

## BELIEVING IN MIRACLES

by Keith Ward

*Abstract.* Classical Christian definitions of *miracle* speak of events transcending the natural powers of objects. A personal creator, I argue, might well cause such events in order to achieve a supernatural purpose—bringing creatures to eternal life. Miracles—events transcending natural powers, disclosing and realizing the divine purpose—would then be integral to the rational order of nature. David Hume’s arguments against believing reports of miracles are shown to be very weak. Laws of nature, I suggest, are best seen not as exceptionless rules but as context-dependent realizations of natural powers. In that context miracles transcend the natural order not as “violations” but as intelligible realizations of a divine supernatural purpose. Miracles are not parts of scientific theory but can be parts of a web of rational belief fully consistent with science.

*Keywords:* Thomas Aquinas; Benedict XIV; causal powers; Carl Hempel; David Hume; law of nature; miracle.

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Pope Benedict XIV (1738) defined a miracle as an event whose occurrence exceeds the power of visible and corporeal nature. It follows that if miracles occur they must be brought about by spiritual and incorporeal beings. Human persons might perform miracles, however, if they were given powers beyond their nature by a superior spirit, whether angel or God. This definition is slightly more relaxed than that of Thomas Aquinas, who argued that God alone can work miracles, inasmuch as a miracle must occur “outside the natural run of things” and be beyond any natural power—even that of an angel—to bring about (Aquinas 1276, 1a, 110, 4).

There are two main elements in these definitions. A miracle must be an extraordinary event, one that is not part of the normal or regular operation of things, and must be beyond the power of either a corporeal or a natural,

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created being to bring about. If one allows the operation of the general causal principle that no event occurs without any cause, then the occurrence of a miracle requires an incorporeal or supernatural cause, perhaps the action of the Creator of the natural order.

If there is a God, a Creator of the universe, it is plainly possible that God might perform miracles, might bring about events that no created cause has the power of itself to bring about. Any argument that miracles are impossible simply begs the question by assuming that there is no God. Thus, David Hume, who at one point unguardedly speaks of “the absolute impossibility” of miraculous events (Hume [1748] 1902, 125), makes an assumption of atheism to which he is not entitled, by his own professed agnostic principles. An agnostic does not know whether or not there is a God and is bound to admit that miracles are possible. Therefore, miracles could be reliably reported and justifiably believed. And if they were, they would constitute evidence that there is indeed a God.

Hume famously denies that miracles could ever constitute such evidence, but his arguments are exceptionally poor and are found acceptable only by those who are (rightly) impressed by his general philosophical acuteness—an acuteness that does not carry over into his remarks on miracles.

Everything begins to go wrong for Hume when he revises the classical Christian definitions of miracle. Hume’s definition of a miracle as a “violation of a law of nature” differs from the definitions of Benedict and Aquinas, and of Augustine, too, in that he introduces the idea of “a law of nature” and sees miracles as violations of the rule of law in the universe. Of course Aquinas was aware that the natural world behaves in an orderly way most of the time. He speaks of the natural, normal, or regular operation of things and is quite clear that a condition of the rational intelligibility of nature is that there are such regular operations. He speaks of the “natural powers” of objects, their tendency or disposition, in appropriate circumstances and in relation to other objects, to behave in regular and largely predictable ways. There is no reason that such regular tendencies to act should not be formulated and conceived of as “laws of nature,” general principles of the exercise of the natural powers of objects as they have been created by God.

Hume, however, is introducing a hyperinflated sense of a “law” of nature, which views such laws as unbreakable and as absolute principles that govern the occurrence of each and every possible event in the history of the universe. Where such laws are still connected to theism, it can come to seem that it would be an imperfection in God’s work for God to interfere in the presumably perfect order of laws that God has ordained. Among Christian theologians, Friedrich Schleiermacher, D. F. Strauss, and Rudolf Bultmann propound this argument (see Swinburne 1989 and Houston 1994 for good discussions of this issue). It is, I think, an extremely odd argument for those who believe in a personal God to put forth.

It is possible that a personal God might create a universe in which events always and only occur in accordance with a set of absolute and universal laws, laid down unalterably from the beginning. Yet it would be very odd for a person to say, "I intend to act only in accordance with universal laws, not altering them for any reason." Among philosophers, Immanuel Kant perhaps came nearest to such a view, in thinking that all actions should be capable of being generalized as laws for all rational agents. But even he did not think that every human action had to conform to laws that were already laid down in the structure of things, so that no new relationships or creative decisions could ever be made. And Kant's account of human action is notably lacking in those features of feeling, interpersonal relationship, and uniquely individual initiative and response that make human acts fully personal.

Why should a personal God confine divine action to a set of absolute laws? If appeal is made to the desirability of having an intelligible and predictable structure to the universe, such a structure is in no way undermined by the occurrence of some events that, for good reason, transcend that general structure. Rare exceptions do not undermine useful general principles. Even if we accept Hume's tendentious talk of "violating" laws of nature, occasional violations do not destroy the advantage of having general principles, especially when such violations can for all practical purposes be ignored.

The Humean tendency is to think that any variation from a law of nature is improper, untidy, or arbitrary. That is the connotation of the word *violation*. But if we think of laws as having been created by God, the laws themselves must exist for some reason—and if God is a personal agent, that reason could well justify some occurrences that transcend general law-like principles. Suppose God's purpose is, as the New Testament suggests, that there should come into being finite persons who come to know and love God and enjoy the divine presence for ever. In that case an integral part of the structure of created being will be that finite persons should come to be aware of and have some personal relationship with a reality beyond all created being, with God. If that relationship is to involve some sort of personal relation on God's part—for instance, God's making the divine presence known to a finite person or comforting or strengthening that person—there will be some causal power exercised by God that affects the way things happen in the universe, if only in the minds of finite persons. A full causal account of what happens will require reference to the presence and causal action of God, a supernatural and spiritual being.

It seems that any self-revealing act of God in human experience will be, according to Benedict's definition, a miracle. It will be, or will entail, an occurrence in some human brain of events that can be brought about only by God and so are quite beyond the powers of any natural object. We

would not call such an event a miracle, however, because it might be considered to be part of the normal or regular exercise of human powers. Nevertheless, the occurrence of such an event entails that a closed and complete account of events in terms of laws of nature is insufficient if there is a personal God. By a “closed and complete account” I mean one that wholly explains the occurrence of all aspects of physical events without reference to anything outside a set of (in principle) specifiable general laws of nature.

This line of reasoning does not show that miracles are likely to occur if there is a God, but it gets the camel’s nose inside the tent. That is, it shows that any causal account of the natural world must include reference to divine actions as part of a complete explanation of why things happen as they do. The reason this does not affect the physical sciences is that such sciences simply do not mention or concern themselves with these divine actions (of revealing, forgiving, comforting, and strengthening). They do not even have to concern themselves with the question of whether such divine actions leave all of the laws of physical nature intact or whether they modify them in some way that can for all practical purposes be discounted.

A theist will see God as continuously acting in the physical cosmos in order to realize the divine purpose of enabling persons to know and love God. The cosmos will not be a closed causal system that requires no reference to God as a causal agent at any point. Divine acts will not generally “violate” the laws of nature. Nor will they “interfere” with an otherwise complete set of laws. Rather, such fairly frequent divine actions will be seen as integral and “natural” parts of the regular operations of nature, at least in such complex integrated structures as the human brain.

In this context, the question of miracles is the question of whether a God who is constantly causally active in the cosmos sometimes acts in ways that wholly transcend the regular operations of nature for a sufficiently good reason—for instance, to forward in a conspicuous way the purpose of bringing persons to know and love God. At the very least, such extraordinary acts would not be improper or arbitrary. The occurrence of a miracle would be largely a matter of degree, of the extent to which a divine action transcends the normal powers of natural objects and functions as a disclosure and realization of a divine purpose.

Suppose God wills that persons should be transformed into a form of existence beyond this space-time, that they should know this to be possible, and that they should know that Jesus was not a failed prophet and understand that the way to their own transformation is through the Spirit who filled the life of Jesus. In that case, the resurrection of Jesus, though it transcends all known regularities leading to the natural decomposition of bodies, would be deeply intelligible, a divine act conspicuously manifesting and foreshadowing the destiny of the physical cosmos itself. It would be no violation of nature but rather a disclosure of the final goal of the

whole natural creation, when all nature's laws will be transcended by a more intimate and conscious relation to their divine source.

#### HUME'S ARGUMENTS AGAINST BELIEVING IN MIRACLES

Hume has two rather weak arguments against believing in miracles, and they can be quickly disposed of. First, he maintains that the evidence for the existence of laws of nature will always outweigh any claim that a miracle (something that breaks such a law) has occurred (Hume [1748] 1902, 114). This is plainly not so. In both cases, observation is the ultimate court of appeal. Even an enormous amount of testimony that events have always obeyed regular laws of succession in the past cannot count at all against a well-grounded claim that there has been an exception to such regularity. How can we be sure that the future will be like the past? Hume himself admits that it is basically a matter of custom or habit: we just expect it to be so. Observation, however, can confound our greatest expectations. If we ask for evidence for the claim that laws of nature allow of no possible exceptions, it is hard to see that we can get any at all. One good case of reliable observation provides the only required counterexample. Therefore, reliable testimony to observed miracles should rationally outweigh claims that laws of nature allow of no exceptions.

Hume's second argument is that there can be no reliable testimony to miracles. For us to accept such testimony, he says, the probability that the testimony is false must be less than the probability that the miracle occurred. But for Hume the probability that miracles occur is zero, whereas there is always some probability that testimony is false—that misobservation, deceit, delusion, or hallucination have occurred. In reply to Hume, it may be said that there is always some probability that miracles occur, if one cannot definitively rule out the existence of God, and the probability that one is deluded or deceived in observation is sometimes extremely low—in good conditions and with a number of unbiased observers and careful and cautious reporters.

Hume argues that the more unusual an occurrence is, the less we can trust reports that it happened. But that is false. There is no correlation between the unusualness of an occurrence and the unreliability of a report. "No one has ever before experienced events like *X*" is not a strong argument against a claim that "I have just seen an event of type *X*." A more reasonable statement would be that, in the case of reports of events of a certain sort that are very commonly found to be delusory or deceitful—as in reports of UFO sightings—one should scrutinize them very carefully. It is not the unusualness of the reported events that makes us think them unreliable but the usualness of delusion in such cases.

We should scrutinize reports of miracles carefully, because people are known to exaggerate, be deluded, or be victims of deceit where miraculous

events are concerned. We should not, however, discount seemingly strong testimony just because, much less to the extent that, the events reported are very unusual. A report of a maximally unusual event can be rationally accepted if the report meets the tests for delusion and deceit that we usually apply. And miracles, for a theist, are not even maximally unusual; they are irregular, rare, and exceptional. But good reasons might be found for their occurrence, insofar as they fit into a general web of beliefs that leads one to expect physical-law-transcending actions, unusual or not, from a Creator whose purpose is to lead people beyond the physical cosmos into conscious relationship with a higher spiritual reality. And if events that look like miracles are reported by reliable observers, that might in itself raise the probability that there is a God. If I am wondering whether God exists, reliable and life-transforming reports of the resurrection of one claimed to be the Son of God might reasonably lead me to believe that there is a God who can raise the dead.

#### MIRACLES AND LAWS OF NATURE

What goes awry with a Humean account of miracles is that the laws of nature are taken to be absolutely changeless and universally operative. Acts of God, then, are taken to be interferences with or violations of the system. The antidote to this view is to see that if there is a personal Creator of all things, the physical cosmos will be partly instrumental in the realization of a purpose that begins with but transcends it—eternal life. Laws of nature are the general principles of intelligible regularity that govern the physical cosmos, but there is every reason for a theist to think that there are higher principles than laws of nature—principles that draw finite persons into conscious relationship with the Creator. Miracles, events that transcend the regularities of nature, result from the application of such intelligible principles. In extraordinary circumstances, and for reasons connected with the realization of the Creator's ultimate purpose, miracles are partial completions of the intelligible purpose that underlies the very existence of a physical universe. Insofar as they disclose personal purpose and its foreshadowing in the history of this cosmos, miracles vindicate, not violate, the rational unity of the cosmos.

There are good reasons why miracles should not be considered part of a scientific account of the universe or fall under formulable scientific laws. Carl Hempel's account of laws of nature as either deductive-nomological or inductive-statistical (1962) still often finds favor with philosophers of science. Deductive laws set up axioms from which laws can be deductively derived, and they state that whenever an event of type *X* occurs, other things being equal, there is a general law that an event of type *Y* will follow. The effect follows deductively from the cause, given that the covering law applies. Since miracles are events caused directly by God, they do

not follow from any prior physical state in accordance with a general law. We cannot give any physical account of why God acts as God does, because God is not a physical being. So we cannot in principle formulate any deductive covering laws for the activity of God.

Inductive Hempelian laws assign probabilities to events, such that, if an event of type *X* occurs, there is an exactly specifiable probability that an event of type *Y* will follow. The effect follows from the cause with a specific probability, but some other effect, whose probability is also specifiable, may follow instead. Some interpretations of quantum mechanics maintain that there is an objective probabilistic indeterminacy in nature that makes exact prediction of specific states impossible, though general, quite deterministic equations can be formulated.

There is perhaps some leeway for God to act here, determining the indeterminate. But God would still be confined by the limits of probability, and of course any divine action of this sort would not be miraculous, inasmuch as it would concur with the natural powers of objects. A miracle would not be physically probable—that is, it would not be predictable as a probable outcome of a prior physical state alone. Because a miracle is unpredictable (I assume that prophecies are not predictions but promises to act), Hempel would hold that to say God performs miracles is not an explanation.

At that point, however, many philosophers of science are prepared to reject Hempel's principle of structural identity, which maintains that all explanations must be predictive or must have predictive power (for one alternative account, see Cartwright 1983). It seems sensible to abandon it, since it does not work for Darwinian evolutionary explanations anyway. And it would certainly explain the resurrection to say that there was a personal agent with the power and a reason to raise Jesus from the dead, even though no one could predict the resurrection from the previous history of the universe. One could see why it happened, what its meaning was, and how it forms part of a wider web of beliefs about the nature of the universe. Such an explanation, however, is not part of any natural science. It can be provided only if one believes that there is, or could be, a God with a purpose to raise the dead and to raise this particular person in a unique way. There is no way that sense observation and experiment can detect such particular intentions of a spiritual being. Therefore, miracles can occur, and can properly explain the divine purpose, without forming part of any scientific, physical, partly predictive account of the universe.

The only sort of explanation that can be given of miracles is personal or value explanation—explaining an event as existing in order to help one realize a personal purpose or intention, to realize a goal that is of value in itself. We normally assume that value explanations are complementary to, or can run concurrently with, covering-law explanations, which derive events from prior conditions together with general laws of regular succession. I

can say both that my arm went up because of the movements of electrons in my brain and nervous system, and that I raised my arm—it went up because I intended it to do so for some reason. It is plain that these explanations are separable in principle. My arm may go up involuntarily or I may intend to raise my arm and nothing happens. It is logically possible that my intending to do something may bring it about, even though no covering-law explanation of the event can be found. That is how things used to be before the rise of modern science, though we now often assume that covering-law explanations always can be found. It may be, however, that covering-law explanations never completely explain human actions, that there is always some sort of “gap” in the purely physical account that needs to be filled by intention. The assumption of full complementarity may turn out not to apply in some cases. Whether or not it applies will depend on empirical investigation.

The case is similar with miracles. It is logically possible that God could bring an event about by direct intention, when no covering-law explanations of the event can be given. That would be a miracle. God is a wholly spiritual being, unlike humans, who are embodied physical beings. God is also the ordainer of the natural order, able to direct it to God’s purposes, whereas humans are parts of the natural order and cannot order it as they desire. For these reasons, intentional acts not falling under covering laws are much more likely to be modes of divine action than of human action.

In the question of whether miracles occur, then, the prestige and success of the natural sciences is of no avail. The sciences cannot, of themselves, make the possibility that miracles occur more or less likely. In assessing whether a miracle has occurred, we have to pay close attention, first of all, to the reliability and wisdom and knowledge of those who report its occurrence. Then we have to assess the sort of value explanation that can be given of its occurrence. Does it, for instance, contribute to the realization of a good and intelligible purpose that points to a transcending of physical conditions as their fulfilling destiny? or is it just an odd event that seems to have no particular spiritual point? If the testimony is reliable, and the event transcends the normal powers of objects, which is disclosive of divine power and helps to realize a divine purpose in a conspicuous way, it is wholly reasonable to accept that a miracle has occurred. The occurrence of miracles, then, will be a proper part of a many-stranded argument for the existence of a personal ground of being, a Creator of the universe.

I may have given the impression that science has nothing at all to say about miracles. That is not quite right. An event cannot properly be called a miracle unless it does transcend the ordinary powers of natural objects. It is for competent scientists in the appropriate field to say whether a given event transcends the normal operation of the laws of nature. If it does not, however statistically improbable the event may be, it is not a miracle. Where miracles can be subjected to scientific examination—as in



the most often claimed cases, cases of healing—they should be, and competent scientific authorities should declare whether an event is a candidate for a miracle or not.

Science is important not only as a set of laws, methods, and assured experimental results but also as suggesting a rational and reflective approach to the world in which we live, a general view of the universe and the place of humans within it. If proper scientific method requires an exceptionless rule of general laws and an absence of any events that are not completely explicable in physical terms, then scientific method, if not scientific fact, will be at odds with a religious view. At that level a Humean view of science will find miracles absolutely impossible; they simply do not lie within the realm of physically possible events this view legislates.

The sort of scientific worldview into which miracles comfortably fit is one in which personal explanation plays an important and ineliminable part, in which the powers and capacities of objects are variously realized in contexts of varying complexity and degrees and types of consciousness and in which the whole cosmos can be seen as expressing the purposes of a personal ground of being, purposes whose ultimate realization may well transcend the physical existence of the cosmos itself.

The investigations of scientists into the physical structure of the cosmos are highly relevant to the formation of such different worldviews. They are relevant in many informal and cumulative ways, in strengthening or weakening webs of belief about the most general nature of the cosmos. I have not argued that miracles occur. I have argued that they could occur, be reliably reported, and be justifiably believed. I have suggested that decisions about their occurrence will depend on a serious assessment of evidence and testimony and, wherever possible, on a scientific assessment of the availability of a natural explanation of the events. Decisions will also depend on the judicious formation of worldviews that scientific investigations support but that need also to take into account the status of personal or value explanations and of the data of conscious experience to which such explanations primarily apply. One is certainly justified in basing a view about miracles on one's own reflections on such matters. Until such investigations have been much more seriously undertaken, however, one might be wise not to be too dogmatic about what they will reveal to an (imaginary) unbiased observer.

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