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Atheism and Miracles

Fallibilism: Being Justified and Reasonable, but Dead Wrong

An ancient Greek astronomy name Ptolemy who lived from approximately 87-150 AD had a view about the earth that has become famous for being incorrect. By building on the work of Hipparchus and incorporating a number of Greek views about the nature of heavenly bodies, Ptolemy developed and codified the view that the earth is the center of the universe and that the Sun and the planets orbited around it in concentric circles. He thought that their order was the Earth, then Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and finally Saturn. In order to explain the movements of the planets across the sky, Ptolemy postulated epicycles within the larger circular orbits, and even epicycles within epicycles. Drawing from Aristotle, his view was that the planets were embedded in the surface of concentric crystalline spheres, and those spheres rotated within the larger sphere that traced the orbit of the planet.

Ptolemy worked very hard to arrive at his systematic theory of the universe. He incorporated details from 800 years of Greek astronomy that preceded him. He studied the works of Aristotle and Hipparchus. He made extensive empirical observations and measurements. He developed and employed the most sophisticated mathematical and astronomical techniques that had ever been used. He struggled for years to develop a synthesized view of the universe that incorporated everything that scholars believed they knew in Ptolemy's day into a single comprehensive model. He considered alternative hypotheses, made his models conform to the empirical data. He created sophisticated tables that could accurately predict the positions of the Sun, moon, and planets. He calculated the size and the distances between the planets, the Sun, and the earth. Ptolemy, by any fair measure, was a genius. His work was so influential sophisticated, and accurate that it held sway for centuries after Ptolemy's death until Nicholas Copernicus.

Yet he was dead wrong. As any 3rd grader can tell you, the Sun is the center of the solar system and the Earth is the third planet in an elliptical orbit around it.

But I want to argue that despite being mistaken, Ptolemy was justified and reasonable in his belief that the Earth is the center of the universe. Ptolemy did the very best that he could have with the tools and information available to him. In fact, he went much further than any ordinary person could have in his age. Ptolemy was even better justified in his view that the Earth is the center of the universe than you are in your view that the Earth orbits the Sun. He had better more extensive information, he had done more of the calculations himself and understood the various issues, he had a better command of all the available tools, and he worked much harder developing his justifications for his conclusions. You probably listened to your third grade teacher tell you that the Earth orbits the Sun, you read the claim in some

reliable textbooks, and you detected that everyone else around you believes it because it's just common sense. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with acquiring a justification for a belief through those avenues; we all do it all the time, it works perfectly well, and lots of our beliefs are well-justified as a result. But there can be no doubt that Ptolemy was an eminently reasonable person, he was very smart, and he had done a far better job acquiring a more exhaustive justification for his mistaken view than you have for your correct one. In fact, you may not have any beliefs that are as well-justified as his false one about the relationship of the Earth and the Sun.

But he was wrong. What the Ptolemy example shows is that the view that epistemologists call *fallibilism* is correct. Fallibilism is the position that it is possible for someone to have a well-justified, but false belief. We can think of it in terms of culpability. Since he did the most that anyone could be fairly expected to do in terms of homework, Ptolemy can't be faulted for still getting it wrong. Given the comprehensive grasp of the information that anyone in his era could have, there just doesn't seem to be any way that they could have figured out the truth. In fact, if someone had claimed that the Earth orbits around the Sun, they would have been correct, but *unreasonable*. Ptolemy would have said,

“But look at the movement of the planets and the Sun in the sky. And look at what we know from Aristotle and Hipparchus. And look at these extensive mathematical calculations that I have done that predict the locations of the planets and the Sun on the basis of my model. You don't have a shred of evidence that could possibly support such a preposterous view.”

And he would have been right about that. What the example also shows is that which beliefs are reasonable and justified is at least partly a matter of social, historical, scientific, and academic context. It makes no sense to say about a belief that it is either reasonable or unreasonable, rational or irrational in itself. If the claim that the Earth is the center of the universe, or that the Earth is flat can be well-justified for someone as smart and careful as Ptolemy, then anything can be reasonable to believe under the right circumstances. There are only reasonable and unreasonable ways of believing a claim. And part of the difference is determined by what others around you are saying, what the general state of your culture's knowledge of the world is, how good you are at making inferences, what your community takes to be common sense, and what other things you take to be true and justified.

What About Miracles?

With those points in mind, let's turn to the question of miracles. What should we make of miracles? Should we take the miracle stories in the Bible seriously? Would the occurrence of a miracle give us good grounds for believing that an omni-God exists? Are the stories that we have about Jesus sufficient to justify Christian theism? What the Ptolemy examples suggests, and what we will explore later in this chapter, is that there certainly could have been cases where people had a reasonable belief in the existence of God that was founded on what they took to be miracles.

What is a Miracle?

The term miracle is used in a wide range of cases. And it is confusions about these different common senses of the term that have fostered confusion about what they are and what sort of evidence they might provide for the claims of theism. Very often, people will use the term miracle to describe what they take to be a very unlikely and fortuitous event. “I won the lottery,

it's a miracle!!" TV reporters interview the sole survivor of an airplane crash: "it's a miraculous story." Or Aaron Ralston got his arm pinned under a boulder on a hiking trip in Utah. After being stuck for days, he amputated his own arm, and walked back out of the back country. Later he said, "I have this sense of purpose about what I went through, that it was a miracle." Or consider this from the parody newspaper, The Onion:



Miracle Of Birth Occurs For 83 Billionth Time

March 3, 1999 | [Issue 35•08](#)

HOPE SPRINGS, AR—The holy and sacrosanct miracle of birth, long revered by human civilization as the most mysterious and magical of all phenomena, took place for what experts are estimating "must be at least the 83 billionth time" Tuesday with the successful delivery of eight-pound, four-ounce baby boy Darryl Brandon Severson at Holy Mary Mother Of God Hospital.

On David Hume's famous account, a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, an interruption in the patterns of behavior of physical matter. $E=mc^2$ or $pV=nRT$ (Ideal Gas Law) applied until Tuesday at 3:32, then it briefly stopped applying while Jesus walked on water, and the molecules of the water and Jesus' body resumed following all the normal physical laws at 3:37.

So none of the examples of fortuitous and unlikely or likely events would or should count as miracles on Hume's account. And there are a number of reasons why the so-called miracle of birth, or winning the lottery, or surviving a car wreck do not provide the sort of support for the claims of theism that they are often taken too. First, many of these so-called miracle events aren't really unlikely at all. They happen quite often. They are predictable, and their occurrence is exactly what we would expect in a natural world where matter is governed by physical laws. Physical laws describe the mass, momentum, and trajectory of the car crash survivor when she was thrown clear of the car. When people have unprotected sex, there's a 25% or so chance that a pregnancy will result. Many of the lesser lottery prizes are quite common. The lottery tickets are printed so that winning \$2, or \$10, or even \$100 all happen frequently. And on any given day, with enough car and plane wrecks, there will be survivors. Even exceedingly unlikely events happen, and in the end someone has to win the lottery.

There's also a myopia that sets in for someone considering a single case retrospectively. When the reporters ask the sole survivor of the plane crash about what it feels like to have escaped harm and she says, "It was a miracle; God reached out and saved me," it's obvious that the friends and families of the other 265 people who died in the crash don't see the event the same way. In fact, being killed in a plane crash is so exceedingly unlikely that one might well say, "Wow, what are the odds that Smith would have been killed in a plane crash this weekend? That never happens. It must be a miracle!" But of course, even though exceedingly unlikely and horrible things happen too, since they aren't fortuitous, we tend not to see them and special, positive evidence for some supernatural force. Ironically, we typically do not conclude that there must be a devil or some malevolent supernatural force that is responsible when a friend is struck by lightning, or dies from cancer. Part of the reason we don't is that we are very selective about the evidence that we consider and we've already got a conclusion in mind and we're skimming the world on a daily basis looking for evidence that will corroborate it. Aron Ralston probably didn't go and gather information about the number of hikers who die in the wilderness every year.

There's also a curious statistical fallacy that is at work in people's thinking about miracles. When we view some event in hindsight, it's easy to make it seem as if there was something extraordinary about the way that all of the contributing factors lined up to produce just the outcome that resulted. After you win the lottery, you think to yourself, "Wow, if I had gone to the convenient store even 5 minutes later, I wouldn't have gotten the winning ticket. Or if the phone had rung before I went, or if the guy in the delivery truck who brings the rolls of lottery tickets to the store every day had had a flat tire, then I wouldn't have won. It's so exceedingly unlikely that all of those events would have happened in just the way that they did to give me the winning ticket, it must be a miracle." What's easy to overlook is that if the next guy who bought one had won because the lottery ticket delivery truck driver did have a flat tire, the winner would be saying the very same thing. It was a certainty that someone was going to win the lottery that day; there's nothing supernatural, or unlikely about that. Imagine the two lovers making pillow talk; "what are the odds that you and me would have both been in line in that same Starbucks that day, and that we were both ordering coffee, and that we both had a few minutes to chat before we had to go do other things? It must be destiny that we were meant to be together." The problem is that you were single and lonely at the time, and that you would have readily made time to talk with an attractive person who seemed available, and if it hadn't been her, it would have been the woman working at the cash register at the Starbucks or someone you chatted with in line at the grocery store, or someone from church. A hookup was looming in your future, and when it does happen, there's nothing particularly notable about it statistically.

Carl Sagan called this mistake the Texas sharpshooter's fallacy. The marksman takes a shot at the side of a barn and then draws a target around the bullet hole in the wall. "Look, another bulls eye!!! Damn I'm a good shot!"

Calculating odds works differently before the event than it does afterwards looking back. If on Monday Smith predicts that the winning lottery numbers for Tuesday will be 12, 35, 1, 78, 37, 79, 41, 3, and 7, in that order, and on Tuesday those are exactly the numbers that come up and in that order, then we should be surprised. But if 21 million people play the lottery on Tuesday with millions of different number combinations and a guy (Jones) in Louisville, Kentucky happens on the right sequence, and we hear about the news on Wednesday, then we should be less impressed. It won't do to then say, "Wow, what are the odds that Jones would have picked exactly the right sequence of numbers? It must be a miracle!" Detailed, specific predictions can be surprising and unlikely. But myopic post dictions that impress us by actively selecting for the result we are looking for are based on a confusion. The fallacy has been identified as hindsight bias, or prediction after the fact.

So, seriously, if a miracle is going to possibly count as evidence for something as important as the existence of God, we cannot allow it to just mean something we are happy about, or something that we think is unlikely when it is not, or even something that is unlikely. And it can't be something that we have constructed into having the appearance of something unlikely after the fact by narrowly selecting a result in hindsight.

Hume's definition, then, is important. A miracle must be a bona fide violation of the laws of nature. If we had good reasons to think that something like that happened, then we're at least in the neighborhood of God. To actually suspend the laws of nature would seem to indicate divine or supernatural intervention (although I am going to argue in the next section that even this presumption is mistaken.)

We also need to be clear on the distinction between a violation of the laws of nature and a violation of what we take to be the laws of nature. A medieval doctor might well have thought that it would be impossible to cure someone of the bubonic plague with an injection from a syringe. When the first steam locomotives were introduced, doubters argued that the human body would be destroyed if it travelled faster than the speed of a running horse, about 40 miles per hour. And before Darwin, it seemed contrary to the laws of nature that anything as

complicated as a biological organism could develop through a blind, purposeless natural process. Although we talk about the miracles of modern medicine, we should not take vaccines, fast cars, or complex organisms to be miracles that are pertinent to the existence of some super natural force. The sort of events that might indicate some power that transcends that of nature would have to violate the real laws of nature.

Our Presumptions about the Significance of Miracles

In most matters, people have a profound tendency to find evidence for conclusions they already favor. We also stop inquiring before seriously considering evidence that would disconfirm a favored view. And when we do encounter negative evidence, we scrutinize it with abnormal levels of skepticism and we hold that evidence to excessively high levels of proof. Then we take a liberal and forgiving view of the evidence that supports the conclusions we favor. So when junior brings home a D on a history exam, there must be something wrong with the teacher or the other kids in class who are distracting him. But when he brings home an A, then it's all to his credit because, after all, he is a brilliant kid.

We have a powerful disposition towards confirmation of conclusions that we arrived at before we considered the evidence. And one of the ways we blur the evidence in our favor is by confusing the difference between reasons that support our conclusion and claims that are merely consistent with our conclusion.

So for a very long time, it seems to have been taken for granted by many people that if we had good reasons to think that the universe had a cause, then that would be tantamount to an argument for the existence of God. And we also seem to have assumed that if miracles really do occur, then proof for the existence of God is in hand. We take it that if there really were a Jesus who did and said all the things he is purported to, then we'd have compelling reasons to think that the God of Christianity is real. We assume that if prayers are answered, then God must be listening.

Atheists and non-believers are just as guilty of buying into these assumptions when they have expended energy arguing that there really was no Jesus, or that the virgin birth motif was common among various first century religious sects, that the Bible contains internal inconsistencies, or that there was no Intelligent Designer of life on Earth. The background presumption often seems to be that if we can't show that there were no Jesus, or if he really was born from a mother who was a virgin, or if the Bible is perfectly consistent, or if there were a non-natural cause of life on Earth, then we would have a compelling proof that the claims of Christian theism are true. In Victor Stenger's recent book, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, he argues at great length that prayer doesn't work, the laws of nature weren't violated at the beginning of the universe, there is no evidence for supernatural powers or predictions, and that the world looks exactly the way it should if there were no God. Some of his arguments have some merit, but by drawing the battle lines at the question of whether or not there is any empirical evidence for any events that defy our grasp of physics Stenger and a whole host of theism's critics have already surrendered far too much territory.

In his critically acclaimed, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins pursues the same wrong strategy. In the Ultimate Boeing 747 argument, he sets out to give a "statistical demonstration that God almost certainly does not exist."¹ The proponents of Intelligent Design argue that complex things cannot come about by chance. And the only alternative explanation to chance is an intelligent designer. Therefore, God must exist. But Dawkins argues that anything that is capable of creating something that is complex must itself be at least as complex. So that

¹ Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. 113.

creator must have been produced by another intelligent designer that is at least as complex, and so on. So the Intelligent Design argument collapses under the weight of an infinite regress since it cannot reduce or explain complexity by means of some simpler parts or principles. Natural selection, of course, Dawkins argues, can solve this dilemma.

But here again, Dawkins seems to have presumed that if we had a convincing design argument for some non-natural origin for humanity and life on Earth, then the existence of God would seem to follow. Dawkins and Stenger, and a host of other doubters who have taken these Design argument seriously have accepted a Christian theist agenda that smuggles in a number of staggering non-sequiturs that cheat the gap from non-natural cause to omni-God, or even worse, from non-natural cause to Christian God.

What the non-believers seem to have missed is that the arguments for the existence of a first cause, for the authenticity of miracles, for the internal consistency of the Bible, or for the existence of a non-natural intervention in evolutionary history are non-starters because even in their strongest forms they cannot show the existence of an omni-God, and they certainly cannot show the existence of the more articulated Christian God.

What Would a Miracle Show?

Let's turn to the argument that even at their best, miracles won't get you God. First, we need some epistemological distinctions concerning evidential support and conclusions. Evidence that is consistent with a conclusion is importantly different from and weaker than evidence that supports or proves a conclusion. Consider some examples that illustrate the difference. If I can successfully perform algebra problems, then my ability is consistent with, but not proof that, I can do calculus. If a person can do calculus, then they can most likely do algebra. But not all people who can do algebra can do calculus. So my ability to do algebra alone gives us no indication *one way or the other* concerning my ability to do calculus.

Likewise, if I can bench press 200 pounds, then that is consistent with my being able to bench press 500 pounds. No one could do the latter without being able to do the former. But if I insisted that my lifting 200 pounds was *proof* that I can lift 500, then you'd be a fool to believe me on those grounds alone.

Similarly, if there is conclusive proof that the defendant was in the same city as the victim at the time of the murder, that would be consistent with his committing the murder, but not favorable evidence for his guilt by itself.

If blood from the attacker was found at the scene of the murder, and the defendant has blood, then it is possible that he is guilty. But that fact alone really offers no indication one way or another concerning his guilt. But if the attacker has a rare blood type that only occurs in 1 out of 10,000 people, and the blood from the attacker at the crime scene is also of that rare type, then we now have some evidence that supports the conclusion that he is guilty.

Earlier we considered the powerful disposition towards confirmation bias in humans towards any conclusion they favor. Blurring the line between consistency and support is one of the places where we frequently find supporting evidence for a conclusion we already favor and ignore evidence against it. Since so many people have such a strong tendency to believe, it becomes easy to slip from one to another. When we already believe, then we find evidence of God and miracles everywhere and we tend not to scrutinize those cases as carefully as we would if the scenario was reversed. And the other side of the bias is that when we encounter challenges to our pet belief, we turn up the heat and invoke criticisms and a level of proof that few of our other beliefs could survive. It's easy to stop asking hard questions about whether or not the alleged miracle actually does withstand some critical scrutiny and provide the support we want when the preliminary indications are good and we don't really want to consider the alternative.

The strength of disposition to believe that miracles are earthly manifestations of God or of the gods is so strong that people will happily find God's presence in the most unlikely places. Motorists spotted a water stain on a bridge overpass in Chicago recently that they thought resembled the virgin Mary. In no time an elaborate shrine filled with flowers, gifts, candles, and other tokens formed around the stain.



Of course, not all believers are so easily impressed. But the examples serves to show how readily and enthusiastically we will sometimes embrace the possibility of a miracle. The lesson we should learn from what we now know about confirmation bias is that we should resist the temptation to be too easily satisfied with corroborations, particularly when we will slide up the scale of increased scrutiny and proof when it comes to evaluating some claim that we are not so sympathetic with. These believers would not be so easily convinced by similarly sloppy miracles claims about some divine being that they find foreign. In the Hindu world, it has become common for stories to circulate about statues of the Lord Ganesha drinking milk from a spoon or an outstretched hand.



The milk can be seen to visibly diminish in the spoon. Physicists and chemists insist that the porous stone of the statue is absorbing the liquid, or that the surface of the statue is wicking the milk away in a thin film that can't be easily seen—at least until the puddle of milk forms at the base. But presumably, the same believers who were convinced by the water stain on the overpass above would not be so easily convinced by the Lord Ganesha stories, and vice versa. What we'd hope is that both groups of people would be more reluctant to surrender their belief by such superficial empirical signs.

The Crucial Questions About Miracles

Here are a few simple questions. First, would it be necessary for a being to have omnipotence in order to violate the laws of nature?

Consider these two events, both violations of the laws of nature. First, a human walks on water. Second, all of the nuclear fusion reactions that drive the burning of the sun are stopped and the sun is instantly rendered cold and inert. It is reasonable to think that being able to walk on water would take less power than it would take to stop the sun's fusion reactions. My grounds for thinking that the first would take less power are that were we to try to perform these feats by acting within the framework of natural law, using physical means to try to bring the event about, it would, I think, be less difficult to bring the first about than the second.

Admittedly, it could be a poor analogy to infer the scope of supernatural power from the challenges created by problems within nature. Nevertheless, I see no obvious problem with the possibility that a being could have the power to perform one violation of the laws of nature and not another. And that one sort of violation might be easier than another, even within the supernatural realm. We could imagine that some force is able to make a human walk on water or stop the sun's burning only once and only for a moment, but never again. That would be a case where the laws of nature are violated, but omnipotence was not required to do so because presumably omnipotence would include the power to do either of those acts at any time, and any other logically possible act at any time. A being could have just enough power to violate those laws of nature at that moment but no more than that. That force could have just enough power to enable someone to walk on water, but not enough to reverse time, or to stop the nuclear reaction of the sun, or perform more than one miracle. Having that much power would be remarkable, but it is a far cry short of being all powerful, or having the ability to do anything that is logically possible. Since it appears that an omnipotent being could perform acts like parting the Red Sea, or stopping the rotation of the Earth, but he could also do much more than that, then being omnipotent is merely consistent with the occurrence of miracles. But were we to come across that sort of evidence, at most it would suggest that there *could* be an omnipotent force that was responsible, although the evidence alone doesn't support that conclusion.

Second, would it be necessary for a being to have omniscience in order to violate the laws of nature? No, certainly not. You could have a dumb, but very powerful God who actually violates the laws of nature to burn a face on a fish stick because he thought that would make people believe in him. There have been a few times when something on my car wasn't working, and foolishly, I started tinkering around with the components that I figured were responsible without really knowing what they do or very much about how they work. And then after messing around with the settings on the carburetor, or taking some fuses out of the fuse box and putting them back in, or checking the oil, inexplicably and much to my surprise the car started working properly again. So there are times when I have managed to fix my car, but I was largely in the dark about how I did it, what I did, or what was wrong in the first place. There's no reason in principle to deny that this same sort of thing could be going on with a God who intervenes in nature to bring about miracles. He sort of faked it, tinkered blindly a bit, and the results seem to have come out the way he wanted. This sort of stupid or in the dark God hypothesis might make much more sense of statues bleeding from the eyes, statues drinking milk, and fish sticks bearing the image of Jesus. So God's being omniscient (if there's a God responsible at all) appears to be consistent with miraculous events, but those events can't count as positive evidence for God's omniscience.

Third, would it be necessary to be omnibenevolent in order to violate the laws of nature? Again, the answer is no. Typically, we think that miracles are always fortuitous events. We don't describe Satan's tormenting of Job as miraculous. But those acts were clearly violations of the ordinary course of nature. Presumably, if Satan hadn't engaged in his challenge with

God, the Job would not have lost all of his livestock, had his wife and children die, got boils all over his body, and so on. It seems that being could violate the laws of nature in order to inflict more suffering than a person's nervous system would be capable of sustaining otherwise, or a being could just strike everyone dead with no natural, lawful cause. So coming across a miracle, however great it appears, might be consistent with God's being all good.

Our fourth question about the miracle inference: is it necessary that a force that can violate the laws of nature must be a person or possess a consciousness with goals, or have the capacity to love, hate, forgive, become angry? Again, the answer is no. Couldn't there be a blind, unthinking, unconscious force that is powerful enough to interrupt the course of nature? At first glance, I see no reason why being capable of violating natural laws also requires being sentient, aware, or having any of the personal traits that we typically attribute to God. Or to put it another way, reading particular intentions, consciousness, purpose, or personhood from an anomalous event that violates the laws of nature is very hard because none of those appear to even be necessary for that interruption to occur. At the very least, one would need to give an argument the best explanation of miracles in general, or of a particular miracle is that some personal force rather than a blind, unconscious one was responsible. We shouldn't assume what needs to be proven. The occurrence of a miracle might be consistent with God's being a person, but it's not positive evidence in favor of the conclusion that he is.

What the preceding paragraphs have shown is that while the occurrence of a miracle might be consistent with the existence of an omni-God, or a Christian God, by themselves they don't support those stronger conclusions any more than my lifting a bag full of groceries, balancing my checkbook, and giving a homeless person five dollars proves that I'm God. Sure, God could pick up the groceries, do the math, and spare five dollars. But since so many other variations of lesser beings could do those things too, the stronger conclusion for the existence of an omni-God is grossly underdetermined.

Let's not underestimate the force of this point concerning other possible beings that might have done it too. Immersed in a Christian nation as we are, other possibilities for supernatural beings or other accounts of God or gods tend not to be "live" hypotheses for us, as William James pointed out. A live hypothesis is one that's at least a nearby possibility that you could be convinced of, even if you don't currently believe it. So being a Republican or a Democrat are probably more live possibilities for you than being an anarcho-syndicalist or a Federalist. We can think of the latter as a dead option because of how radically your belief structure would have to change and how different your experiences would have to be in order for you to adopt one of those positions.

The point of the stronger miracles argument was to start from nothing and give compelling evidence that an omni-God exists. And the greater challenge was to prove the existence of the Christian God with the associated corollaries about sin, redemption, Jesus' sacrifice, and so on. If we are really going to take the miracle line of argument seriously, then the miracle advocate needs to be prepared to argue that the occurrence of miracles give us a reasonable amount of proof to support one of those stronger conclusions. What we have seen is that suppose I have compelling evidence in front of me for the occurrence of a miracle—for the parting of the Red Sea, or Mohammed was said to have split the moon on command, or for the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—even if we grant the inference to some supernatural force being responsible, there is an infinitely long list of scenarios that could have produced these results. Since the evidence is consistent with the responsible force's being "sub-omni," it could have been aliens with more power, knowledge, and goodness than us, but less than God. It could have been a mistake, a blind tinkering, or a deception. It could have been the Tooth Fairy, or Santa, or the Great Ju Ju in the Limpopo river to use an example from Richard Dawkins. What's the status of the God hypothesis in the midst of all these possibilities when we consider our miracle? It has nothing special to recommend it from the miracle alone. Were

there some way in principle to rule out **all** of those other possibilities, then we might have some grounds to boost the God explanation above. But we can't assume that it is the front runner merely because that's the explanation we hear offered most often, or because that's the one we were raised believing. If miracles are going to prove God, then the gap from non-natural event to Christian omni-God needs to be closed by the evidence and argument.

So we should conclude that at the very most, if a miracle occurred and we had good reason to believe that a real violation of the laws of nature had occurred, the strongest conclusion that we could get from that evidence some force greater than us but lesser than God could perform a miracle. And we shouldn't even read too much into the term "being," since personhood and consciousness do not follow. We cannot infer from a miracle alone that the cause is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, or even a personal agent.

What's next? So far, we've driven back the inference from miracles to God from: miracles, were they to occur, would support or imply the existence of God, to miracles, were they to occur, could be merely be consistent with the existence of God, but don't offer any supporting evidence by themselves. But I will now argue that even that assumption is mistaken because, they wouldn't even be consistent with the existence of God. That is, the occurrence of miracles would be persuasive evidence *against* the existence of God.

Miracles are Evidence Against the Existence of God.

On Hume's view, it would take an extraordinary set of circumstances to make miracle testimony reasonable to believe. The problem is that someone is telling you that they witnessed a violation of the laws of nature, but during every moment of every day of your life, the laws of nature have always been uniform and uninterrupted. So the weight of that evidence that interruptions never occur overwhelms the possibility that what the testifier is telling you is true. It's always more likely that they are lying, mistaken, deceived, or otherwise wrong no matter how convinced, honest, and careful they seem.

The one example he gives of a case that might be compelling sets the bar so high, it would appear that it cannot be met. He says,

"Thus, suppose, all authors, in all languages, agree, that, from the first of January 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days: suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: that all travelers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction: it is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived."

Several points are important in this passage. First, Hume appears to be demanding a level of consistency, and unanimity among people all over the world that cannot be met even in cases where we know if fact that some extraordinary event has occurred and we can consider testimony about it. I suspect that in cases where there has been an eclipse of the sun, and the event has been viewed by people over large parts of the world, we will still not get unanimous accounts "without the least variation or contradiction." Second, notice at the end of the passage that Hume then concedes that we should then search for the causes of the event. He does not concede that such a body of testimony or that such an event, now reasonable to believe, indicates a miracle. Finding the cause may reveal that there is a natural, uniform, law like explanation. So at least on one reading, this passage is consistent with Hume's not believing that any circumstances could render miracle testimony reasonable.

Another important question in Hume's piece is the question of what would be reasonable to believe if I witness what appears to be a miracle. Hume's attention is focused entirely on the question of miracle testimony, and we have to wonder what, by extension, would he say about the situation where I am not hearing about a miracle from some third party, but I observe it myself?

The natural and obvious answer, I think, is that Hume's answer would be almost the same. When someone else tells me that they have witnessed a miracle, the obvious explanations are that he is lying, he has been deceived, he is mistaken, or he actually witnessed a violation of the laws of nature. If I see what appears to be a violation of the laws of nature, and I find myself inclined to think that it was one, I must consider the possibilities that I am lying, I am being deceived, I am mistaken, or that it really was a miracle. How could I be lying? While it may be hard to detect these cases when it is ourselves who are guilty, we are all capable of wanting something to be true or having ulterior motives and talking ourselves into believing, or deceiving ourselves. Consider the case of the boyfriend who refuses to acknowledge the evidence presented by his friends that his girlfriend is cheating on him. All of the evidence is there; he has seen it himself. And now people that he knows and trusts tell him the same thing. Yet in his passion and desperation somehow he manages to ignore or explain away the obvious. It's accurate to describe such a case as lying to oneself.

And the irony of extending Hume's argument to cases where you witness the alleged miracle is that you must now acknowledge, about yourself, and despite the fact that you think you saw the event yourself and you are inclined to believe, that it is far more likely that I am lying, deceived, or mistaken, than that a real violation of the laws of nature occurred. And given the bulk of my experience as uniform and law like, it will always be more likely that one of the former explanations is correct instead of the latter.

The larger problem here is that Hume's argument is too stringent. By most readings, Hume's argument has this implication: in the event that we actually do witness a miracle, Hume concludes that it would not be reasonable to believe that one had. That is, on Hume's account of evidence and rational belief, there are circumstances where one could satisfy an extraordinarily high standard of evidence and still not be justified in believing. Suppose Jack sees what appears to him to be a miracle. Jack could gather other eyewitness corroborations, he could investigate all the possible explanations that he could think of, and he could interview relevant experts for possible explanations. And if Jack lives in 21st century America, and has a typical education level and intelligence, he could study all the relevant psychological data and theories concerning self-deception. He could devote years of study and analysis to the project. Jack could acquire most exhaustive and thorough evidence that despite his best efforts to poke holes in it, still seems to indicate that a real violation of the laws of nature occurred. And at this point, Jack has acquired better grounds for believing than he has for any other thing he believes in the rest of his life. He has gathered a body of evidence that vastly exceeds the quantity and quality of evidence that he has for any other reasonable belief he possesses. And none of the other possible explanations for the anomalous event turns out to be supported by these investigations as he sees it. No plausible alternative to the violation of the laws of nature explanation develops despite Jack's best, genuine efforts to find one. But by Hume's account, it would appear that Jack should still conclude that a miracle did not occur. So on Hume's theory of evidence there could be situations where a reasonable person could gather an extraordinary body of evidence of exceptional quality, and all of that evidence could point to the conclusion that X is true, and in fact (by hypothesis) X is true, yet it is not reasonable for S to believe X.

Now consider Ptolemy's example from the beginning of this chapter. We established that by any fair standard of reasonableness, Ptolemy was perfectly well justified in believing that the Earth was the center of the universe. In fact, he's done his homework better than you have about this question. What Ptolemy and lots of other normal people in the history of humanity

show us is that it is possible, even common, for us to be well justified in believing something that is dead wrong. Hume's argument seems to be ignoring this very common and very real possibility. He's prepared to ratchet the standards of evidence for miracles up so high that one could have the most compelling, objective justification in favor of a claim in history and you *still* shouldn't believe what would be blindingly obvious otherwise.

This result strikes me as a serious liability to Hume's account. Whatever else a theory of evidence and rationality does for us, it should not impose requirements like these on us. These are grounds, I believe, for rejecting the theory of evidence, not for concluding that a miracle has not occurred. Although I do think that were one to see what appeared to be a miracle, you should subject that event the very serious scrutiny. And since the occurrence of a miracle would be so significant, you should become completely convinced that none of the alternative natural explanation that Hume points us to are better descriptions of what happened. But it seems to me that Ptolemy was well-justified in his geocentric model of the universe, so surely in the right circumstances, one could become justified that you have seen a real miracle.

Even though Hume demands more than reasonable and justified people could ever provide, we have seen that even if we grant that it is reasonable to conclude that there was a violation of the laws of nature, the omni-God conclusion is seriously underdetermined. The miracle line of argument was a dead end from the start. Miracles don't give us evidence that some supernatural agent was responsible. Nor do they indicate omnipotence, omniscience, or omnibenevolence.

How Big is the Total Burden of Proof from Miracles to God?

Furthermore, recall that we are not just concerned with real miracles but faux miracles that to a finite human agent would appear in every regard to be a miracle. It is possible and quite common for events with a natural explanation to look supernatural. Las Vegas magicians, especially when they are good, pull it off several times a night, and during the matinee on Saturdays. So, are omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence required in order to create something that looks like a real miracle but that is not a violation of nature? Since Las Vegas magicians do it, we have to answer no. Being clever, thoughtful, and creative are enough to even fool the skeptical. And in lots of cases normal, natural events like strange weather or geological phenomena are mistaken for supernatural occurrences. So omnipotence and omniscience are certainly not necessary to accomplish what Siegfried and Roy, or Chris Angel can do.

The Strong Thesis: Miracles Would Be Evidence Against the Existence of God

An implication of our exploration of the miracle question is that in performing a miracle, an omni-God would be acting far below capacity. Since miracles are merely consistent with and don't require the omni properties, they amount to cheesy party tricks for God. Since we have seen that omnipotence (not to mention the other properties) is not required in order to violate the laws of nature, then a miracle, by definition, as a violation of the laws of nature, would be a restrained act. A restrained act is one where a being performs X but is capable of doing more. If I am capable of running a 10 minute mile, then a 15 minute mile—a fast walk at 4 mph—is well below my ability threshold. Giving a homeless man a dollar when I could have spared \$10, and doing algebra when I am capable of calculus are also restrained.

Finite, limited beings like us are certainly capable of restrained acts. But if there are compelling reasons to think that an infinite, omni-being such as God would be incapable of restrained acts, then those would be compelling reasons for concluding that the occurrence of miracles isn't even consistent with the existence of God. If God can't act sub-maximally, and we

have good reasons to think that some miracles have occurred, then we cannot attribute those to God.

But even if the author of those miracles cannot be God, that would not give us grounds to conclude that there is no God. We could only conclude that if there is a God, he didn't do *that*.

Suppose, however, that there are good reasons to think that God wouldn't even tolerate the occurrence of miraculous events that for him would be restrained. What if God was the omni-sheriff in town, and not only does he not break the laws, but he permits no one else to do it either? If there are reasons to think that God wouldn't restrain himself to perform miracles, and he wouldn't tolerate their occurrence either, then were we to have evidence of the occurrence of a miracle, we'd have evidence *against* the existence of God.

Two very important questions, then, become: Is God capable of restrained acts? And would God tolerate them in his presence? If the answers are no and no, then miracles would disprove God.

God Will Not Be Restrained: The Miracle Problem of Evil

Recall the challenges facing the theodist concerning the amount of evil in the world in the previous chapter. There are alleged miracles in religious history that seem to have served primarily as evidential or epistemological miracles. Their occurrence seems to have been intended to prove that Jesus was who he said he was, or that Mohammed was in fact a prophet of Allah, or that God has the power he is alleged to have. God's turning Sarah into a pillar of salt for looking back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, or God's unleashing a flood that kills everyone except Noah and his family appear to be punitive demonstrations of power. But God's parting the Red Sea seems to be intending to help save the Jews, and the goal of Jesus' healing the sick was, at least partly, to eliminate their suffering. Mohammed is said to have multiplied food supernaturally on several occasions in order to feed hungry masses.

Miraculous events that serve to alleviate suffering generate a new problem that we will call *the miracle problem of evil*. Suppose Jesus heals a crippled man so that he can walk again, or cures a group of lepers, or God otherwise prevents some local instance of suffering. Or suppose that of the millions of pilgrims who have bathed or drunk the waters at Lourdes, France, some of their medical problems were miraculously cured. The overwhelmingly obvious question to ask in each of these cases, especially if the event is being held up as evidence for the existence of an infinitely good and loving God, is "why not more?" Even the Catholic Church has only officially recognized a handful of cases at Lourdes as authentic miracles. At any given moment on the planet, there are most likely thousands or even millions of people claiming to have had some beneficial miracle that alleviates suffering. But at any given moment on the planet there are millions or even billions of other people who are not being cured, healed, or benefitted. So the occurrence of one beneficial miracle in the midst of so many instances of unabated suffering seems to count heavily against attributing omnibenevolence to the source. There are a number of important details and issues here that we will discuss in the Evil chapter, but here the question is can the occurrence of miracles be reasonably construed as evidence for the existence of an omni- or Christian God? Were some supernatural force to alleviate some cases of suffering and not others, then at the very least it will take some careful argument to show that that evidence is even consistent with the attribution of omnibenevolence. If there were two people walking out in an intersection about to be hit by a bus and you could save one of them both without much effort, but you restrained yourself and only called out to or pulled one of them back, we wouldn't judge you to be as good a person as someone who saved them both. If a doctor travels to an African village with enough polio vaccine to inoculate 1,000 children, but only gives 10 of them the shot and throws the rest of the vaccine away, and then watches the remaining 990 die or be crippled, we would conclude that doctor was a monster, not a saint.

Even if some supernatural force were to reach out and instantaneously eliminate all of the suffering in the world today, one would think that an omnibenevolent being would have done it sooner. What was he doing yesterday? Was he busy? Off on errands? And what was he doing in 1945 during Auschwitz, or while the bubonic plague was ravaging and killing millions in Europe during the middle 1300s?

Much to our surprise, the classical problem of evil is *made worse* by cases where God is alleged to have done something good for someone. Every case where someone claims that their prayers led to their rapid recovery from terminal cancer, or that their piety helped bring back a loved one safe from the fighting in a war zone shines a powerful spotlight on centuries of gratuitous suffering that went unabated despite heartfelt prayers, decent lives, and fervent piety.

It would have been more plausible, perhaps, to argue that God is all good and loving had that particular beneficial miracle not happened. That is, the theist in these cases would have less explaining to do, and could possibly make more sense of the compatibility of a world that does not have local, seemingly arbitrary miracles, than a world where a tiny bit of suffering is alleviated in a neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio, or in Amsterdam, while wars, famine, plagues, and drought kill millions elsewhere. If an omni-God performed no local miracles, one might hope to offer up some generalized account of gratuitous suffering like Hick's soul-making theodicy. But if you try to derive God's omnibenevolence from miracles, you've opened the door wider to the problem of reconciling it with all the staggering amounts of suffering in history that went on without intervention.

In fact, all of the classic theodicies that attempt to reconcile the existence of evil in the world with an omni-God rest are uneasy bedfellows with miracles. The freewill defense alleges that God valued endowing humans with the freedom to commit morally evil (and good) acts more highly than he valued preventing moral evil. According to the soul making justification of evil, a good and loving God would not prefer a "hedonistic paradise" for his children. Moral virtue, responsibility, and personal growth can only be accomplished by meeting real physical, moral, and social challenges. And on Leibniz's view, an omni-creator with a variety of complex priorities and goals would create a rich and diverse world that might appear to be less than optimal from the local view, but is in fact, the "best of all possible worlds."

The introduction of miracles into any of these scenarios thoroughly and unnecessarily complicates matters. It's hard to conceive how an omniscient being who would have a perfect plan for the best of all possible worlds from the start would then see fit to tinker, interrupt, or meddle with the unfolding of events with miracles. Miracles would directly undermine the soul building explanation which is predicated upon the world's being an orderly, predictable, and challenging place for us to learn to exercise our reason and develop ethical virtue. And miracles as direct and overpowering manifestations of God's will in the world would erode our capacity to freely exercise our wills.

So the theist who offers an explanation of God's purposes for evil in the world must either be very skeptical about and reluctant to accept real miracles, or they must go through even more dramatic gymnastics to explain why God would both want inscrutable evil in the world, and then arbitrarily eliminate tiny fragments of it with miracles periodically.

From a purely strategic perspective, the Christian theist should view miracle claims with a great deal of caution. If God is bothering with those sorts of petty and inconsequential problems in the world, how could one plausibly argue that he's also the Alpha and the Omega, the grand author of the universe? A God who bothers with making statues that cry blood, clouds that resemble the name of Allah, or raising Lazarus from the dead (and not 6 million Jews in the Holocaust) is harder to defend and believe in than no God at all.

So the occurrence of beneficial miracles, even big one, appears to count against the existence of an all good, all loving supernatural force. The typical assumption has been that miracles, were they to occur, would be positive evidence for the existence of God. But what we

have seen is that even the project of showing that miracles are consistent with the existence of God is plagued (pun intended) with difficulties. Reading off positive, supporting evidence for the attribution of omnibenevolence from some miracle is outrageous. An omni-being wouldn't manifest himself through mere healings, images, cryptic intimations. Only a petty, superficial, short-sighted being would bother with such insignificant party tricks.

God Doesn't Slouch

But that leaves epistemological miracles. What about miraculous events that don't do a shabby job of addressing the world's gratuitous suffering? Again the possibility that an omni-God would resort to such trite, ineffective, and indirect means to achieve his ends turns out to be problematic. We've now seen just how little progress even the most impressive miracles make towards proving an omni-God. If an omni-God has some goals that he wishes to achieve such as instilling belief, inspiring faith, fortifying resolve, discouraging misbehavior, or enforcing commandments, it takes very little imagination to conceive of more direct, effective, and sustained means of achieving those ends.

We have had a profound lack of imagination and a surprising lack of curiosity about just what it means to be all knowing, all powerful, and all good. God would conceive of the perfect, optimal solution to every challenge, and could bring that solution about instantaneously and unequivocally. Consider two computer programming students working on a homework project to produce some output Y from an input X using a programming language. Smith creates a circuitous, inefficient, clumsy set of unnecessarily complicated program modules that fulfill the required task with hundreds of lines of code. Jones is more clever and finds a simple, elegant, efficient solution that achieves the same output with a few dozen lines of code. The instructor would rightly give Jones the better grade. By extension, an omniscient, omnipotent being would achieve the most elegant and effective means to achieve its ends. This was part of Leibniz's point concerning God's achieving the best of all possible worlds to achieve a complicated set of goals. Omniscience would grasp that solution perfectly, and omnipotence would enact it without any restraint. Walking on water, turning water into wine, and splitting the moon are petty, microscopic stunts for an omni-being. Whatever it is that they are supposed to accomplish, they don't do it very well. They have been ambiguous, under documented, obscure, contentious, and divisive. If God's intention was to foster confusion and strife, then that end was accomplished admirably.

All the same feats, or at least facsimiles that are nearly undetectable, can be performed by even mediocre modern magicians and illusionists. David Copperfield made the Statue of Liberty disappear. Penn and Teller catch bullets in their teeth. Chris Angel walks on water in a swimming pool and floats in the air over the Luxor hotel. Imagine the social and religious impact illusionists with their ingenuity could have had amongst the superstitious, poor, and uneducated masses of New Testament Palestine. Religious frauds such as Peter Popoff, Robert Tilton, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Ted Haggard have netted millions from much more educated modern people with cruder and more transparent trickery and deception. Surely an omni-God, were he to opt to manifest himself through miracles would do much better.

Now we've seen a number of powerful reasons for thinking that an omni God wouldn't manifest himself or act by means of miracles. The larger question is, if a miracle occurred, would that be evidence against the existence of God. What we have seen thus far is that if a miracle occurs, we can be pretty confident that God wasn't responsible.

Consider the possible scenarios where God didn't do it, but a real violation of the laws of nature has occurred. That would mean that some supernatural force or being with vast power was responsible (assuming for the moment that it had to be caused by something. We will consider the possibility that it wasn't shortly.) That would also mean that God, being all

knowing, all powerful, and all good, would know about that supernatural source. He would have the power to stop it, redirect it, eliminate it, or even enhance it. And being omnibenevolent, he would have a unified tolerating or unconflicted will towards it.² Omni beings do not wring their hands or harbor discontent; they understand the totality perfectly, and their power integrates with reality completely. So now we have some demi-God force or being that perpetrating miraculous events in God's creation. In turn, these events foster great confusion and conflict because of their ambiguity. Or they cultivate piety and belief in the real God through some Gettier problem confusion of cosmic scale.³ The faithful may be content with something like this scenario—after all, if one believes in Satan, or angels, or saints, these are precisely the sorts of manifestations they are supposed to have in the world. But I take it that this increasingly far fetched scenario raises more questions than it answers.

First, all the same concerns and objections stated before to the possibility of God's employing miracles to achieve his ends apply here as well. What possible purpose could it serve for God to create and tolerate such a baroque ontology? Why would an omni being employ such indirect and inefficient means to achieve his ends? If God has achieved the optimal solution to his plans and created the best of all possible worlds, why would he permit these forces or beings to meddle, tinker, or interfere with the machinery of nature? If they are part of the plan, wouldn't an omni being be able to achieve the end goals more expeditiously? Where is there any plausible, concrete evidence that such forces or beings exist? Why would a loving and powerful God so thoroughly and successfully hide his real nature and existence, but permit enigmatic and ambiguous miracles? If there are real miracles, why would God embed them in the midst of thousands or millions of other alleged miracles that are so easily debunked as deceptions, mistakes, exaggerations, and enthusiasm? If they are real miracles, then why can't we obtain any convincing evidence that they are real, instead of cryptic, conflicting, apocryphal anecdotes? Working out the details of how such a scenario could be real makes it clear that the far simple explanation that fits with the available evidence is that the alleged miracles are the product of our anthropomorphic imaginations.

The culture surrounding miracles and paranormal phenomena has become so mired in fabrications, frauds, and confusions that were God to perform a real one it would stand the same chance of exoneration as the one innocent man who is mistakenly jailed crying out for justice in a prison full of guilty criminals who all passionately insist that they are innocent. Once again, couldn't an omni being do better than that? Would he allow himself to be so grossly mistaken, maligned, and misunderstood?

In conclusion, were real miracles to occur, it would increase our confidence that there is no God. A good God wouldn't concern himself with petty, local suffering while neglecting vast amounts of gratuitous evil in history. An omnipotent and omniscient being would not employ such ambiguous, divisive, ineffective means to achieve his ends. Nor does it seem that he would tolerate other forces or being mucking up the unfolding of his masterful creation. And the epistemological environment surrounding miracles eliminates any hope of a real one achieving the concrete ends it might have were it not for so many hoaxes, deceptions, and imaginings.

² An omni being would not tolerate the existence of anything that he had the will and the power to change, and he would be resolved and at peace with anything he could not. See my article, "The Paradox of Divine Agency," in *The Impossibility of God*, eds. Martin and Monnier. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Press, 2003.

³ In Gettier's famous problem, a person Smith ends up having a justified, true belief in a proposition, but the justification was based on an accidental alignment of evidence with the truth that prevents the belief from being considered knowledge.

What about the Gospel Accounts of Jesus? What Should We Make of Those Miracle Accounts?

Despite the substantial challenges we have seen to the miracle line of argument for God's existence, there is a class of arguments that many people find very compelling concerning the historical Jesus that deserve some consideration here. For many people, the historical reality of a person named Jesus who claimed to be divine and who performed acts that seemed to demonstrate his divinity presents us with evidence that we cannot ignore. Being religious is not just an abstract, intellectual and emotional activity; God has actually made himself present in the world and he walked on water, healed the sick, and was resurrected from the dead to prove his pedigree.

So many people have given this sort of argument for the historical authenticity of the stories we now have about Jesus.

1. We have ample historical evidence that corroborates the existence of Jesus.
2. We have good reason to think that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life are true.
3. If we have ample historical evid. for X and good reasons to think that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life are true, then Jesus existed and the miracle claims of the Gospels are true.

4. Therefore, Jesus existed and the miracle claims of the Gospels are true.

Here are some of the reasons often given in support of premises 1 and 2.

There were **multiple eyewitness accounts** of the miracles of Jesus, not just a few isolated people. Thousands of people are purported in the Gospels to have witnessed his healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry. Furthermore, when Jesus was crucified, he wasn't buried in secret. The tomb was widely known and accessed. If it contained his corpse, then a story about his resurrection would have been very difficult to fake. A number of people found the tomb empty. On several different occasions, different groups of people are purported to have experienced Jesus resurrected from the dead.

The witnesses are not a homogenous group of religious zealots. They are from **diverse backgrounds**, with different educations, and social standings. They were not a strange, fringe group.

It is highly unlikely that the witnesses had any **ulterior motives**. The witnesses stood to gain nothing from retelling what they had seen. In fact, they stood to lose a great deal. Early Christians were socially ostracized for their beliefs, persecuted, and even killed. The original disciples believed that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their having every reason not to. Such an event would have been outlandish to them, yet they still believed. They were so convinced that they gave up their jobs, their wealth, and their families to become Christians.

The people surrounding the eyewitnesses believed them and were impressed enough to **convert**. The passion and conviction of the original believers was so profound that it conquered the doubts of all those around them. A whole religious movement that has lasted for thousands of years and spread to millions of people has sprung from the eyewitness accounts. Also what must strike many Christian theists as important is that even though there were many other religious movements at the time, and even though many people have claimed to be a savior for humankind, it is the Christian religion based on the Jesus stories that won out, so to speak.

One might say that no other religious movement has had such a lasting and widespread impact on the history of humanity. And the fact of that impact itself lends credibility to the claims about Jesus' divinity and miracles upon which the movement is based. (One obvious problem, of course, is that there are other religious movements such as Islam that can make the same claims about widespread impact, but it would not appear that they all can be correct.)

Many of the events of the New Testament have been **historically corroborated**. Archeologists, historians, and other scholars have been able to find a great deal of independent evidence that confirms many of the historical claims such as the reign of Herod, the destruction of the temple, the growth of the early church.

The Gospels focus on a **real, historical** person. They are not comparable in their age to a book of mythology about Paul Bunyan, or fairy tales. They present their account as a factual record of the events in history, not as allegory, or fiction. Furthermore, the Jewish tradition of transmitting history accurately and reliably was highly developed and successful.

Once we consider all of these factors, it would seem that no other hypothesis can explain all the elements of the story of Jesus as well.

What's Wrong with the Historical Argument for Jesus?

There is much to say in favor of this argument. It would be a mistake for non-believers to dismiss it outright. First, this argument reflects a genuine attempt to provide just the sort of real, empirical evidence for the divinity of Jesus and the existence of God that so many atheists have been clamoring for. Second, the proponents of this argument have raised a number of very important questions with their attempt to prove their point. Just what sort of evidence would we expect to find if there *really were* a supernatural being who sought out contact with natural beings in an otherwise natural world? If this empirical case for the authenticity of the Jesus stories is not adequate, then what would be? Would we be satisfied if there were more corroborating historical sources? If there had been more apostles who had all told the same story, would that make it convincing? If the Gospels had been written immediately after the events they describe instead of decades or even centuries later, would that make them convincing? We probably have far less evidence for the existence of many other historical figures whose existence we would never doubt like Aristotle, or Alexander the Great, or even Shakespeare. So why aren't we convinced by this argument?

As I see it, these are all very good questions, and many doubters have not been adequately prepared to address them.

It would be possible to argue each of the various points concerning ulterior motives, eyewitness accounts, and so on. But I'll offer a more general objection that will show where the burden of proof challenge lies in this case.

Consider these comparable examples from history. The Salem Witch trials around 1692 generated a very similar case that alleges the existence of something supernatural or paranormal. 19 men and women were convicted and executed for having magical powers, consorting with the devil, or otherwise participating in some evil supernatural realm. We can readily see that there is a parallel argument for the conclusion that those people really were witches and that they really did have supernatural powers.

First, there were multiple eyewitness accounts. Dozens of people testified that the accused had magical powers, they had cast spells, they had interacted with demons and the devil himself. As a result of the conviction and authenticity of the witnesses testimony, hundreds of people became convinced that the accusations were true. The people who testified against the accused witches, and the people who became convinced about the allegations came from diverse backgrounds and social strata. They included magistrates, judges, the governor of Massachusetts, the people in Salem, and so on. The people in Salem conducted extensive,

exhaustive investigations of the witch charges. In fact, the careful analysis that the court in Salem did was probably more deliberate and exhaustive than any investigation that was done to corroborate the details of the Jesus stories. The court trials in Salem expended a great deal of time energy in a deliberate attempt to discern the facts from falsehoods. And since the Salem Witch trials occurred in 1692, instead of the first century A.D., we have much more extensive and better preserved historical evidence concerning the events.

As a result of the trials, a large group of people in Mass. became convinced that the accused really were witches. And the people who became convinced--the judges, the people in town—had no ulterior motives for their conclusions. They were horrified to discover that there were witches in their midst. Many people lost friends and family members to the gallows. They saw the verdicts as tragic and desperately hoped that they weren't true. And even though they had overwhelming motives to be skeptical, they still became convinced.

Furthermore, that there were witch trials in Salem and that many people were put to death has been thoroughly corroborated with a range of historical sources. In fact, since these events were relatively recent and well documented, we may have much better historical corroboration from multiple sources for the historical authenticity of the story.

And none of the other hypotheses explains what happened adequately. There are problems with the mass hysteria hypothesis, it seems implausible that so many people could be suffering the same hallucinations from spoiled rye grain, and so on.

Therefore, by a comparable argument to the argument for the historical authenticity argument for Jesus, we should conclude not only that the Salem Witch trials occurred, but that there really were witches with supernatural powers of black magic in Mass. in 1692.

In fact, the evidence and the argument that we have for the authenticity of the existence of witches in Salem is **even better** in several respects than the historical evidence that we have for the existence and divinity of Jesus.

The problem with this argument, of course, is that the people in Salem were **completely** mistaken. The accused were not witches. There was no one with supernatural powers or the ability to perform black magic.

And I maintain that we can be confident that nothing supernatural happened in Salem, even if we do not currently have a comprehensive naturalistic explanation of the events.

The same argument can be made for the conclusion that during the 1300s in Europe, people really did die from demon possession and not the Bubonic plague. And reading tea leaves really does reveal the future. And it wasn't epilepsy that caused the seizures and wild behavior of early mystics, but supernatural channeling of the spirit world.

In the 1970s, as now, evangelical preachers professing the ability to perform miraculous healings were wildly popular. One of the biggest at the time was Peter Popoff. Arch debunker and skeptic, James "The Amazing" Randi set about to reveal Popoff's methods. Popoff appeared to have the ability to stand in front of a stadium full of thousands of people and then mysteriously call one of them out by name, and then tell the audience a great deal of detailed information about what ailment that person was suffering from, where they lived, what they were praying for, and so on. Randi and his assistants took a radio scanner to a healing service and discovered that Popoff's wife was broadcasting information about people in the audience taken from prayer cards that they had filled out before the cameras were rolling to a tiny, difficult to detect ear piece hidden in Popoff's ear. Even though they knew that they had given Popoff Ministries all of the information about them, and even though Popoff could have just as easily memorized the information before the service, audience members were stunned and amazed that Popoff could divine so much intimate information about them. Popoff played the deception for all it was worth and thousands of people left the services with a rush of adrenaline and the full conviction that they had been witnesses to and recipients of real life miracles.

Now consider the difference in the science education of an average American who has completed high school and the extent of knowledge of the natural world that someone growing up in Palestine in 20 AD. A typical child growing up in Nazareth in Galilee, or in Jerusalem in Judea in the first decades of the first century wouldn't probably wouldn't have learned any math, or any of the rudimentary science that some contemporary scholars might have pursued through Aristotle or Plato. That child would have been illiterate. He probably would have learned a trade through his parents. And his knowledge of the natures of things in the world, the answers to "why" questions about the origins of civilization, the natures of the stars and sun in the sky would have all been answered through simple folk explanations relayed in an oral tradition. The concepts of spiritual beings, magical powers, mysterious forces, symbolic events, fortune, and other supernatural entities would have been invoked frequently, familiar, and common sense. Even today, many people's everyday lives are filled with poignant, symbolic events of spiritual significance, mental causation, and magic. But compare even the most ordinary American school child has more knowledge of the natural world and has been exposed to more science than the most advanced, knowledgeable, and intelligent person alive from the society where Jesus is purported to have done his miracles. And also consider that these ordinary Americans, with their unprecedented levels of background knowledge about physics, medicine, human psychology, biology, and chemistry are complete fooled, duped, deceived, or mistaken on a regular basis about the existence of supernatural, magical, and paranormal events.

In a classroom experiment, college psychology students were told that they would see a magic show from someone performing a number of sleight of hand tricks, but that all of the tricks were merely a matter of standard deceptions and stage trickery. Despite the detailed disclaimer, a large percentage of the students who were debriefed afterwards were convinced that the magician had supernatural powers. Some of them could even be seen to be crossing themselves and drawing superstitious, protective symbols on their notebooks.

So my point is that if modern Americans who have so much evidence to the contrary and who really should know better can be so easily fooled, mistaken, or confused about the existence of supernatural or paranormal powers, how easy would it be for even the most skeptical person in Jesus' era to be fooled, deceived, or mistaken about the divinity of Jesus and the authenticity of his alleged miracles? Given that even when fraud or mistake is abundantly clear, people still insist on believing now, we should be highly skeptical about comparable claims from a primitive, ancient culture where such beliefs were even more a part of common sense.

Hume's mistake was that he was uncharitable concerning how justified and eminently reasonable a false claim can be under the right circumstances. One doesn't need to be an ignorant savage, isolated in the jungles of Borneo to arrive at superstitious and magical beliefs. With the right sorts of background education, a culture that holds certain spiritual views as common sense, experts and trusted authorities who teach and train, a belief that strikes us as bizarre and even comical can become perfectly reasonable and obvious to very smart people. I.Q. hasn't changed significantly in the last 20,000 years or so, but the culture in which human children are raised has. How did you come to your view that the earth is round, or that the earth and the planets orbit the sun, or that radio waves are invisible electromagnetic radiation that saturates our atmosphere? Unless you are one of the rare people who is actually trained and capable to do the research themselves (could you build a phone if you needed to, or would you know how to preserve perishable food for more than a few days if you had no refrigeration?) chances are you know what you know because someone in a position of authority and who is a respected expert told you it was true and you believed them. There's nothing wrong in principle with that sort of epistemic policy; it's how we all come to believe and be justified in the vast majority of what we believe. What we often fail to appreciate is just how different the world would look and just how radically someone else's "common sense" would diverge from ours

because the information environment they have lived in is so different. It may well have been reasonable for the early followers of the Christian movement to believe the claims about other metaphysical realms, transcendence to another existence, violations of the laws of nature, angel guided assumptions into heaven and so on. Given the world they lived in and the state of what was around them, those sorts of claims may have made perfect sense. These people weren't stupid, they were just very differently informed.

But you have a very different perspective on such matters, and 2,000 additional years of expansion of human knowledge about the natural world. With our enthusiasm for religion and our failure to apply consistent standards of reason and evidence, we tend to treat these ancient magical claims with reverence and authenticity. My aim is to get us to see these familiar claims in the light of strangeness that would apply if we hadn't been immersed in a Christian culture all our lives.

If ordinary, intelligent and educated people today can be as convinced by an obvious fraud, then what would we expect from someone in Jerusalem in the first century.

Their entire worldview dictates that such a person as a messiah claiming to be the son of God would come to them. They had been primed with social, religious, and historical cues to look for a spiritual and political emancipator. What would be extraordinary would be if one of them suggested that they were suffering mass delusions, they'd all eaten some spoiled grain and ingested a hallucinogenic ergot derivative, or that Jesus was a con man or a sleight of hand magician. Those concepts were so utterly foreign to them that they were completely off the radar. If they had come up with one of those naturalistic explanations given their level of scientific knowledge and understanding of the complicated nature of human social and psychological interactions, **then** we should postulate some divine intervention, or at least that an alien with advanced technology or a human from the distant future was having fun with them. But that they came up with a magical, supernatural explanation for the Jesus anecdotes is precisely what they should have done given what they believed about the world.

Ptolemy was even better justified in thinking that the earth was the center of the universe than you are in believing that the sun is the center of the solar system. And (ancient Greek flat-earth) was better justified than you in thinking the earth was flat. And Heraclitus probably had a more articulated, complex and powerful explanation of the world with his earth, air, fire, and water elemental scheme than many of us do with what we recall from high school chemistry.

So very smart, thoughtful people are often well justified in believing things that turn out to be patently false. So the fact that they believe it alone doesn't count for much. And in the case of ancient, scientifically unsophisticated cultures like Jerusalem in the first century, there is a substantial prima facie strike against anything they take to be true about the ultimate nature of things. We can see now that even though they might have been well justified in their conclusions, there just wasn't much that they got correct. Large numbers of 21st century Americans still believe in ghosts, ESP, psychic powers, demon possession, etc. And these are people who have cell phones in their pockets, microwave ovens in their kitchens, and who have had modern micro-biology extend their lives by decades with vaccines and disease treatments. These are people who have seen the successes of science and the grow of our knowledge of the natural world at work in 10,000 cases in their everyday lives. Yet beliefs in magic and supernaturalism abound.

You're Already and Atheist and a Skeptic about Miracles

Right now, we can now find thousands or even millions of people making fraudulent, mistaken, or deceptive miracle claims on a daily basis. People claim to see a pattern resembling the Virgin Mary in the water stains on a bridge in Chicago. Someone cuts open a watermelon

and sees the word for "Allah" represented in the patterns of pulp inside. A man in Ontario burns his TV dinner and finds an image of Jesus in the burn marks of his fish stick. Another family finds a twisted pretzel in their bag that they say looks like Mary and Jesus. Televangelists "perform miracles" at will at every meeting. Closer inspection reveals that they are always lying, cheating, or mistaken.

Televangelist Pat Robertson, who has hundreds of thousands of regular viewers, claims that his prayers to God steered hurricanes away from the Virginia Beach, Virginia headquarters of his company. He also claims to have steered Hurricane Gloria in 1985 and Hurricane Felix in 1995, and Hurricane Isabel in 2003. In 2005, he began a prayer project for vacancies on the Supreme Court--he was frustrated with the "radical" views of the current judges. He claims that these prayers resulted in the resignation of Sandra Day O'Connor. Conveniently, Robertson doesn't publicize the numerous cases where he prayed for some outcome and nothing happened.

Frequently in India, millions of the faithful rush to Hindu temples to see statues of the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha and others drink milk. Huge crowds form as people hold spoonfuls of milk up to the trunk of the statues and watch milk disappear. The phenomena is widely accepted as a miracle. Scientists examined the case and concluded that the milk was being siphoned down the surface of the statue in a thin film that wasn't easily visible. As more people made offerings, pools of milk formed at the base of the statues. The Press Trust of India wrote, "the phenomenon of idols "drinking" milk could be explained scientifically by the theory of capillary action or the movement of liquids within spaces of porous surfaces due to surface tension, adhesion and cohesion." Typically, believers deny that there could any explanation besides the miraculous one. Similar stories appear from time to time in the west surrounding statues of the Virgin Mary. Different types of porous stones that are used to make the statues have the capacity to absorb and wick a great deal of fluid.

People feel miracles in their hearts while they are watching TV, as they pray, when they go to church, or when they think about a loved one. But it only takes a little distance and objectivity to see that they are often enthusiastic, gullible, or mistaken. Millions of people fall under the influence of cults and dedicate their entire lives to outlandish, demonstrably false creeds and obviously false miracle claims. And notice that these people come from diverse backgrounds, they have varying levels of education, and come from different social groups. No one is immune to the allure of miracle stories. In the case of cults, it's obvious that when people have such a passionate, and powerful conviction that makes their claims even more unreasonable to accept. Passion, and unreflective commitment makes it more difficult for someone to analyze claims that need clear, objective consideration. In general, people's passion and commitment to beliefs should not itself be seen as evidence that they are true.

The important fact to note is that on the whole, we, even the most pious among us, do not take any of these claims seriously. Even most Christians who believe, do not accept most of these claims. Even if you find some of the claims above to be plausible, there are still many more claims about miraculous events every day that you would discount than you would accept. You know that people are prone to exaggerate, they like to tell exciting stories, they are easily influenced, and they are eager to have their cherished beliefs corroborated. You already take the vast majority of such claims with a grain of salt. You aren't rushing off to Bangladesh or Mecca to convert at the feet of some statue that absorbs fluid. You'll even laugh to discover that someone found a burn mark on a sour cream and onion potato chip that looks like Jesus and they thought it meant something. You are already a skeptic about the majority of miracles because you know that the other natural explanations are much more likely almost every case you have ever encountered. And to make the case stronger, whenever a disinterested, objective third party has checked, none of these miraculous claims has ever turned out to be true.

So we are surrounded by thousands of miracle testimony cases on a daily basis that we do not think are real. These purported miracles make several things clear. First, people have a powerful disposition to assert and believe in miracles. Once you start looking, they are everywhere. Second, it not just like this now; history is full of similar cases. And in the past, say in the Middle East, 2,000 years ago, before so many important advancements in science and before so many mysteries had been explained, people's propensity to believe in miracles would have been even stronger. For them, the possibility that some supernatural forces were at work in the world causing things to happen that couldn't be explained otherwise would be common sense. Even more of the people around them would have believed in such events. There were no scientists with alternative natural explanations. People they knew and trusted believed in supernatural interventions and influences in the world. Their culture, their books, their stories, their conversations, their lives would have contained thousands of references that would have made the reality of God's hand acting in the world as obvious to them as the existence of radio waves are to you. For them, gossip, hearsay, and anecdotal evidence, as well as superstitions, mysteries, and supernatural forces would have been the norm. Their threshold for accepting a miraculous story would have been much lower than ours. For them, that would have been perfectly reasonable.

But now, you know a lot more about the way the world works than they do. And what would have been common sense to them is not for you. In the Middle Ages, they thought it was common sense that demon possession caused the flu, and that children born on Wednesdays will have a life of misery, after all. So now, given that you are surrounded by patently false miracle stories that you do not take seriously at all, and given that people would have been much more prone to believe and promote such stories in the past, how likely is it that miracle stories from 2,000 years ago from a culture that was immersed in superstition, supernaturalism, and ignorance are true? Or put another way, you don't think it is reasonable to believe all the obviously over the top miracle claims right in front of you now, so why would you believe some from centuries ago when people didn't have the benefit of the knowledge of the world that you have?

Conclusion

So now we have seen that the miracles are insufficient to provide evidence for the existence of God. In fact, contrary to what is usually thought about them, their occurrence would suggest that no God exists. Another implication for this argument connects to teleological and cosmological lines of argument for the existence of God. What sort of a divine act would creating the universe from nothing, or intervening in the course of evolutionary history?

If God is acting to create all of matter and the physical laws that govern it, then first cause arguments for the existence of God are a form of miracle argument for the existence of God. A divine act to bring about the existence of matter and natural laws would be an act outside or beyond the nature. So the first cause that brings the universe into being on Cosmological arguments is akin to the grandest sort of miracle. And what we have seen is that miracles underdetermine the existence of an all powerful, knowing, good personal being. In the next chapter we will see how in their own way Cosmological arguments suffer from a similar problem of under determination.

And by extension, God's reaching down into the course of evolutionary history to boost the development of complex organisms, or to guide that process towards a certain outcome, or to start that process from inorganic to self-replicating organic molecules is a lesser sort of miracle than creating a universe. If the act of creating the universe doesn't necessitate an omni-God, then neither with the sorts of supernatural acts postulated by Intelligent Design arguments. So the recent cluster of Teleological arguments for the existence of God in their ID form suffer

from a similar problem of under determination. We will consider the problems with these arguments in the next chapter too.