

Introduction to Miracles

1. Contemporary attitudes toward miracles embrace two extremes.
 1. Secular skeptics reject miracles outright.
 1. The scientific community has been dominated by an incorrigible antisupernaturalism for two centuries.
 2. Belief in the supernatural, they tell us, is part of an outmoded world view that has been disproved by scientific research.
 3. An article published in the Smithsonian magazine in 1983 characterizes the scientific attitude toward the supernatural view of origins: ". . .the central axiom of our epic is that the universe must have been formed by natural laws which are still discoverable today."
 4. The author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, as quoted in one of his biographies, reflects the antisupernatural disposition of the modern mind when he declares of the virgin birth that "The day will come when the account of the birth of Christ as accepted in the Trinitarian churches will be classed with the fable of Minerva springing from the brain of Jupiter."
 5. Some contemporary antisupernaturalists share Sigmund Freud's view that belief in the supernatural is a form of escapism or an illusion; religion is dismissed as a childhood neurosis that people use to protect themselves from the horrible realities of life.
 6. Ludwig Feuerbach contends that belief in the supernatural saps needed human energy from this world. His aim is "to change the friends of God into friends of man, believers into thinkers, worshiper into workers, candidates for the other world into students of this world, Christians who on their own confession are half animal and half angel, into men -- whole men."
 2. On the opposite extreme there is a current revival of occult "supernaturalism" in new age healings, revelations, firewalking, and crystal power.
 1. Many gurus, channelers, mediums, shamans, and witches lay claim to the supernormal power of the Force.
 2. The famous Hindu guru, Sai Baba, boasts: "My power is divine and has no limit. I have the power to change the earth into the sky and the sky into the earth. . . . I am beyond any obstacles and there is no force, natural or supernatural, that can stop me or my mission."
 3. A growing number of evangelicals believe that miraculous healings and even resurrections like those in the Bible still occur today.
 1. They make claims like John Wimber's claim in *Power Evangelism*,

"Today we see hundreds of people healed every month in Vineyard Christian Fellowship services. Many more are healed as we pray for them in hospitals, on the streets, and in homes. The blind see; the lame walk; the deaf hear. Cancer is disappearing."

2. The whole question of the supernatural has a serious impact on biblical Christians and "Christianity" as defined by the religious world.
 1. Christianity is at its heart based in the Scripture, which is filled with miraculous events.
 2. The Bible itself cannot be a supernatural revelation, as it claims to be, unless there are supernatural acts.
 3. Neither can we trust the gospels to provide reliable information about Christ, the central figure of the Christian faith, since they are replete with miraculous events repugnant to the modern mind.
3. Since the credibility of Christianity rests on the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:12-19), the whole of the Christian faith crumbles if miracles do not occur.
 1. If historic biblical Christianity is to survive and make sense to the modern mind, it is necessary to provide a reasonable explanation of the supernatural.
 2. Apart from the credibility of the biblical account of miracles, we can bid farewell to Christianity.
 3. Such is the challenge before us.
4. The biblical record is replete with miraculous stories.
 1. Moses stretched out his hand over the waters and the Red Sea divided.
 2. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky for a whole day.
 3. Elisha made an iron axe to float on the water.
 4. Jesus gave sight to the blind, caused the lame to walk, and raised his friend Lazarus from the dead.
 5. He walked on water, turned water into wine, and multiplied a few loaves and some fishes into food for 5,000 people.
 6. This is the world of the Bible; it is a world of unusual and miraculous events -- and a world almost totally foreign to the modern mind.
5. The modern scientific world, by contrast, is a natural one.
 1. It is a world in which solid metal objects heavier than water sink, as do people who step into water.
 2. It is a world in which water flows to its own level, but does not form vertical walls.
 3. It is a world where the dead remain in the grave and where wine makers cannot fill their bottles from the kitchen faucet; they must wait for the slow natural processes to produce wine from grapes.

4. Indeed, the biblical world and the modern world are worlds apart; the one seems mythical and the other seems real; the one seems superstitious and the other seems scientific.
6. Before we can consider miracles and the modern mind, we must first investigate the term "miracle."
 1. As Thomas Huxley said, "The first step in this, as in all other discussions, is to come to a clear understanding as to the meaning of the term employed. Argumentation about whether miracles are possible and, if possible, credible, is mere beating the air until the arguers have agreed what they mean by the word "miracle."
 2. Theists have defined miracles in both a weak and a strong sense.
 1. Following Augustine, some define a miracle as "a portent [that] is not contrary to nature, but contrary to our knowledge of nature."
 2. Others, following Aquinas, define a miracle in the strong sense of an event that is beyond nature's power to produce, that only a supernatural power (God) can do.
 1. This is the definition that we shall use.
 2. In brief, a miracle is a divine intervention into the natural world.
 1. It is a supernatural exception to the regular course of the world that would not have occurred otherwise.
 2. As Anthony Flew defined it, "A miracle is something which would never have happened had nature, as it were, been left to its own devices.
 3. Natural law describes naturally caused regularities; a miracle is a supernaturally caused singularity.
7. Clearly, in order to understand "miracle" fully, we need some understanding of what constitutes "natural law."
 1. Natural law can be understood as the usual, orderly, and general way that the world operates.
 2. It follows, then, that a miracle is an unusual, irregular, specific way in which God intervenes within the world.
 3. In other words, if a miracle occurs, it is not a contradiction or violation of the ordinary laws of cause and effect, but rather a new effect produced by the introduction of a supernatural cause.
 4. Keeping this understanding of a miracle in mind, we will examine the most important philosophers in the miracles debate of the last 300 years.
 1. We do this in order to get a closer look at the reason that it is so difficult for the modern mind to maintain a serious belief in the supernatural.

2. One of the reasons for this difficulty arises from the writings of the Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677).
 3. Arguing from a strongly deductive perspective, this Dutch Jewish thinker did not hesitate to pronounce the belief in miracles absurd.
8. Benedict Spinoza and the impossibility of miracles.
1. Spinoza was one of the early rationalists who developed a complete form of pantheism. [In general terms pantheism is the doctrine that the universe is god. It denies his transcendence, holding that god is wholly immanent; because god is identified with the universe, there is a greater or lesser denial of the personal character of God.]
 2. Spinoza believed that there could be only one infinite substance, and that, therefore, the universe was uncreated; since the universe was uncreated, the universe is god (pantheism = god is all).
 1. Since god is identified with the universe, he could not have created it, since it is his essence.
 2. God is not transcendent; he is not beyond or other than creation.
 3. This means, then, that God's creativity is no more than nature's activity.
 4. Miracles as we have defined it, therefore, are impossible, since if god (the supernatural) is identical to nature, then it follows that there is no supernatural intervention into nature from anything beyond it.
 3. The character of Spinoza's argument.
 1. Spinoza declares that "nothing. . . comes to pass in nature in contravention to her universal laws, nay, everything agrees with them and follows from them, for . . . she keeps a fixed and immutable order."
 2. He adds, In fact, "a miracle, whether in contravention to, or beyond, nature, is a mere absurdity."
 3. He concludes that "We may, then, be absolutely certain that every event which is truly described in Scripture necessarily happened, like everything else, according to natural laws.
 4. His argument can be reduced to some basic premises:
 1. Miracles are a violation of natural laws.
 2. Natural laws are immutable.
 3. It is impossible to violate natural laws.
 4. Therefore, miracles are impossible.
 5. The second premise is key to Spinoza's argument - nature keeps an immutable order and nothing comes to pass in contravention of her natural laws.
 1. Spinoza was a rationalist who tried to construct his philosophy on the

basis of Euclidean geometry.

2. He believed that we should accept as true only that which is self-evident or what is reducible to the self-evident.
 3. Like his French contemporary, Rene Descartes, Spinoza argued in a geometric way from axioms to conclusions contained in those axioms.
 4. His age was increasingly impressed with the orderliness of the physical universe; thus, it was axiomatic to Spinoza that natural laws are immutable.
4. The consequences of Spinoza's argument.
1. First, Spinoza rejects the resurrection accounts in the Gospels.
 1. His position is that "the Apostles who came after Christ, preached it to all men as a universal religion *solely* in virtue of Christ's passion." (Emphasis added.)
 2. In other words, Christianity is reduced to a mystical, nonpropositional religion, a religion without foundations.
 2. Second, the Scripture merely "contains the word of God."
 1. In Spinoza's view it is false to say that the Bible *is* the word of God.
 2. The prophets did not speak from supernatural revelation, but "the modes of expression and discourse adopted by the Apostles in the Epistles, show very clearly that the latter were not written by revelation and Divine command, but *merely by the natural powers* and judgment of the authors." (Emphasis added.)
 3. Rather, the parts of the Bible that contain the word of God are known to be such because the morality contained therein conforms to a natural law known by human reason.
 3. Third, Spinoza categorically denies all miracles in the Bible.
 1. He commends "anyone who seeks for the true causes of miracles and strives to understand natural phenomena as an intelligent being.
 2. Obviously, anyone who believes in miracles is not an intelligent being.
 4. Not everyone would agree with Spinoza's rationalistic basis for rejecting miracles, but both the spirit of his antisupernaturalism and general criticism of the Bible are still widely held today by both secular and liberal Biblical scholars.
9. An evaluation of Spinoza's critique.
1. Spinoza's attack on miracles rests on three foundations: his Euclidean rationalism, his deterministic view of natural laws, and his view of the nature of God.

2. All three foundations have been subject to serious criticism and, as we will see, each falls far short as a definitive argument against miracles.
 1. Spinoza's deductive deck is stacked.
 1. Spinoza's rationalism suffers from an acute case of begging the question (*petitio principii*).
 2. In other words, Spinoza assumes as true in his axioms the very thing he sets out to prove.
 3. Once we define natural laws as "fixed," "immutable," and "unchangeable," it is of course irrational to say that a miracle as we have defined it occurred.
 4. How can anything break the unbreakable.
 2. Spinoza's god and modern science.
 1. We have already seen that Spinoza's god and the universe are one substance; God is coterminus with nature.
 1. Hence, a miracle as an act of a god beyond nature cannot occur, since there is no god beyond nature.
 2. Miracles can occur only in a theistic universe.
 3. Hence, scientists are apt to want some evidence of the existence of a theistic God before there is any likelihood that they will believe in miracles.
 4. In Spinoza's world there is no room for miracles.
 2. Albert Einstein's belief in Spinoza's god gave rise to one of the more fascinating stories in modern science.
 1. Astrophysicist Robert Jastrow offers several lines of scientific evidence that support a beginning of the universe: the fact that the universe is running down and thus cannot be eternal (second law of thermodynamics), Einstein's theory of relativity, and the fact that the universe is expanding since its origin. (Jastrow calls it the "Big Bang." Whether the world started with a "big bang" is a subject for another day.)
 1. He adds that the radiation "echo" of the Big Bang which has allegedly been discovered has convinced almost "the last doubting Thomas."
 2. Concerning this he continues, "theologians generally are delighted with the proof that the universe has a beginning, but astronomers are curiously upset."
 2. A most notable example of scientists who became upset is Albert Einstein.

1. Einstein failed to see that an expanding universe was a conclusion to be drawn from his theory of relativity.
 2. Russian mathematician Alexander Friedmann pointed out that Einstein's failure to conclude that the universe had a beginning came about because he "had made a schoolboy error in algebra."
 3. In effect, he had divided by zero.
 4. When Einstein learned of the mistake pointed out by Friedmann, he defended his thesis by a proof that contained another error.
 5. Eventually Einstein recognized his error and wrote, "My objection rested on an error in calculation. I consider Mr. Friedmann's results to be correct and illuminating." However, "this circumstance [of an expanding universe] irritated me."
 6. In another place he said, "to admit such possibilities seems senseless."
3. Why would such a brilliant mind consider "senseless" the view that the universe had a beginning, and how was he "irritated" into making a simple mathematical error?
 1. Part of the answer, says Jastrow, lies in Einstein's philosophical conception of god and the universe.
 2. In 1921 a rabbi sent Einstein a telegram asking, "Do you believe in God?" to which Einstein answered, "I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists."
 3. This explains why Einstein could not believe in a supernatural beginning of the universe.
10. Today we have scientific evidence that the universe is of finite age, that it had a beginning.
 1. Therefore, for rational minds, creation would seem to be the only alternative.
 2. As William James points out, "From nothing to being there is no logical bridge."
 3. It makes no sense to say as one did, that all things have come from "nothingness pregnant with being," since "nothing" means "nonbeing."
 4. In view of the increasing evidence, British physicist Edmund Whittaker concludes that "It is simple to postulate creation *ex nihilo*--divine will constituting Nature from nothingness."
 5. Despite the strong evidence for a beginning of the universe, many scientists resist this conclusion.

1. In 1931 Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington wrote, "The expanding universe is preposterous. . .incredible. . . .It leaves me cold."
 2. More recently Phillip Morrison of MIT said, "I find it hard to accept the Big Bang theory; I would like to reject it."
 3. Allan Sandage of Palomar Observatory said, "It is such a strange conclusion. . . .It cannot really be true."
 4. In spite of his earlier acknowledgement of the strong evidence for the Big Bang origin of the universe, even Steven Hawking is looking for alternatives.
- 11.**As Jastrow notes, scientists are being upset by their own scientific discoveries. He concludes his book (*God and the Astronomers*) with these vivid words: "For the scientist who has lived by faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountain of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."