



HOW TO THINK ABOUT MIRACLES

It is said that miracles are events that defy scientific explanation. But we know that science does not explain everything and what it does explain it does not explain completely or in an always satisfying way. Science itself is continually generating additional and more detailed questions about everything with which it grapples. That is the essence of scientific progress.

It may be better to say that miracles are events that don't just defy scientific explanation but that contradict scientific principles and understanding. This could be many things as well since there are known anomalous phenomena that occur in certain circumstances, famously at the quantum level, that are contrary to ordinary experience. In addition, many seemingly impossible things can be achieved by trickery. Magicians, after all, can saw people in half and show them to be alive and well afterwards. They can make 747 airplanes and even the Statue of Liberty vanish. They can levitate themselves over their audiences and even the Grand Canyon. They have even tricked scientists.

The 18th Century Scottish philosopher David Hume considered these issues carefully. He defined a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature." Such laws have their basis in a uniform "firm and unalterable experience," and so are the best "proof against a miracle." Thus, wrote Hume, in Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748):

"The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), 'that no testimony is 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 endeavors to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior.' When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that

this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion."

Thomas Jefferson may have had this in mind when in 1808 he wrote to someone who said they had a piece of what we now call a meteorite that fell in Connecticut in 1807:

"A thousand phenomena present themselves daily which we cannot explain, but where facts are suggested, bearing no analogy with the laws of nature as yet known to us, their verity needs proofs proportioned to their difficulty. A cautious mind will weigh well the opposition of the phenomenon to everything hitherto observed, the strength of the testimony by which it is supported, and the errors and misconceptions to which even our senses are liable. It may be very difficult to explain how the stone you possess came into the position in which it was found. But is it easier to explain how it got into the clouds from whence it is supposed to have fallen?"

Contrast such thoughtful skepticism with what Antoine Lavoisier (a devout Catholic whose theology did not admit of such imperfections in the heavenly realms as random rocks floating about) said of a witnessed meteorite fall in France:

"A stone cannot fall from the sky because there are no stones in the sky!"

The case of meteorites is instructive. It illustrates the fact that to know if something is a "violation of the laws of nature" we must know what "the laws of nature" are and what is and is not "possible." Today we know better than Jefferson, Lavoisier and

their contemporaries. But there are some things that we have high confidence about being "impossible." A human body that has died, cooled to room temperature and begun decomposing cannot become a living human person again. A piece of bread cannot be turned into human flesh except by being eaten, digested, and metabolized into such tissue. And one cannot travel by winged horses. But all of these, we are assured by religious teachings, are possible and have happened.

This brings us to the point of "miracles," that they are claimed to be evidence of the supernatural and, specifically, evidence of the agency of "God." Without getting into the theological weeds, it is clear that when something inexplicable happens, part of the inexplicability is that the cause is unknown. Even if a supernatural entity is the cause, how can one know which entity is the cause?

Now consider Arthur C. Clarke's observation:

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

The problem then becomes supernaturalism as such. For even if supernatural entities exist, the scientific outlook recasts them as superhuman extraterrestrial or extradimensional beings. And even if we are to such beings less than bacteria as bacteria are to us, such beings are still understandable to us within a framework of facts and reason. But until additional evidence relating to such beings becomes available they are of no more consequence or interest than unicorns and leprechauns.

The remaining problem is that even if superhuman extraterrestrial/extradimensional beings can cause violations of the "laws of nature" at their whim, why, then, are the regularities or "laws" of nature as reliable as they are? As Hume pointed out, the "firm and unalterable" experience of the past and present attests to the regularities of objective reality. These cannot reasonably be believed to be breached by "miracles."

MIRACLE:

- 1) the survival of X people in a disaster that kills Y people where X << Y
- 2) any unexpected event that pleases us
- 3) anything that has no good explanation
- 4) anything unusual or impressive that is not ugly or malodorous
- 5) anything
- 6) everything

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- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant "The Vineyard" - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: Nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Le Havre, Carcassonne, and other fun games!

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**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
"THE ARGUMENT FROM REASON"
> Sunday, June 4, 2017 <
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western;**

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