Do Miracles Occur?

Kenny Pearce

Big Questions in Philosophy
Trinity College Dublin

February 2, 2021
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Ibrahim said: “...Fie upon you and upon that which you worship besides Allah! Have you then no sense?” They [the idolaters] said: “Burn him and help your gods, if you will be doing.” We (Allah) said: “O fire! Be you coolness and safety for Ibrahim!” And they wanted to harm him, but We made them the worst losers. (Quran 21:66–70)
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A young labourer [in Templemore] named James Walsh has had visions of the Blessed Virgin... Miraculous cures are also being reported, including that of a young girl named Crowe, who was in the last stage of consumption when she entered Dwan’s house, but completely healed when she left it. (Century Ireland, 23 August 1920)
Why Might Miracles Matter?

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- Part of the content of religious doctrine.
  - For instance, virgin birth, transubstantiation.
- God’s activity in our lives.
# What Is (or Would Be) a Miracle?

## General Idea

### Special Divine Action
A miracle is something wondrous or inexplicable to a particular person. The general idea of a miracle includes the notion of special divine action. We can divide the special divine action into two accounts:

**Deflationary Account (Spinoza)**

Anything that is wondrous (Latin *mirum*) or inexplicable to a particular person.
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### General Idea

**Special Divine Action**

### Deflationary Account (Spinoza)

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### Classical Account (Aquinas and friends)

An event produced by God that is ‘above nature’ or ‘beyond the power of creatures’.

### Modern Account (Hume)

An event produced by God in violation of the laws of nature.
What Is (or Would Be) a Miracle?

General Idea

Special Divine Action

Note

- All these accounts imply that we can’t label something a miracle if we are able to give a scientific explanation.
- This is also assumed by the Vatican’s procedure for certifying miracles for sainthood.
Do Miracles Occur?

1. A Conceptual Objection

2. An Epistemological Objection

3. A Theological Objection

4. A Scientific Objection
A Conceptual Objection

1. An Epistemological Objection

2. A Theological Objection

3. A Scientific Objection
A Conceptual Objection

A law of nature, by definition, is an exceptionless regularity.

Alastair McKinnon (1925–2016)
McGill University, Canada
A law of nature, by definition, is an exceptionless regularity.

A miracle, by definition, is an *exception* to a law of nature.

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A Conceptual Objection

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- A law of nature, by definition, is an exceptionless regularity.
- A miracle, by definition, is an exception to a law of nature.
- So a miracle would be an exception to an exceptionless regularity—a contradiction!

Kenny Pearce (Big Questions)
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February 2, 2021
Natural law is not, as has been widely supposed, a kind of code for nature having legislative and, perhaps particularly, prohibitive force. This is an outdated, untenable, and completely unscientific view. . . Natural laws. . . are simply highly generalized shorthand descriptions of how things do in fact happen. . . Hence there can be no suspensions of natural law rightly understood.

– McKinnon, “‘Miracle’ and ‘Paradox’” (1967), p. 309
McKinnon on Laws

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See: “Miracles” (1968)
An Epistemological Objection

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2. An Epistemological Objection

3. A Theological Objection

4. A Scientific Objection
If there is any reason to believe in transubstantiation, it’s because some religious authority (the Church, the bishops, the Bible, etc.) teaches it.

It’s only by means of our senses (seeing, hearing, etc.) that we can know what religious authorities teach. If transubstantiation is true, then our senses deceive us under even ideal circumstances (no matter how closely you look, it still looks like bread!) and therefore cannot be trusted. Therefore, if transubstantiation is true, then there is no reason to believe in it.
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- If transubstantiation is true, then our senses deceive us under even ideal circumstances (no matter how closely you look, it still looks like bread!) and therefore cannot be trusted.
- Therefore, if transubstantiation is true, then there is no reason to believe in it.
This is an *epistemological* problem—that is, it’s not about whether transubstantiation is actually true, it’s about whether we could know or rationally believe it to be true.

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**See:** *A Discourse Against Transubstantiation* (1684)
“There is, in Dr. Tillotson’s writings, an argument against the real presence, which is as concise, and elegant, and strong as any argument can possibly be supposed against a doctrine, so little worthy of a serious refutation... I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument of a like nature... [against] miracles and prodigies.”

— Enquiry concerning Human Understanding (1748), Section X

David Hume (1711–1776)
Edinburgh
Miracles and Testimony

“It is acknowledged on all hands, says [Tillotson], that the authority, either of the scripture or of tradition, is founded merely in the testimony of the apostles, who were eye-witnesses to those miracles of our Saviour.” (EHU, Section X)
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Testimony

When someone tells you something and expects you to accept it on their authority.

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- We have to think the testimony of Christian miracles is more believable than the testimony for competing miracles!

- Our ordinary practice of evaluating testimony includes *weighing probabilities*: which is more likely, that this event really happened or that this person is lying or mistaken?
Hume Against Miracles

It follows “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 endeavours to establish” (EHU, Section X)

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Even if I see the miracle myself, it will be more probable that I’m hallucinating or making a mistake about what the laws are.
Objection

Hume assumes that trust in testimony and trust in my senses proceeds by weighing probabilities. This has been regarded as both psychologically and epistemologically implausible.
Objection

Hume says that miracle reports “are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations.” This seems to include everyone except educated upper-class residents of a handful of major European cities.
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Testimonial Injustice

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Question

Would trusting a greater diversity of people make us more likely to believe in miracles?
Further Question

Can we rationally believe an event occurred while also believing it was a miracle. (Remember McKinnon and Swinburne.)

David Hume (1711–1776)
Edinburgh
A Theological Objection

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the universal laws of nature are simply God’s decrees. If anything therefore were to happen in nature that contradicted its universal laws, it would also necessarily contradict the decree of God than which nothing is more absurd.

— Theological-Political Treatise (1670), tr. Silverthorne and Israel, ch. 6
The wise mind always acts according to principles; always according to rules, and never according to exceptions.

– *Theodicy* (1710), tr. Huggard, §337
Theists think that the orderliness of nature is evidence for God. But if orderliness is evidence for God, then disorderliness is evidence against God. Hence, if there were miracles, they would be evidence against the existence of God.

**Classic Work:** “Miracles as Evidence against the Existence of God” (1985)

Christine Overall
Queen’s University, Canada
The Sages... have made a very peculiar statement about miracles... Its gist is that they consider miracles also in some way part of nature... [the sage] found it exceedingly difficult to accept that any natural disposition should alter after the act of creation... He holds, for instance, that God laid it into the nature of water that it should always form a continuous mass and run downwards except at the moment when the Egyptians were drowned in it.

— *Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Rabin, Book 2, ch. 29
Al-Ghazali’s ‘Saltation’ Theory

The second approach... is for us to admit that fire is created in such a way that, if two similar pieces of cotton come into contact with it, it would burn both... With all this, however, we allow as possible that a prophet may be cast into the fire without being burned, either by changing the quality of the fire or by changing the quality of the prophet.

– The Incoherence of the Philosophers, tr. Marmura, Discussion 17
Aquinas’s ‘Above Nature’ Theory

- All things happen according to God’s plan. (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.98)

St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)
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- Such events are *above but not contrary to* nature, since it is the nature of things to be moved by God. (*SCG* 3.100)

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God’s plan includes some events that happen outside this causal order (SCG 3.99)

Such events are *above but not contrary to* nature, since it is the nature of things to be moved by God. (SCG 3.100)

In this way, without violating nature, God performs ‘wonders’ nature itself could never produce.

St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)
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Larmer’s Modernized ‘Above Nature’ Theory

The laws of nature say how the state of the universe evolves over time *in the absence of external intervention*. To assume that there can’t be external intervention is just to assume that there is no God!

**Classic Work:** *Water Into Wine?*  
(Queens-McGill University Press, 1988)

Robert A. H. Larmer (1954–)  
University of New Brunswick, Canada
A Scientific Objection

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Conservation of Matter and Energy

Robert A. H. Larmer (1954– )
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Objection

Any external intervention in nature would necessarily violate the Law of Conservation of Matter and Energy!

Reply

The scientifically supported law says that matter and energy are conserved in a closed system. The assumption that the universe as a whole is such a system is nothing but atheistic dogma!
Conservation of Matter and Energy

Objection
Any external intervention in nature would necessarily violate the Law of Conservation of Matter and Energy!

Reply
The scientifically supported law says that matter and energy are conserved in a closed system. The assumption that the universe as a whole is such a system is nothing but atheistic dogma!
Noether’s Theorem shows that we can't get a conservation violation without a violation of the dynamical laws. As a result, events that are ‘above nature’ will also be ‘contrary to nature’, contrary to Larmer (and Aquinas and friends).

**Symmetry:** A change to the mathematical setup that doesn’t alter the physical outcome.
The Objection from Noether’s Theorem

Symmetry: A change to the mathematical setup that doesn’t alter the physical outcome.
  - When you started your stopwatch.

Emmy Noether (1882–1935)
University of Göttingen
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- **Conserved Quantities:** Quantities that stay the same through any physical interaction.

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Example: time-translation symmetry $\leftrightarrow$ energy conservation

Example: space-translation symmetry $\leftrightarrow$ momentum conservation
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- Example: time-translation symmetry ↔ energy conservation
- Example: space-translation symmetry ↔ momentum conservation

Emmy Noether (1882–1935)
University of Göttingen
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Consequence of Noether’s Theorem: Any violation of a conservation law necessarily violates the dynamical laws.

Note: This isn’t some kind of vague concern about ‘the scientific mindset’ or something, but a consequence of the actual known laws of physics!
The conceptual objection relies on a faulty understanding of laws of nature.
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- Stick around for Dr Fernandes’s lecture 23 February!

Theological and scientific objections show that some traditional assumptions about God are incompatible with some popular definitions of miracles. A defender of miracles could adjust either the concept of God or the concept of miracle. That’s how philosophy normally works!

Does this adjustment undermine the motivation for believing in God and/or miracles?

The epistemological objection raises really tricky issues.
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My Assessment

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Further Reading

- David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Section X, http://gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm#section10