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Miracles and the Progress of Science

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Abstract: The objection that the progress of science will ultimately provide explanation of any actually occurring events deemed miraculous is examined. I conclude that the progress of science strengthens rather than undermines paradigm examples of miracle claims.

In examining the rationality of belief in miracles, it is important to distinguish between two questions; the first being whether certain events occurred, the second being whether they are best understood to be miracles. It is unfortunate that these two questions are often conflated to the extent that proponents of belief are faced with a >heads I win, tails you lose= strategy from critics. If the reported event is thought to have an explanation in terms of natural causes it is accepted and deemed non-miraculous, but if it has no plausible explanation in terms of natural causes it is rejected as unhistorical.

It needs to be stressed that the criteria for answering the first question in the affirmative are very different than the criteria for answering the second question in the affirmative. Whether or not an unusual event plausibly viewed as miraculous occurred must be judged on the customary criteria by which we assess testimony and not on the basis of whether it fits a favoured world-view. With this firmly in mind, let us turn from the first issue to consideration of the second.

Miracle Claims and the Progress of Science Objection

To call an event a miracle is to make a claim about its cause, just as to call a corpse a homicide victim is to make a claim about the cause of death. This has led some critics to dismiss the rationality of belief in miracles not on the basis of presumed difficulties in establishing the occurrence of unusual events, but rather on the basis that the progress of science will demonstrate that, even if unusual events viewed by religious believers as miracles occur, such events have a natural, as opposed to supernatural, cause. It is typically assumed by such critics that the success of science in explaining events in terms of natural causes provides inductive warrant for such a conclusion.

Response to the Objection

There are a number of reasons for thinking such an argument unconvincing. First, the assumption that prior to the rise of science theists typically inferred that God was the immediate cause of any event they did not understand is historically naïve. Augustine and Aquinas allowed for direct and indirect divine action, but neither argued for direct divine action in nature on the basis of ignorance of how secondary causes operate. Further, even if it is the case that certain classes of events were wrongly viewed as instances of supernatural intervention – critics typically cite examples such as earthquakes or crop failures - this hardly constitutes a strong inductive argument that all classes of events viewed as miracles can be explained in terms of natural causes. One cannot argue that because pigeons are easy to catch foxes will likewise be easy to catch. There is a great difference between a pigeon and a fox and our success in catching pigeons will have little or no bearing on whether we will be successful in catching foxes. Similarly, there is a great difference between the event of an earthquake and the event of a person returning to life after three days of being dead. Our success in explaining earthquakes in terms of natural causes hardly provides us with a strong inductive argument that we can explain a resurrection in terms of natural causes.

Second, any appeal to the argument that the progress of science may invalidate miracle claims is double-edged. The claim that an event is properly regarded as a miracle can be undermined if, as science progresses, it becomes clear that a complete explanation purely in terms of natural causes can be given. Equally, however, it must be acknowledged that such a claim is strengthened if, as science progresses, the prospects of providing a naturalistic explanation become increasingly remote. Critics hoping to employ a progress of science objection against miracle claims must grant the possibility that the progress of science has strengthened, rather than weakened, the claim that certain events are properly deemed miraculous.

In the case of events traditionally and paradigmatically described as miracles, it is evident that our increased knowledge of how natural causes operate has not made it easier, but more difficult, to explain them naturalistically. The science underlying wine-making is more advanced today than it was in first century Palestine, but these advances have made it more, not less, difficult to explain in terms of natural causes how Jesus, without any technological aids, could, with a spoken word, turn water into high quality wine. Likewise, our knowledge of human physiology is vastly increased from that of first-century Palestine, but this increase does not make it any easier to

provide a natural explanation of how Jesus could rise from death. Indeed, it is the difficulty of providing a naturalistic account of such events that leads critics to deny that they ever occurred, though this amounts to begging the question in favor of naturalism.

Third, insisting that the occurrence of such events must be viewed as explicable in terms of unknown natural causes rather than supernatural intervention not only issues a promissory note of dubious value, it also commits one to unwarranted skepticism concerning our understanding of how nature works. One must abandon what appear to be basic, well-evidenced, accurate accounts of what we can expect to naturally occur and instead adopt a radical skepticism concerning the claims of science. One has not an explanation in terms of natural causes, but rather the hope that one will someday be available.

This is in sharp contrast to the person willing to posit supernatural intervention. Such a person is able to offer an account of how one may accept the occurrence of such extraordinary events, yet retain faith in our knowledge of how nature operates. As has already been argued, miracles do not violate the laws of nature. They threaten not our understanding of how nature works when not intervened upon by something other than itself, but rather the insistence that nature is never affected by supernatural agency.

Consider, by way of analogy, a man who places diamonds in a safe to which he believes only he has the combination. He is confident that the diamonds will be in the safe when he returns to claim them at a later date. When he returns, however, he finds that the diamonds are missing. Two hypotheses are available to the man. The first is that he is radically mistaken in what he thought he knew about the nature of safes and diamonds; that somehow, in as a yet unknown way, it is possible for diamonds to evaporate through the walls of safes. The second is that, although he thought he was the sole possessor of the combination to the safe, in reality he was not. There seems every reason to prefer the second hypothesis over the first. It appears more rational for the man to give up his belief that he is the sole possessor of the combination, than to insist that it is possible for diamonds to evaporate through the walls of safes. Similarly, in the case of events such as the Resurrection or Jesus turning water into wine, it would seem more rational to view them as indicating that the universe is open to the intervention of supernatural agency, rather than insisting that we do not really understand the nature of dead bodies or what processes are involved in the natural, as opposed to supernatural, production of wine. To take the latter course of action regarding these events is not to provide any kind of natural explanation of what

religious believers take to be a miracle, but rather to issue a promissory note of very dubious value that someday a natural explanation will be forthcoming.

Finally, it deserves emphasis that miracles do not occur as mere anomalous events, but as part of a larger teleological pattern that itself needs explanation. Jesus does not simply rise from the dead, he predicts that he will rise from the dead (Matt. 17:22-23, Mk 9:30-32, Lk 9:43-45). Paul is not only struck blind, he is told to go to Damascus and wait for further instructions, meanwhile, Ananias in prayer is given specific instructions to go to a certain address where he will meet Paul and heal him of his blindness (Acts 9:3-19). Peter is not only given a vision that he should not discriminate between Jews and Gentiles, but at the same time Cornelius is told in a vision that he should send for Peter (Acts 10:1-48). Jesus's mother, Mary, does not simply find herself pregnant while still a virgin, but has a vision in which she is told that this will occur (Lk.1:28-31). Many more examples could be cited, but enough has been said to make clear that any explanation in natural, rather than supernatural, terms requires not simply an explanation of the event itself, but also the teleological context in which it is embedded.

Conclusion

In the case of events traditionally and centrally described by Christians as miracles, it is evident that our increased knowledge of how natural causes operate has not made it easier, but more difficult, to explain them naturalistically. The progress of science does not undermine the claim that such events are properly described as miracles, but rather strengthens it.

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