

Did Jesus (or anyone else) perform miracles?

Notes are available on the *Philosophy and Ethics* website at: www.mel-thompson.co.uk

What you mean by 'miracle'?

- A pleasant surprise. He's done 'miracles' with that place. It may be used of an unexpected and good event for which there is no known cause. (For example, someone may unexpectedly recover from a serious illness.)
- A person has very special powers. Thus, in the New Testament, the 'miracle' stories of Jesus were recounted in order to illustrate to people who he was and what authority he had.
- An event which is 'a violation of a law of nature'. In which case, it is the sort of thing which science might possible, but at the moment cannot explain.

Evidence?

- The 'Congregation for the Causes of the Saints' investigates accounts of miracles performed by those people who are being considered for canonisation – in other words, to become saints..
- Investigations are made, witnesses interviewed, medical evidence is gathered.
- Something is only accepted as a miracle if there is strong evidence for it having taken place, and no scientific explanation.

Miracles and science

- With the rise of modern science, in the 17th century, the general view of the world was of an ordered mechanism.
- Hume was an **empiricist** – in other words, he believed that all knowledge is based on evidence that we gain through the senses, and which the mind then sorts out to give us the information we need.
- Note: scientific laws are **descriptive**, not **prescriptive**. A 'law of nature' cannot dictate what **must** happen; it summarises what **has been found to happen**.
- Laws of nature sum up what we have observed.

Hume's definition

- *'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... The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), 'That no testimony is ever 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 endeavours to establish;'*...

Fact and evidence

- Hume argued that, since we proportion belief to evidence, there can never be enough evidence to prove that a miracle has taken place. It is always going to be more likely that the person reporting it was mistaken.
- BUT notice that Hume's argument is **not** that miracles cannot happen, but that – given the amount of evidence that has established and confirms a law of nature – there can never be sufficient evidence to **prove** that a law of nature has been violated.

Christian views

- Aquinas (13th century) in *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Miracles are 'those things done by divine agency beyond the order commonly observed in nature.'
- Eric Mascall (20th century), describes as miracle as 'a striking interposition of divine power by which the operations of the ordinary course of nature are overruled, suspended, or modified.'

Religious issues

- If you believe in miracles, you must believe in a God who interferes in the workings of nature. But what sort of God could that be?
- If God needs a miracle to put something right, should he not be blamed for getting it wrong in the first place? In a well-ordered world, miracles should not be necessary.
- Are miracles moral? If one person is saved when 99 are killed, can that person claim that they were spared through a miracle?

Trivial miracles – crosses of light

El Monte (1988)

- 'As word spread about the cross, crowds began lining up to see the phenomenon. While viewing the cross, people kneel and pray, say a rosary, cry, and even faint.'

The Los Angeles Herald Examiner commented:

- 'Whether or not a miracle exists, it is clear that many people in Los Angeles want desperately to see and touch a fingerprint of the creator. All but the most committed atheist would like to have a sign, any sign. Everyone wants to know that we are here for a reason, and that a higher entity stopped by to sell us so.'

Miracles are not shown by analysis

- You can describe something totally, and yet you will find nothing in that description that corresponds to the word 'miracle'.
- When the Catholic Church investigates a miracle, it does no more than try to establish the facts, and to establish that there was no existing medical or scientific explanation.

Bible accounts of miracles...

- They are not science, nor do or did they ever pretend to be.
- They are religious writings, interpreting events – some perfectly normal, others unusual – to make a point about belief in God and what follows from it.
- And they are (by rational standards) morally ambiguous. e.g. the fall of the walls of Jericho

Specialness and meaning

- Religious people sometimes ask 'Why should this happen to me?' when something goes wrong
- They may pray for God to help in a situation of suffering, and they may refer to a fortunate and unexpected event that follows such prayer as a 'miracle'.
- Unless an event has religious meaning, it is not likely to be called a miracle.

Interpretation

- What makes something 'religious' is generally a matter of **interpretation**, rather than fact.
- Religious people may argue that a miracle is an event that is seen as having **special significance in showing God's will**, not necessarily something against a law of nature.

But, if so:

- Why are miracles necessary in a world ruled by an all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing God?

Regularity?

- The Cosmological and Teleological arguments for the existence of God were based on the idea that the world displayed a regularity and design, which suggested the existence of a divine designer.
- If the regularity and predictable nature of the world suggests that it is sustained and guided by God, 'miracles' – which go against that regularity – are an argument **against** God.

Did Jesus (or anyone else) perform miracles?

- A event is an event. One person may call it a miracle, another may not. Is what Jesus did open to natural interpretations?
- Look at the evidence. Weigh up the probability of something unusual having happened with the possibility that the evidence for it was mistaken. And – like Hume – check whether the person giving that evidence has any personal reason to present it in a particular way (i.e. to make it seem more definite, or to give a religious interpretation).
- If someone does perform a miracle (in the strongest, literal sense), is it because of his or her own unusual powers (mind over matter) or simply because he or she is a vehicle for some divine power?

The challenge

- Miracles (along with the 'problem of evil') present most clearly the issues and problems for anyone who believes in God – if you know a person's view on miracles, you know almost all you need to know about their view of God.
