

Understanding Christian Apologetics

Lesson 16: Miracles

I. Definitions

- A. Miracle: a purposeful, supernatural act of God in the world that brings about an effect that cannot be brought about by the laws of nature
- B. Science: “a discipline in which one studies features of the world around us, and tries to describe his observations systematically and critically”¹
- C. Methodological naturalism: science can only explain the world by means of natural processes and cannot use supernatural causation in its explanations
 - 1. This definition of science is rooted in naturalistic materialism, which says that the material world is the only thing that exists
 - 2. Errs because it says that the study of the natural world rules out the existence of the supernatural
 - 3. Breaks its own rules because it makes an assertion about supernatural forces (denying their possibility)

II. Basic Objections to Miracles²

- A. The miracles recorded in the Bible reflect a pre-scientific worldview that is no longer viable in the modern world
 - 1. John Macquarrie: “Science proceeds on the assumption that whatever events occur in the world can be accounted for in terms of other events [that are] just as immanent and this-worldly... Miracle is irreconcilable with our modern understanding of both science and history.”
 - 2. Rudolph Bultmann: “It is impossible to use the electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical

¹ C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?*, 34.

² This lesson is largely drawn from chapter 6 of William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*.

discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles. We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world.”

3. The Jesus Seminar: “The contemporary religious controversy, epitomized in the Scopes trial and the continuing clamor for creationism as a viable alternative to the theory of evolution, turns on whether the worldview reflected in the Bible can be carried forward into this scientific age and retained as an article of faith... The Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo’s telescope.”
- B. Such arguments reflect a confusion about the Bible’s picture of the world and a misunderstanding of what can and cannot be proved by science
1. The Bible distinguishes between natural events and supernatural events; it is not animistic (confusing the natural world with the supernatural)
 2. Science is the study of natural operations
 3. While science is limited to the study of these natural operations, science cannot prove that the universe is a closed system and that supernatural causes are impossible
 4. “how could a study of natural events prove that the world is shut off from the supernatural? That’s a job, not for the natural sciences, but for theology.”³
 5. Alvin Plantinga: “Macquarrie perhaps means to suggest that the very practice of science requires that one reject the idea (e.g.) of God raising the dead... [This] argument... is like the drunk who insisted on looking for his lost car keys only under the streetlight on the grounds that the light was better there. In fact, it would go the drunk one better: it would insist that because the keys would

³ Collins, 217.

be hard to find in the dark, they *must* be under the light.”

III. Historical Backdrop to Modern Skepticism about Miracles

A. 17th century Enlightenment

1. Deists denied the possibility of miracles
2. Allowed for God’s existence, but argued that God “wound [the world] up like a clock and set it running under the laws of matter and motion, never to interfere with it again.” [249]

B. Newtonian physics

1. Isaac Newton (1642-1717) formulated the three laws of motion, which gave rise to the notion of the universe as the “Newtonian world-machine”
2. Initially, the smooth function of the world-machine was seen as evidence for God’s existence
3. At the same time, some contended that “it was absurd and insulting to God to think that he would interrupt the operations of ‘this immense machine,’ since he designed it from the beginning to run according to his divinely decreed, immutable laws.” [249]

C. Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677)

1. Argued that miracles violate the unchangeable order of nature, which flows from the perfection of the divine nature; “To say that God does something contrary to the laws of nature is to say God does something contrary to his own nature. Therefore, miracles are impossible.” [249]
2. Argued that the only absolute proof of God’s existence is the unchangeable order of nature; if we allow for miracles, we lose the only absolute proof for God’s existence

D. David Hume (1711-1776)

1. Argued that the unchangeable laws of nature negates even the strongest testimony put forth for miracles
2. Argued that "it is always more probable that the testimony in support of a miracle is false than that the miracle actually occurred." [273]
3. Argued that the testimony in support of miracles does not amount to a full proof
 - a) Lack of attestation by enough educated and honest men
 - b) People crave the miraculous and will believe absurd stories
 - c) Miracles only occur among barbarous peoples
 - d) Miracles occur in all religions and cancel each other out
4. Essentially said that the only real miracle is that anyone would be stupid enough to believe in Christianity

IV. Assessment and Response

A. The Newtonian world-machine

1. It is prejudicial to think of miracles as violations of the laws of nature (as if God is breaking the law when he performs a miracle)
2. Natural laws are merely generalizations based on experience that operate on the assumption that no supernatural factors are interfering
3. "Thus, if the law proves inaccurate in a particular case because God is acting, the law is neither violated nor revised. If God brings about some event which a law of nature fails to predict or describe, such an event cannot be characterized as a violation of a law of nature, since the law is valid only under the tacit assumption that no supernatural factors come into play in addition to the natural factors." [262]

4. Miracles are naturally impossible events, but they are possible given the existence of an all-powerful God who created and upholds the world and is capable of acting freely in it
5. The only way to deny the possibility of miracles is to prove that atheism is true, which is something that cannot be proven

B. Spinoza

1. To equate the laws of nature with God's unchangeable nature is to deify nature
2. As seen above, miracles do not violate the laws of nature

C. Hume

1. If an event's improbability is allowed to trump all testimony that the event really occurred, we would be forced to deny the occurrence of events that are known to have happened (e.g. the morning news' announcement of the correct pick in last night's lottery would not be trustworthy because of the improbability of that number being selected)
2. If the evidence for a miracle is far more probable given that the event actually occurred than that it did not occur, it is more rational to believe that the miracle occurred than that it did not occur
3. Hume rejects the testimony of the biblical writers simply because they report supernatural events (circular reasoning)
4. "The early Christians did, as a matter of fact, reject a number of stories that claimed to be about miracles that Jesus and the apostles worked — because they didn't believe these stories. So we have no good grounds for calling these people ignorant or gullible."⁴

⁴ Collins, 220.