Fortifying Hume's Miracle Prison (1):

Miracles and the Laws of Nature

by

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Miracles, if they happen, are exceedingly rare, but compared to what?

When you drive your car, you obey the laws of nature. The engine conforming to mechanical laws propels the rest of the car forward, and this obeys the laws of motion. The law of gravity keeps the car on the road. Examples of the laws of nature could be multiplied. Thus, miracles are exceedingly rare compared to the flow of natural laws that describe our world and even the entire universe. Believers in miracles would not want it any other way.

Though miracles are very rare by definition, are they completely impossible? To investigate them fairly, can they be excluded from the start? Should they be a real possibility, not an artificial one?

It is said that Anthony Flew and others improve on David Hume's arguments against miracles. The improvement is indeed accomplished, but is it absolutely sufficient to produce insurmountable doubt about miracles? Is skepticism firm and unshakable? To continue the prison metaphor begun in the article on Hume, are the prison doors locking up miracles slightly open? Can the doors ever be shut in an honest inquiry into them?

In various writings, Flew divides his analysis into the world of science and of history, so we follow this division too.

In Part One here, Flew and other skeptics describe the scientist's task of weighing all of the input data. Can a believer claim a miracle and still uphold the laws of nature? How do we recognize a miracle? Can it not be encompassed by nature itself? What kind of evidence is acceptable, if any?

For our purposes a believer says that miracles happen, a theist is a believer, and a skeptic says that miracles do not and even cannot occur.

The goal of this essay is modest. It is to keep Hume's prison doors open, so that professional skeptics do not close them even before investigating them.

Can a believer be consistent?

Flew outlines the believer's difficulty, perhaps an insoluble one (he says), in maintaining on the one hand an orderly universe, and on the other, exceptions or miracles.

> The inevitable tension between the ideas of rule [natural order] and of exception [miracle] thus gives concepts of the miraculous an inherent instability. ("Miracles," p. 347).

> But insofar as a miracle involves an alleged overriding of a law of nature, [the believer] too is committed to showing the subsistence of a natural order. Exceptions are logically dependent upon rules. Only insofar as it can be shown that there is an order does it begin to be possible to show that the order is occasionally overridden. The difficulty (perhaps an insoluble one) is to maintain simultaneously both the strong rules and the genuine exceptions to them. (p. 347)

What Flew says here is correct. Nature is orderly, and miracles are rare exceptions to its laws. A believer would not have it any other way. But a believer simply does not rule out *a priori* any miracle; that is, miracles must be a real possibility, not a fake one.

Further, theistic philosopher Stephen T. Davis is right when he observes:

> Flew first points out that believers in miracles typically offer historical or probabilistic arguments in favor of the miracles they believe in. But this makes their position inconsistent, for their arguments always presuppose the very regularity of nature and the reliability of nature's laws that they are arguing against. Much of what Flew says here is correct. Believers in miracles do indeed presuppose regular workings of nature in order to argue that certain irregularities (i.e. miracles) occur. But how does this make their position inconsistent? Is it not possible that nature, so to speak, acts regularly and predictably most but not all of the time? If this is possible, then miracle-believers will naturally argue for certain irregularities in nature on the basis of regularities seen elsewhere. ("Miracle at Cana," p. 431)

May skeptics rightly demand prison lockdown?

William P. Alston responds to a well-received essay by Langdon Gilkey who says that the Biblical description of miracles is outmoded in the world of modern science. Though Alston's directs his comments at Gilkey's essay, they are relevant to Flew's (and other skeptics') notions, as well. The universe that we know today is locked tight by cause and effect. For example, gravity will make (cause) a human sink (effect) if he tries to stand upright in deep water. Miracles found in the Bible need to be demythologized or stripped bare of all supernatural elements for modern humanity, say the skeptics. Alston explains the problem posed by such views.

> It is often supposed that the laws of nature discovered by modern physical science...make it impossible that God should even partly determine the

> course of events, at least without violating those laws (if that is at all possible). In making this supposition one supposes that such laws specify *unqualifiedly* causally sufficient conditions. Thus a law of hydrostatics might specify as a sufficient condition for a body sinking in still waters . . . that the body be of a density greater than the water. A man standing upright in the middle of a deep lake without sinking would be a violation of that law, and so would be impossible. ("How to Think about Divine Action," p. 55, emphasis original)

However, Alston disagrees with the skeptics' position, because these laws are upheld only on the absence of other relevant factors. Can all factors be excluded in a cause-and-effect nexus (connection) in a closed system?

> But in fact we are never justified in accepting laws of this sort. The most we are ever justified in accepting is a law that specifies what will be the outcome of certain conditions *in the absence of any relevant factors other than those specified in the law.* The laws we have reason to accept lay down sufficient conditions only within a "closed system," i.e. a system closed to influence other than those specified in the law. None of the laws we are capable of working with take account of all possible influences. (pp. 55-56, emphasis original)

So maybe the system is not completely closed, after all, because can we be assured that no unknown influences are lurking on the horizon? Alston mentions some natural influences on the law of hydrostatics that appear to suspend the law that says a man cannot stand upright in deep water. One example is a man being pulled by a motor boat. Then he concludes:

> ...It can hardly be claimed that such a law will be violated if a divine outside force intervenes; and hence it can hardly be claimed that such laws imply that God does not intervene, much less imply that this is impossible. (p. 56)

However, perhaps Flew and other skeptics would reply that Alston has overlooked something important. The law of hydrostatics says a man cannot stand upright in deep water, but if he is towed by a motor boat, then the laws of motion come into play, combining with hydrostatics. Both sets of laws cause a man to water ski, even barefooted. This still accords with the laws of nature.

Yet even in this case, the prison doors locking up miracles must be kept open. Otherwise, a skeptic risks begging the question. Recall that this fallacy says that the answer to the question we are investigating is found at the front of the investigation. Francis Beckwith writes:

> Sufficient testimony and evidence make it reasonable to believe that an improbable event has actually occurred. Hence to say that no testimony or evidence is sufficient for us to be justified in believing a miracle has occurred is to beg the question in favor of naturalism [which says that nature

> alone exists and is uniform, regular, and continuous]. In other words, in order to claim that no evidence is sufficient to prove a miraculous event has occurred, opponents of miracles must assume the truth of naturalism, the view which if true would make evidence for a miracle de facto insufficient . . . . ("History and Miracles," pp. 93-94)

R. C. Wallace rightly adds:

> Necessarily a miracle would not be conformable to what we are already familiar with and so expect. But to exclude it as impossible on those grounds alone would render scientific theory too static, that is too immune to counter-evidence and subsequent change. (p. 237)

Are miracles physically possible?

To say that something is logically possible means that it is a conceptually consistent state of affairs. It does not have to be physically possible. However, Flew says in his Encyclopedia article and in the context of historical investigation that miracles may be logically possible, but not physically possible. He writes:

> But in this context, what is impossible is what is physically, as opposed to logically, impossible. ("Miracles," 351)

See also Everitt's article that argues for the logical impossibility of miracles, not to mention their physical impossibility, and Ahern (1977) concludes the same (click on the bibliography at the end of this article).

However, Flew may adopt this strategy to show that he has an open mind. R. C. Wallace correctly notes:

> [Flew] makes use of a distinction between logical and physical impossibility, his aim being to show that he . . . can have an open mind that the Humean position requires as to what conceivably might occur, but yet in practice be able to exclude any anomalies that would be too extreme and disruptive. (p. 232)

To believers, Flew's distinction between logical and physical possibilities seems like unwanted charity. But his (supposed) concession does not allow the skeptic to escape from the fallacy of begging the question. Miracles must be a genuine possibility, not a fake one, if skeptics are to investigate them fairly.

Do miracles destroy the laws of nature?

One may worry that miracles destroy the law of nature, and science topples down with it. However, a miracle does not tear the fabric of the laws of nature. The laws accommodate miracles, once the new, divine factor is introduced. As noted in "Hume's Miracle Prison" in this present series, C. S. Lewis rightly says that a virgin conceiving without a man still goes through the normal feelings of carrying a child

and birthing it, and miraculous wine still intoxicates. Further, even if a million miracles occurred around the globe every hour, the laws of nature are too strong and all-encompassing to be scarred beyond recognition or even at all. A man experiencing a miraculous healing will eventually succumb to death in his old age. Nature will have her way.

Do miracles violate the laws of nature?

The short answer is no. Robert A. Larmer explains:

> It is important to emphasize that the occurrence of such an event [a miracle] would in no way imply that the laws of nature had been contravened. We do not, for example, violate the laws of motion if we toss an extra billiard ball into a group of billiard balls in motion on a billiard table. There is no movement at which the laws of motion are contravened. What we do by introducing the extra billiard ball is to change the material conditions to which the laws of motion apply and hence change the result which would otherwise be expected. Similarly by creating or annihilating a unit or units of mass/energy, God may produce in nature an event that could not otherwise occur without violating the laws of nature. (*Water into Wine?* p. 20)

Thus, God changes the material conditions to which the laws apply. He does not violate his own laws. As I noted in "Hume's Miracle Prison," if a prison warden allows a concert in chapel, then he commits no violation or transgression of the rules, because he calls for them within the limits of his own authority. But if a lone guard does this for his own purposes and without permission, then this would be a violation or transgression because he does not act as a rightful authority. The existence of God lifts the analogy beyond the human level. More than a warden, God does not violate or transgress anything of his creation when miracles occur, because he is the final authority over it.

Can we recognize miracles?

According to Flew, humans, apparently, have no capacity for recognizing miracles that endorse a religion or possibly any miracle, for the miracles are part of nature's rules. Humans do not have any natural criterion for saying that nature itself could not encompass an alleged miracle. That is, it may be a part of nature that a scientist may not have expected, but it is not beyond the powers of nature.

> We simply do not have, and could not have [note the words], any natural (as opposed to revealed) criterion which enables us to say, when faced with something which is found to have actually happened, that here we have an achievement which nature, left to her own unaided devices, could never encompass. The natural scientist, confronted with some occurrence inconsistent with a proposition previously believed to express a law of nature, can find in this disturbing inconsistency no ground whatever for

> proclaiming that the particular law of nature has been supernaturally overridden. (“Miracles,” p. 349)

It is true that some miracles may be hard to detect. My favorite says that God helped a driver find an ideal parking place. This can be attributed to coincidence. With that acknowledgement given, however, this is largely a strange idea in Flew’s Encyclopedia article on miracles. Humans cannot have any natural criteria? His claim seems to be pulled out of thin air. Believers or skeptics can indeed recognize a miracle.

If a woman who was completely blind or a man who has one leg much shorter than the other recovers completely (the first can see and the second can walk normally), then the results would be clear to a child. It is incumbent on the skeptic to overturn this recognition that even a child has. How can a skeptic attribute their recoveries to all-encompassing nature?

Curiously, the burden of proof for an all-powerful nature shifts over to the skeptics. It seems the skeptic falls prey to the anything-but-God explanation, the corollary opposite of the God-of-the-gaps.

Winfried Corduan, writing in favor of theism, says that skeptics like Flew want things both ways. A miracle is somehow natural, but it nonetheless “violates” natural law.

> But perhaps Flew also had in mind the idea of a natural “nonmiraculous miracle,” an event that cannot be deemed a miracle simply because it happened. The problem with “natural miracles” is that they are an attempt by a naturalistic skeptic to have it both ways. For as Flew stated . . . the scientific enterprise involves not merely description but the subsumption of events under laws . . . But surely this is a two-edged sword that undercuts the idea of “natural miracle” as well. The idea of a natural event that violates the natural order can be maintained only on the basis of dogmatic antisupernaturalism. (“Recognizing a Miracle,” p. 110)

In the next paragraph in Corduan’s chapter he states his objection more succinctly, citing the fallacy of the appeal to ignorance:

> The skeptics’ dogmatic position must ultimately degenerate into the fallacy of the appeal to ignorance: no one has proven that an event could not be the result of some unknown scientific law; therefore the event is the result of an unknown scientific law. Such a line of reasoning is not convincing. (p. 110)

Thus, Flew’s belief in an all-encompassing nature simply assumes in advance that miracles do not and cannot occur. Somehow they are still natural—if only the scientist could find the (new) natural law that the “nonmiraculous miracle” produces. We believers must not let the skeptics decide on the rules of the game, so to speak. Many miracles, such as deaf ears opening immediately after prayer, are not so difficult to detect.

What if nature's laws and historical testimony conflict?

This last question in Part One here provides a transition to Part Two.

In the following passage, Flew puts the laws of nature over reliable testimony in history. Therefore, any past "miracle" never happened.

> The justification for giving the "scientific" . . . ultimate precedence . . . over the "historical" lies in the nature of the propositions concerned and in the evidence which can be deployed to sustain them. It derives—to borrow the expression of Hume's material mode of thought—"from the very nature of the fact." The candidate historical proposition will be particular, often singular, and in the past tense . . . by reason of this very pastness and particularity it is no longer possible to examine the subject directly for himself . . . The "law of nature" will, unlike the candidate historical proposition, be a general nomological [law-like generalization]. It can thus be tested at any time by any person. (Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, pp. 207-08, also quoted in Larmer, *Water into Wine?* p. 101)

Thus, any testimony in the past can never be used to justify a miracle. The law of nature is more probable. An historical proposition is "particular, often singular and in the past tense." But can a historical proposition not be tested over and over again, though Flew says it cannot?

In reply, prominent theistic philosopher Richard Swinburne points out why Flew is wrong. Historical events can be investigated thoroughly, even if they are "particular, often singular, and in the past tense."

> Any person can test for the truth of a purported scientific law, but a positive result to one test will give only limited support to the claim. Exactly the same holds true for purported historical truths. Anyone can examine the evidence, but a particular piece of evidence gives only limited support to the claim that the historical proposition is true. But in the historical as in the scientific case, there is no limit to the testing which we can do . . . True, the actual traces, apparent memories and testimony, which I may term direct evidence, available to an inquirer are unlikely to increase in number, at any rate after a certain time . . . But although the number of pieces of direct evidence about what happened may not increase, more and more evidence can be obtained about the reliability of the evidence which we have. One could show the evidence yielded by traces of certain types, or testimony given by witnesses of such-and-such character in such-and-such circumstances was always correct. This indirect evidence could mount up in just the way in which the evidence of the physical impossibility of an event could mount up. (pp. 42-43)

Swinburne says here that evidence for an event (read: miracle) in the past could mount up and be tested. One should not reject or discredit historical testimony out of hand. It must be examined on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes the evidence is strong. Plus, what if miracles do not happen only in the past? What if they can be observed in the present tense, in the now? Would this not open the prison doors to their happening in the past? This would strengthen the evidence, making it difficult to reject.

Summary

Flew and other skeptics seem to dismiss out of court any evidence for miracles. But this point bears repeating: miracles actually happening must be a real possibility, not a fake one; they must be investigated fairly and open-mindedly because the evidence for them may be stronger than we may expect. The prison doors keeping miracles locked up must be kept open, if skeptics are to avoid the fallacy of begging the question.

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