Philosophers and Miracles

By Dr. Benjamin Smith

At this current stage of philosophical discourse, enquiry into miracles focuses on three questions. First, what is a miracle? Second, are miracles credible? Finally, if real, what do miracles prove or indicate? David Hume’s famous essay “Of Miracles” in An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748) remains the locus classicus for contemporary responses to these questions; accordingly it serves as a useful introduction to philosophical discourse about miracles. Hume famously defines miracles as events that violate the laws of nature; miracles are the kind of events that contradict “uniform human experience.” According to Hume no reported miracle is credible because “uniform experience” will always outweigh the credibility of a reported miracle. In the second part of the essay Hume argues that there simply has never been strong evidence for a miracle; all reports of miracles are dubious because of the ignorance, remoteness, or motivations of the sources. The problem with miracles does not depend on the laws of nature and logic, but on the facts of the matter — there just never has been strong evidence for miracles.

Hume’s first argument remains influential because it provides prima facie grounds for dismissing reported miracles without investigation, but for this same reason it has been thoroughly criticized. In Miracles (1947), C. S. Lewis points out that Hume’s definition of miracles seems to beg the question. On Hume’s approach, any report of a miracle can be dismissed on the basis that it is contrary to uniform experience, although the reported miracle is
just the sort of event that would challenge the relevant uniformity. The uniformity of X cannot be the basis for rejecting an event that calls into question the uniformity of X. More importantly, Hume’s definition seems to make rational enquiry into miracles impossible. If it could be proven beyond a doubt that a miracle really occurred, the miraculous event would vacate the “contradicted law of nature” because this law would no longer represent uniform experience. In such a case the event in question would cease to be a miracle because it would no longer contradict uniform human experience. This paradox makes rational enquiry into miracles useless.

Saint Thomas Aquinas provides a less problematic definition and approach to miracles. A miracle would be an event that occurs outside the natural order of causes, and since only God could exist outside the natural order, only God could perform a miracle. A miracle would be an event that is caused directly by God, without a natural cause — it is not the effect of the actualization of a natural power. (Summa contra gentiles 3, q. 100-101) As William Lane Craig explains in “Creation, Providence and Miracles” (1998), miracles are naturally impossible because they lack a proper natural cause. Accordingly, if we find an event without a natural cause, then it must be caused by God. This definition successfully distinguishes miracles as a type of possible event and provides a clear criterion for verification. It is credible to believe that an event is a miracle, if it is not the outcome of the settled pattern of natural agency. It needs to be added that miracles as works of God are not mere prodigies; they have traditionally been interpreted as signs that point to God’s presence and purpose in history. As such, miracles should be defined as naturally impossible events occurring within a religious context. This account coherently answers the first question about miracles and provides the framework for answering the second question. Nevertheless, it does not prove that any particular miracle has occurred. This is important because, as Michael Levine argues in “Philosophers on Miracles” (2011),
Hume’s second argument is far stronger than his first — as a matter of fact we have no credible, objective, scientific grounds for accepting the reports of miracles. This is a strong challenge and in a way moves the discussion beyond philosophy into the domains of empirical science and history. However, this line of argument does not escape philosophical scrutiny altogether, for it assumes that the only standard for credibility is science. If so, then the demand for scientifically supported testimony exposes itself as a form of scientism, which is subject to a variety of epistemological criticisms. Nevertheless, it is likely in the current context that scientific standards will be considered the primary standards of verification and so the proof of a miracle will probably fall short of apodictic demonstration; from a scientific point of view the evidence would remain always underdetermined.

What would a real verified miracle indicate? If one had good grounds for accepting that a naturally impossible event occurred within a religious context what would this indicate? If one was really justified in the belief that the event lacked any natural cause, and if every event (change) has a sufficient cause, then it would be reasonable to conclude supernatural agency, which given the religious context could reasonably be called God. And if existing is a necessary condition of agency, then an authentic miracle would indicate the existence of God. (Summa contra gentiles 3, q. 99, 102)
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


