

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 13, Miracles

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 13, Miracles.

The central and key claim of the Christian worldview is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

He was dead, buried, and on the third day, he rose, and that's a miracle. That's the most important miracle in all of human history. So right at the core of the Christian faith is this miracle claim, and of course, that isn't the only miracle that Christians believe in.

There are lots of miracles described in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, the ministry of Jesus was marked by all sorts of healings, turning water into wine and walking on water. So, Christians, in order to be Orthodox, must affirm that miracles are real, that they have happened, and most Christians would say that they continue to happen today. Okay, so the question before us here is, how rational is this belief from just a philosophical standpoint, and what sorts of objections have been made to belief in miracles, and how might we respond to those? So perhaps the central event in the Old Testament was when the Israelites were led out of bondage.

They were freed slaves and ultimately had to walk through the Red Sea after God had parted the waters. Once they made it through, then the waters went back, and all those Egyptian soldiers were killed. That's a key miraculous event associated with another miracle, a deadly miracle, with the killing of the firstborn all throughout Egypt that's remembered with the Passover.

So, there are lots of miraculous events like that in the Old Testament, again, as well as in the New. Most importantly, I noted the resurrection of Christ. So, naturalists challenge these claims and maintain that either miracles are impossible or that, in any case, one is never rationally justified to believe that a miracle has taken place, even if miracles are, in principle, possible.

So, we'll talk about a couple of arguments that critique the belief in miracles, but first, let's make a distinction between different categories or kinds of miracles. Here, what are we talking about? We're talking about a special divine act where God performs a sort of wonder that may or may not be an exception to or a contradiction of a law of nature. Two categories that have been distinguished are the category of

contingency miracles, which result from an extraordinary coincidence of a constellation of events.

I believe it's Win Corduan in a chapter he wrote on this subject that uses the illustration of a bill and a job application where you have a person who's applying for a job downtown. He puts together his application materials, puts them in an envelope, and puts the envelope in the mailbox. Maybe this is a dated illustration, but using snail mail puts the application in the mail, and unbeknownst to Bill, that envelope slips through, a crack in the mailbox and ends up on the ground.

Looks like it's not going to make its way to the bank, though Bill and his family are praying that he'll get the job. What happens is a gust of wind blows that envelope up into the air just as a pickup truck is going by, and it lands in the bed of this pickup truck. The driver of the truck just happens to be driving downtown and goes right in front of the bank that Bill has applied to, and just then, a gust of wind blows the envelope out onto the sidewalk just as the daughter of the bank president is walking up and sees her dad or her mom's name on the envelope, gives it to the bank president, and Bill gets the job.

Now, nothing I described there in that scenario constituted a contradiction of a law of nature. Wind blows envelopes around every day, and there's nothing really unusual there, but it's this combination of events. It's so unlikely that if one found out that this was how Bill's application made it to the bank and how he ultimately got the job, we'd very much be tempted to say, well, that was a miracle.

So those would be a dramatic kind of contrived illustration, but it gets the point across of what a contingency miracle is as opposed to a violation miracle. Violation miracles result from an apparent violation of a law of nature. This would include cases where, say, a person spontaneously recovers from a terminal illness, maybe a tumor disappears overnight, or a person suddenly gets their eyesight after being blind, say, from birth, or a person falls from a 10-story building onto asphalt and walking away without injury.

Every one of those, we'd say, certainly seems like some sort of violation of a law of nature. The most significant critic of miracles in philosophical history is easily David Hume. In his *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he presents an argument against belief in miracles, which has been interpreted in two different ways.

So, we'll look at both versions or interpretations of Hume's argument. One is the metaphysical argument, or the hard interpretation of Hume, which concludes that miracles are impossible in principle. On this interpretation of Hume's argument, miracles are, by definition, a violation of the laws of nature, and the laws of nature are unalterably uniform.

There are no exceptions to the laws of nature. That's why we call them laws because there are no exceptions. The conclusion here, then, is that miracles cannot occur.

It's, in principle, impossible for miracles to occur. That is the hard interpretation of Hume, who argues that miracles can't happen. So, what are we to say to this? The conclusion certainly follows.

If the premises are true, then miracles cannot occur. So, what could be wrong with the argument? Well, it's a circular argument. The second premise really assumes the truth of the conclusion.

It's just another way of saying that miracles cannot occur, to say that the laws of nature are unalterably uniform. So, it's a circular argument. The argument assumes what it purports to prove.

For this reason, most scholars don't think this is actually how Hume intends to argue. He intends to make more of an epistemological point, which is that miracles are never believable. This is a soft interpretation of Hume on miracles, but it's still a formidable argument that needs to be taken seriously because the implications of this would be significant for any religious person because they would, therefore, have to give up all belief in miracles.

It certainly would gut the Christian faith because it would mean the resurrection of Christ is something we should not believe in. Here's how his argument goes. The first premise is that a miracle is, by definition, a rare occurrence.

It's a fair enough assumption. If miracles do happen, they're rare. Secondly, natural law is, by definition, a description of a regular occurrence.

Again, that's uncontested. That is the nature of natural law. It describes how things routinely go.

Thirdly, the evidence for what is regular is always greater than that for what is rare. Just because what is routine and regular is more commonplace, we're always going to have more evidence for that than for what is very rare or unique. Fourthly, wise people will base their beliefs on the greater evidence.

We should always go with the view or the belief that has the most evidence supporting it. Therefore, wise people should never believe in miracles. So that's the argument.

Yes, miracles are, in principle, possible. It's conceivable that a miracle could occur, but it's never credible. You're never within your intellectual rights to believe that a miracle has happened because it is so rare and because the evidence for the regular

is always greater than that for the rare. We're never justified in believing that a miracle claim is true.

So that's the soft interpretation of Hume or the epistemological Humean argument against miracles. What are we to say here? One thing we can note as a problem with Hume's argument is that it deals only in probabilities, not evidence. Some events, though highly improbable, have overwhelming evidence.

If you've ever played the game of Yahtzee, which is basically like drawing poker with dice, you might have seen someone roll five of a kind in one roll. I've played enough Yahtzee where I've seen this happen. Everybody who's playing gets excited and is amazed.

Wow, one roll and boom, five sixes. The chances of that are about 8,000 to one. But again, if you talk to people who've played Yahtzee, as much as the odds are against it, if they've played a lot of Yahtzee, they've seen it at least once.

Bizarre, but it happens. But if probability is all that matters, then we should never believe that that ever happens. Well, okay, 8,000 to one, maybe.

But say events that are far more improbable, the odds of which are extremely remote. Say the odds that some terrorists could take some commercial airliners, commandeer them, and then crash them into the world's tallest buildings, such that those buildings fall to the ground. What are the odds of that? Exceedingly remote, but there's strong, overwhelming evidence that that happened on 9-11.

So, regardless of the improbability, we should believe it because of the evidence. That really illustrates the second point, which is that Hume's critique of miracles really proves too much. If it's always irrational to believe in what's highly improbable, then we should never believe in such things as, say, Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak.

That's another historical event that's exceedingly unlikely. He was Mr. Consistency, actually, and after his hitting streak stopped in that 57th game, he went on a 17-game hitting streak. So, he got a base hit in 74 out of 75 games there.

He also had a very long hitting streak in the minors, so he was Mr. Consistency. But the odds of this are so remote that it seems like, on Hume's terms, we shouldn't believe it happened. We do, and we should believe it happened because of the overwhelming evidence.

So that would be another illustration. And then finally, Hume is inconsistent with his own principles. Elsewhere in his inquiry concerning human understanding, he argues that we can never know that nature is uniform.

We can't know that the future will resemble the past. So, there, he's calling into question our belief in the laws of nature, which is ironic because he's appealing to the laws of nature in this context to try to undermine belief in miracles. So, you can't have it both ways.

That's one of the howlers in the history of philosophy, Hume's oversight in that regard. He offers some other secondary arguments that are intended to undermine belief in miracles. One of them is that throughout history, an insufficient number of intelligent, educated people have testified to the occurrence of miracles.

So that would seem to undermine our confidence in miracles if that's the case. A good response here is just to note that, well, many intelligent and highly educated people have testified to the reality of miracles and witnessed them, like the Apostle Paul and Craig Keener, who's done all sorts of extensive investigations into miracles. He's about as highly reputed a scholar as there is.

He testifies to the reality of miracles, and all sorts of contemporary physicians do the same. Keener's recent two-volume text on miracles is now the standard. It's the standard go-to scholarly volume or volume on miracles, which I highly recommend.

He gives hundreds of accounts of miracles that have occurred on five different continents. And it's just an extraordinarily exhaustive discussion of the topic, again, which I highly recommend. Another argument that Hume gives is that miracle claims abound among the ignorant and uncivilized.

So, shouldn't that give us pause and undermine any rational, or supposedly rational, belief in miracles? We can respond to this by saying that, while this is true of many other beliefs that intelligent, civilized people know to be true, there are all sorts of things that people who are ignorant or uncivilized in various cultures believe are actually true. So, really, the question is not who believes that certain miracles have occurred, but what is the objective evidence for these claims? And finally, that miracle claims in rival religious systems undermine one another.

So, Hindus believe that miracles have happened according to their tradition. You have Christians over here believing in miracles and Muslims over there. Since these rival religious systems are not consistent with one another, they basically refute one another with their inconsistent miracle claims.

So, you shouldn't believe in any religious tradition and their miracle claims. Well, Hume overlooks the obvious here, and that is that miracle claims in some religions may be false. Maybe one religion's miracle claims are the reliable ones, and most, if not all, miracle claims in other religions are false.

Or maybe it's a combination between that and different religions making miracle claims that are true, but the one true god worshipped by this other religion is the one responsible for the miracles in that context. For example, there are a lot of reports coming out of the Muslim world of people having visions of Christ. You know, a person has a dream that someone's telling him that a person's going to come into the community tomorrow with a bunch of books, accept that person and receive the books, and sure enough, the next day, somebody arrives with 500 copies of the New Testament.

That would be kind of a dream vision, maybe not a miracle, but certainly a supernatural intervention. That God is doing in order to bring Muslims to Christ. But there are other ways that God might act in terms of performing miracles in another religious context, and it's the one God who's doing it in each case.

Also, another possibility is that sometimes, you can have demonic activity produce an event that could be conceived or categorized as miraculous. These would be what, in certain places, Scripture refers to as counterfeit miracles. I think Jesus uses that terminology.

I had an experience many years ago, decades ago, when I was back in grad school, and I would do odd jobs for money in a kind of yard mowing and tending service. A friend of mine and I would mow the lawn of this retired Baptist missionary who had a mission down in southern Louisiana, down in Cajun country. He related to us this fascinating story of how, as people in this community were becoming increasingly converts to Christ, becoming Christians, the local occult expert and store owner was becoming dismayed that people were less and less interested in buying his products, his Ouija boards and tarot cards and so on.

He was annoyed by this, and he saw the Baptist missionary walking by one day and he said, you must be pretty proud of yourself for making all these Christian converts. He said I feel good about it. People are coming to Christ, and that's good news.

I hope you do, too. The guy says, no way. He says, my God is more powerful than your God.

The missionary says, oh really? He says, yeah. There was a dead dog over there. There was a dog that had been bitten by a snake, and it was dead on the side of the road.

Even rigor mortis had set in. It was bloated. He said I'm going to raise that dog from the dead.

Come back tomorrow. It will be alive. The missionary said, okay.

The next day, he comes back. Sure enough, that dog is sitting on the porch of that guy's house, still somewhat bloated. Red-eyed, looking weary, looking like death warmed over, I guess literally.

But very much alive. And so that occult store owner says, I told you my God is more powerful than your God. You try to do that.

And the missionary said, well, I never said that it couldn't be done. Through satanic power, there are all sorts of things that can be done that are wondrous like this. But the difference between my God and your God is that my God wants to save you and give you eternal life.

Your God hates you, and he wants to see you in hell. And so days and weeks passed, and eventually, that occult practitioner did become a Christian. And they celebrated his salvation by burning all of his paraphernalia.

And the missionary said that when they piled it up, it was literally about three feet high. They poured gasoline on it and burned it. And it was a big celebration.

Ding dong, the witch, is converted. And it's a pretty fun story. But it illustrates how there is the possibility of counterfeit miracles.

And there's biblical precedent for that in the Old Testament. Moses performed certain miracles, and then there were various occult practitioners who were associated with the Pharaoh's court. They were able to replicate those miracles by the power of Satan.

So, one needs to be alert and discerning when it comes to that. But it's an important category that I think can inform our thinking about this topic. So that's a few thoughts on miracles, Hume's critique of miracles, and the problems with his argument as well.

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