannot happen. This is another unfortunate case of begging the question.

As a key note, people must realise the limits of science. Science cannot say that miracles are impossible due to the fact that science cannot prove anything but can say they are improbable. The scientific endeavour is merely a way of describing the physical universe in evermore accurate terms and therefore neutral on miracles.

So we can conclude that miracles are possible. This does not mean we should believe every miraculous claim. Francis Collins wisely warns us of having a healthy dose of scepticism. If we keep invoking God for seemingly miraculous events when a natural explanation is ready at hand then the credibility of miracles is tarnished. (6) Hume was right when he said we must proportion our beliefs to the strength of the evidence. For the Christian who believes in the resurrection they can rest assured with several eyewitness testimonies constituting strong historical evidence. We, therefore, as scientists can believe in Christianity without foregoing our reason.

CiS Essay References:

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- (4) Hume, An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding X, i, 86
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