

ROBERT ALISTAIR LARMER

BELIEF IN MIRACLES AND THE PRESUMED REQUIREMENT  
OF EXTRAORDINARY EVIDENCE

INTRODUCTION

Regarding the rationality of belief in miracles, one frequently meets the claim that “extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence.” Carl Sagan<sup>1</sup> is generally given credit for originating the phrase, but the view it expresses can be found much earlier. Deist Peter Annet, writing in 1743, insists that “a history of an extraordinary uncommon kind should have more than common proof.”<sup>2</sup> Sagan’s alliterative phrase, like the phrase “God of the gaps” has become a rhetorical device, the bare mention of which justifies a quick and easy dismissal of taking seriously divine intervention in nature. The question which must be asked, however, is whether it is in fact true that belief in events best explained as miracles<sup>3</sup> can only be justified given extraordinarily strong evidence.

Presumably, miracle claims are deemed extraordinary on the grounds that miracles are understood to be events which physical nature could not, at

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<sup>1</sup> Sagan used this phrase in the context of considering alien abductions. “Carl Sagan on Alien Abduction,” NOVA, PBS, February 27, 1996, accessed June 27, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/space/sagan-alien-abduction.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Peter ANNET, *The Resurrection of Jesus Considered in Answer to the Tryal of the Witnesses* (London, 1743), 9

<sup>3</sup> The question of whether an unusual event occurred is logically distinct from the question of whether the event is correctly viewed as a miracle. To call an event a miracle is not simply to say that it is unusual, but to make a claim about its cause. I will elaborate on this point later in the paper, but for now, rather than invariably use the somewhat awkward phrase “event best explained as a miracle” I will simply use the term “miracle”.

least at the time and place and way in which they occur, have produced on its own, but which require the intervention of a supernatural agent.<sup>4</sup> Evidence is understood as extraordinary not based on its type, but rather on its strength. With reference to miracles, Sagan's catchy phrase amounts to the claim that justified belief in supernatural interventions in nature requires extraordinarily strong evidence in terms of quality and quantity.

#### HUME AND THE LAWS OF NATURE

David Hume certainly held that this is the case. His argument rests on his claim that miracles must be defined as violations of the laws of nature, and thus any evidence for miracles must be pitted against the enormous amount of evidence that exists for the laws of nature. In Part I of his famous essay, *Of Miracles*, he writes,

a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. . . , there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle, nor can such a proof be destroyed or the miracle rendered credible but [per the impossible] by an opposite proof which is superior.<sup>5</sup> (emphasis in the original)

For Hume, no amount of evidence is capable of justifying belief in a miracle, since the contrary evidence is as entire as can possibly be imagined and thus can never, even in theory, be outweighed by positive evidence for a miracle.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I define a miracle as an unusual and religiously significant event which reveals and furthers God's purposes, is beyond the power of physical nature to produce in the circumstances in which it occurs and is caused by an agent who transcends physical nature. For a defense of this definition, see my *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (New York: Lexington, 2014), 32–46.

<sup>5</sup> David HUME, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 122–23.

<sup>6</sup> This is the classical interpretation of Hume's argument. For a defense of this reading against other interpretations, see Robert LARMER, "Interpreting Hume on miracles," *Religious Studies* 45, no. 3 (2009): 325–38. Hume considers only testimonial evidence, since he apparently discounts the possibility of personally witnessing a miracle, or there being evidence from physical traces. The clear import of his argument, however, is to deny the possibility of there ever existing sufficient evidence to justify belief in miracles.

Hume is mistaken, however, in his assumption that a miracle, in the sense of an event that is caused by a supernatural agent and that nature could not have produced on its own, requires that the laws of nature be violated.<sup>7</sup> Laws of nature do not, by themselves, allow the prediction or explanation of any event;<sup>8</sup> if one wants to predict or explain an event one must also make reference to a set of material conditions to which the laws apply. For example, it is impossible to predict what will happen on a billiard table solely by reference to Newton's laws of motion. One must also refer to the number of balls on the table, their initial position, the angle of the cue stick, the condition of the felt, and so on, if one wishes to predict or explain what happens on the table. Even in such an instance, the laws will only be helpful if no external causes intervene. William Alston is thus correct in his observation that "it can hardly be claimed that ... [the laws of nature] will be violated if a divine outside force intervenes; and hence it can hardly be claimed that such laws imply that God does not intervene, much less imply that this is impossible."<sup>9</sup> If God intervenes and changes the material conditions to which the laws of nature apply, he thereby produces an event that nature would not have produced on its own, but breaks no laws of nature.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore a mistake to suggest, as do Hume and his followers, that the evidence for miracles must be pitted against the evidence for the laws of nature.

The failure of Hume's claim that the evidence for the laws of nature must inevitably conflict with the evidence for miracles leads to an important observation; namely that, unless there exists a conflict between two relevant bodies of evidence, it only takes a modest amount of evidence to justify belief that an event has occurred, even if the event is rare or unusual. We routinely accept claims with low pre-evidence probabilities based on limited

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<sup>7</sup> That Hume's assumption that a miracle could only occur by violating a law of nature is incorrect was pointed out very early on by Richard Price, Dissertation IV, "On the Importance of Christianity and the Nature of Historical Evidence, and Miracles" (p. 437), but has been virtually ignored by exponents of Hume's argument. For an extended contemporary defense of Price's point see LARMER, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 37–46.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Daniel von WACHTER, "Miracles Are Not Violations of the Laws of Nature Because the Laws Do Not Entail Regularities," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7, no. 4 (2015): 37–60.

<sup>9</sup> William ALSTON, "Divine Action, Human Freedom, and the Laws of Nature," *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert J. Russell, Nancey Murphy, and C. J. Isham. (Vatican City State–Berkeley, CA: Vatican Observatory Publications / The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1993), 190. Also see Alvin PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 8–79.

<sup>10</sup> LARMER, *Legitimacy of Miracle*, 37–46.

testimonial evidence. If my son, who does not buy lottery tickets, phones to tell me that he found a lottery ticket lying in the street and that when he took it to the store he was informed that it was the winning number for a jackpot to which he is now entitled, it would seem irrational to inform him that I cannot accept his report, since extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence.

#### OCCAM'S RAZOR AND THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

It appears that if the critic is to dismiss miracle claims on the basis that extraordinary events demand extraordinary evidence, in the sense in which that phrase is usually employed by the critic, he or she will have to appeal to some conflicting body of evidence that undermines the confidence we would otherwise place in the positive evidence for miracles. There are two strategies the critic might employ; one at a very general level, the other at a much more specific level.

At a very general level, the critic could attempt to argue that the evidence against theism is so strong as to outweigh any positive evidence for miracles. But exactly how is the critic to argue this? Aquinas seems correct in his observation that the two fundamental objections raised against belief in theism are: (1) all that occurs can be explained without reference to God, and (2) the existence of evil.<sup>11</sup> Regarding (1), this is an appeal to Occam's Razor, namely that entities should not be multiplied needlessly. If all phenomena can be explained most simply without reference to God, then belief in God is unjustified. An appeal to Occam's Razor, however, cannot be the basis upon which to dismiss evidence for events that would most plausibly be understood as miracles. If one asserts that there are no rabbits in the woods on the grounds that no evidence has been forthcoming, one cannot then reject reports of someone finding positive evidence for their existence in the form of tracks or scat, by insisting that one has already established that there are no rabbits in the woods. Analogously, one cannot justify disbelief in God on the basis that there is no evidence for His existence and then insist that evidence for miracles cannot be accepted, since it has already been established that theism is false. Occam's Razor states not that one should not multiply entities, but that one should not multiply entities **needlessly**. It cannot serve,

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<sup>11</sup> AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 2, Article 3. *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1944), 1:21.

therefore, as a reason to insist that the evidence for miracles must be of extraordinary strength to justify belief in their occurrence.

#### MIRACLES AND THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL

Regarding (2), the existence of evil is routinely raised as an objection to accepting theism. Can the critic develop a Humean-type balance-of-probabilities argument in which the existence of evil is taken as evidence against the occurrence of miracles, thus justifying the conclusion that an extraordinary strength of evidence is required if belief in miracles is to be rationally justified?

Arguably, the critic cannot. Attempts to demonstrate that there is logical inconsistency between asserting the existence of God and acknowledging the existence of evil have failed. Critics of theism argue not that the existence of evil disproves God in any absolute sense, but rather that it provides strong evidence against theism. The question which must be asked, however, is whether alternative views of reality can better account for evil than theism. If they cannot, if theism provides the most adequate understanding of the nature and existence of evil that we possess, then the existence of evil cannot be taken as evidence against the existence of God. To put it paradoxically, if evil is a feature of the world that cannot be simply explained away as “a by-product of circumstance, the result of imperfect development or inadequate training,”<sup>12</sup> but is rather best accounted for by theism, then this is a reason to accept, rather than reject, theism over other world-views. If world-views other than theism do not allow us to view events such as the Jewish Holocaust or the Rwandan Genocide as fundamental instances of evil, then this is reason to think that, despite whatever difficulties theists have in explaining the existence of evil, their world-view is superior to world-views which ultimately explain away the existence of evil in terms of some presumably more basic concept.

Theism's main rivals in providing a comprehensive understanding of reality are naturalism and pantheism. Arguably, neither provides as adequate an understanding of the nature and existence of evil as theism. Much can be said in support of this claim. In the present context it is sufficient to note that, to the degree that naturalism is unable to acknowledge the reality of agent causation and libertarian free will, it cannot provide an adequate account of moral evil, and that, to the degree that pantheism negates any ulti-

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<sup>12</sup> Cyril E. M. JOAD, *God and Evil* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), 175.

mate distinction between good and evil, it cannot be said to provide an adequate account of evil.

As regards naturalism, it is generally agreed that libertarian free will and the theory of agency it implies are incompatible with naturalism. Libertarian free will is possible on the assumption of an agent with the capacity to act or refrain from acting, but naturalism which only recognizes “event-event causation” has no place in its ontology for such agents. As John Bishop observes,

agent causal-relations do not belong to the ontology of the natural perspective. Naturalism does not essentially employ the concept of a causal relation whose first member is in the category of person or agent.... All natural causal relations have first members in the category of event or state of affairs..., the problem is that the natural perspective *positively rejects the possibility that any natural event should be agent-caused*. From the natural perspective, all events have the status of *happenings*, and the problem is that the ethical perspective requires some events that are *doings* and for which, other things being equal, an agent may be held morally responsible.<sup>13</sup>

It is for this reason that naturalists typically either deny the existence of free will or insist on defining it in a compatibilist manner, despite either option negating attributing moral responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

As regards pantheism, the insistence on reality being constituted by an all-embracing unity leads pantheists to deny any ultimate distinction between good and evil. Thus we find Spinoza writing that “if the human mind had only adequate ideas, it could not form any notion of evil.”<sup>15</sup> Insofar as pantheists conceive of evil as a problem, they think of it as a logical problem of how unity can exist within an impersonal all-embracing divine reality that exists outside of any moral categories, and thus cannot be described as being good or evil. Thus, pantheist Michael Levine suggests that “the very idea of evil may be something the pantheist wishes to eschew.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John BISHOP, *Natural Agency* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 40.

<sup>14</sup> Despite the cleverness of Frankfurt examples, there is good reason to think that moral responsibility requires libertarian free will. See, for example, Peter VAN INWAGEN, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: OUP, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> SPINOZA, *Ethics*, Part 4, Corollary of Proposition 64, *Spinoza Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 354.

<sup>16</sup> Michael LEVINE, “Pantheism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Spring 2011 Edition), accessed June 30, 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/pantheism>.

It seems plausible that if one is to avoid reducing the concept of evil to some presumably more basic concept one will find oneself having to embrace a theistic world-view. To claim, as naturalism seems to imply, that the concept of moral responsibility is a chimera, and thus that we could never attribute moral responsibility to the Nazis for the atrocities they committed, violates our deepest intuitions. To claim, as pantheism seems to imply, that drawing any distinction between good and evil is to engage in confused inadequate thinking, and thus be unable to view the slaughter of almost 800,000 Tutsi by Hutu extremists as genuinely evil, is again to violate our deepest intuitions. If evil *qua* evil is a concept that only theists in the final analysis are entitled to employ, then the critic cannot assume that the existence of evil provides a body of counter-evidence to theism, such that events plausibly regarded as miracles could not be accepted in the absence of extraordinarily strong evidence for their occurrence.

#### MIRACLES AND TESTIMONY

At a very specific level, the critic might attempt to argue that the positive evidence for miracles is subverted or outweighed by the evidence we have regarding the unreliability of testimony under certain circumstances. Thus, Hume in Part II of his *Essay* argues that miracle reports never come from well-educated people of good sense,<sup>17</sup> but rather invariably from ignorant and barbarous religious enthusiasts.<sup>18</sup> Under such circumstances, he asserts, human testimony loses all pretensions to authority.<sup>19</sup>

Leaving aside the fact that Hume never considers the possibility of personally observing a miracle, or the possibility of physical evidence for a miracle, what force does this argument hold? Undoubtedly, there are instances where the person reporting a miracle cannot be considered reliable, but on what grounds is the critic entitled to assume that this is invariably the case? Hume, having insisted that miracle reports never come from credible sources, writes of the Jansenist miracles “that many ... were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world.”<sup>20</sup> His response was not to demonstrate that, contrary to

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<sup>17</sup> HUME, *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> HUME, 125–26.

<sup>19</sup> HUME, 125.

<sup>20</sup> HUME, 132.

first appearances, there was good reason to think the witnesses could not be considered reliable, but rather to assert the “absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events which they relate.”<sup>21</sup> Hume gives us not a body of counter-evidence against the reliability of testimony supporting belief in the Jansenist miracles, but rather a bald assertion that miracles are impossible.<sup>22</sup> If the event was a miracle, then it could not have occurred, if it occurred, then it could not have been a miracle.

It will not do for the critic to decree from his or her armchair that because some reports of miracles come from unreliable witnesses that all or even the majority of reports of miracles can therefore be discounted. It cannot be assumed that the majority of miracle claims have been found fraudulent and that there thus exists a large body of counter-evidence such that any specific miracle-claim must have an extraordinary amount of evidence in its favour before it can be accepted. *Abusus non tollit usum*, the fact that testimony is sometimes of questionable worth hardly establishes that it is always of questionable worth. Indeed, as Richard Swinburne notes, “in general we necessarily assume or have reason to believe that apparent memory, testimony and states of particular types are reliable evidence about past states and events.”<sup>23</sup> Unless there are specific reasons to think that someone is an unreliable witness, that is to say an existing body of evidence pointing to her unreliability, we would normally think her testimony should be accepted rather than rejected, since the most basic principle of assessing evidence is to accept as much evidence as possible that permits the development of a coherent account consistent with the evidence.<sup>24</sup> John Henry Newman is thus correct in his observation that

a miracle ... calls for no distinct species of testimony from that offered for other events ... it is as impossible to draw any line, or to determine how much is required, as to define the quantity and quality of evidence to prove the occurrence of an earthquake, or the appearance of any meteoric phenomenon.... But in any case the testimony cannot turn out to be more than that of competent and honest

<sup>21</sup> HUME, 133.

<sup>22</sup> It appears that Hume is simply decreeing miracles cannot occur. The most charitable reading, but one which it is not clear the text supports, is that Hume is here guilty of rhetorical excess and means to refer us back to his “in principle” argument of Part I, where he argues that the testimonial evidence for miracles must be opposed to the evidence for the laws of nature, and, from the very nature of the case, the evidence for the laws of nature must always outweigh the testimonial evidence for miracles. Even if this is the case, we have already seen that miracles should not be defined as violating the laws of nature and thus the argument of Part I has no purchase.

<sup>23</sup> Richard SWINBURNE, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 38.

<sup>24</sup> SWINBURNE, 37.



men; and an inquiry must not be prosecuted under the idea of finding something beyond this, but to obtain proofs of this.<sup>25</sup>

#### MIRACLES, COHERENCE, AND “PLAIN WITNESSING”

I have been suggesting that, unless there exists a body of counter-evidence against miracles, it is a mistake to claim that rational belief in their occurrence can only be justified on the basis of extraordinarily strong evidence. Put simply, even modest evidence for a particular event plausibly viewed as a miracle gives good grounds for believing it occurred, unless such evidence conflicts with other evidence tending to disconfirm the miracle. Various suggestions as to what might constitute counter-evidence against the occurrence of miracles have been found examined and found wanting. Miracles should not be conceived as violating the laws of nature, so it is illegitimate for Hume and his followers to insist that the evidence for the laws of nature must be taken as in conflict with the evidence for miracles. Similarly, there seems little reason to take seriously the claim that the existence of evil must be taken as providing evidence against miracles. Given this, and given the basic epistemic principle that we should accept as many pieces of evidence as is consistent with developing a coherent account of what actually took place, the burden of proof is upon the sceptic to explain his or her rejection of miracle accounts.

At this point it might be objected that the argument I have been developing proves too much. Would it not require a too easy acceptance of miracle claims that even those convinced that miracles occur should reject? As C. S. Lewis observes,

no one really thinks that the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection is exactly on the same level with some pious tittle-tattle about how Mother Egarée Louise miraculously found her second best thimble by the aid of St. Antony.... The whoop of delight with which the sceptic would unearth the story of the thimble, and the ‘rosy pudency’ with which the Christian would keep it in the background, both tell the same tale. Even those who think all stories of miracles absurd think some very much more absurd than others: even those who believe them all (if anyone does) think that some require a specially robust faith.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Henry NEWMAN, *Two Essays on Biblical and on Ecclesiastical Miracles* (London, 1890), 73.

<sup>26</sup> C. S. LEWIS, *Miracles* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 129.

Lewis appeals to what he terms “our ‘innate sense of the fitness of things’,”<sup>27</sup> as a criterion by which the plausibility of particular miracle reports can be evaluated, though he is careful to note that it cannot be substituted for a “close inquiry into the historical evidence.”<sup>28</sup> He suggests that disbelief in miracles is, in the majority of cases, “based on a sense of their *unfitness*”<sup>29</sup> rather than on a close examination of the evidence. Lewis seems correct in this latter observation. For example, Earman, despite his view that Hume’s “Of Miracles” is an abject failure, and his admission that he does “not believe that there is any, in principle, unbreachable obstacle to satisfying the minimal reliability condition for witnesses to religious miracles”<sup>30</sup> finds it possible to assert that in instances of faith healing “there is a palpable atmosphere of collective hysteria that renders the participants unable to achieve the minimal reliability condition—indeed, one might even say that a necessary condition for being a sincere participant in a faith healing meeting is the suspension of critical faculties essential to accurate reporting.”<sup>31</sup> It is clear that Earman makes his judgment without considering the evidence, since his description is far from characteristic of all faith healing services and less than a quarter of reported faith healings attribute their healing to prayer during a special service by a healing evangelist.<sup>32</sup>

Even if one does not acknowledge the existence of an “innate sense of the fitness of things” the accuracy of Lewis’s observations is evident. Evidence is routinely evaluated in a framework of prior beliefs as regards what is possible or probable. This can hardly be avoided; we rightly seek coherence in our beliefs.

Two important points need to be made, however. First, coherence should not be sought at the cost of recognizing the primacy of what Stanley Jaki has termed “plain witnessing.”<sup>33</sup> Otherwise, one runs the very great risk of maintaining coherence by ignoring the facts. It is sobering to realize that when Pictet, a colleague of the French astronomer Laplace, urged a reconsideration of the evidence provided by “lay-people” that stones sometimes fell out of the sky, Laplace shouted him down exclaiming, “We’ve had enough such

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<sup>27</sup> LEWIS, 128.

<sup>28</sup> LEWIS, 129.

<sup>29</sup> LEWIS, 129.

<sup>30</sup> John EARMAN, *Hume’s Abject Failure* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 61.

<sup>31</sup> EARMAN, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Craig KEENER, *Miracles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 253.

<sup>33</sup> Stanley L. JAKI, *Miracles and Physics* (Front Royal, VI: Christendom Press, 1989), 99.

myths.”<sup>34</sup> The influence of Laplace and like-minded scientists, who had no room in their theories for such phenomena, was such as to result in the discarding of all meteorites from museums.<sup>35</sup> As Jaki notes,

even in the systematic isolation or carefully controlled conditions which science demands for its facts, their usefulness ultimately depends on the reliability of plain human witness about them. Without that witness not only the vast enterprise known as scientific endeavour would lose its claims to truth, but also the far more vast social life would be deprived of its right to justice.... In none of those forums can a discrimination against plain witnessing of unusual facts be condoned or else the most important cases may be prejudged and the only avenues for progress be blocked.<sup>36</sup>

Whether or not an unusual event, plausibly viewed as miraculous, occurred should be judged on the customary criteria by which we assess testimony, not on whether it fits a favoured world-view.<sup>37</sup>

Second, it is important to distinguish the question of whether an extraordinary event occurred, from the question of whether it should be viewed as a miracle.<sup>38</sup> The grounds on which an event is judged to have occurred are

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<sup>34</sup> JAKI, 94.

<sup>35</sup> JAKI, note 8.

<sup>36</sup> JAKI, 99.

<sup>37</sup> One of the referees for this paper finds Jaki’s reference to “plain witnessing”, Newman’s reference to “competent and honest men” and my claim “that it only takes a modest amount of evidence to justify belief that an event has occurred, even if the event is rare or unusual” to be vague and unhelpful. I disagree. We routinely evaluate testimony, and such evaluation includes our judgment of whether the testifier is honest and was positioned to reliably observe what he or she reports. Further, all of us, including scientists, believe the vast majority of what we believe based on what we take to be reliable testimony. A scientist who accepts that proper protocols were followed in an experiment at which he or she was not present and who has not duplicated the experiment does so based on the report, i.e., testimony, of what he or she considers honest and capable witnesses.

<sup>38</sup> Despite numerous helpful comments, one of the referees for this paper appears to fall into this error, writing that “as much as I understand that for some people ‘plain witnessing’ of a ‘competent and honest man’ with respect to some subjective experience of SDA [special divine act] or miracle (meaningful for their own life) is enough, making this a general rule for the assessment of all types of SDA and miracles seems to be at danger of falling into fideism ... we should require a thorough causal evaluation of events we claim to be miraculous.” I entirely agree that a causal evaluation of events we claim to be miraculous is necessary. What is at issue, however, is how much evidence is required to establish the occurrence of the event in question. The criteria for judging an event to be miraculous are quite different than the criteria for judging the event to have occurred. This point is made very clearly by Newman in the quotation I include in footnote 40. See also the reference to LARMER, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, footnote 39.

very different from the grounds upon which we would judge it to be a miracle. Laplace was wrong to summarily reject reports of stones falling out of the sky on the basis that there was no place in his astronomical theory for such occurrences, but it would certainly have been legitimate for him to question whether such happenings are miraculous. This may seem obvious but reports of events that are plausibly viewed as miracles are frequently dismissed, not based on a close examination of the evidence for their occurrence, but rather based on the fact that they strongly resist any explanation in naturalist terms. In the context of a discussion of methodological naturalism at a conference on science and religion,<sup>39</sup> I had the opportunity to raise to a panel of speakers the following question: “If the events in the account of Jesus’s raising of Lazarus took place as described, would it be more rational to view Lazarus’s return to life as miraculous, rather than to insist on some, as yet unknown natural explanation?” Every member of the panel failed to distinguish between the question of whether the event took place and the question of whether, if the event happened, it should be described as a miracle. Even upon this distinction being drawn to their attention, they failed to distinguish the two questions, with members of the panel instead referring to how stage magicians can perform feats of illusion. It was evident that they were willing to dismiss reports of events plausibly viewed as miracles not based on evidential considerations relevant to establishing their happening, but on the basis that if such events were to occur, they would be very difficult, perhaps impossible, to view as having a natural explanation. This, however, is to be guilty of Laplace’s approach to reports of meteorites.

The critic, of course, is entitled to accept testimonial evidence that events plausibly regarded as miracles have occurred, yet attempt to argue that, despite initial appearances, there is good reason to view these events as having a natural explanation. The critic is entitled to his or her attempts, but there may be little reason to take such attempts seriously.<sup>40</sup> If there are good reasons to believe that Jesus died on the cross and three days later returned

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<sup>39</sup> The conference “God, Nature and Design: Historical and Contemporary” sponsored by Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, held at St. Anne’s College, Oxford, UK, July 10–13, 2008. The panel discussion took place on July 13, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> As Newman comments, “it is impossible, from the nature of the case, absolutely to disprove any, even the wildest, hypothesis which may be framed... It becomes, then, a balance of opposite probabilities, whether gratuitously to suppose a multitude of perfectly unknown causes, and these, moreover, meeting in one and the same history, or to have recourse to one ... miraculously exerted for an extraordinary and worthy object.” NEWMAN, *Two Essays*, 54–55. See also LARMER, *The Legitimacy of Miracle*, 79–97.

alive, and that he in fact predicted his return to life earlier in his ministry, the prospects of a natural explanation are not bright. The progress of science, far from suggesting a natural explanation is likely to be forthcoming, suggests quite the opposite. We know vastly more of human physiology than we did two thousand years ago, but this increased knowledge makes it harder rather than easier to propose some plausible naturalistic account of how such an event as the Resurrection of Jesus could take place. Indeed, it is precisely the difficulty of providing a natural explanation that leads naturalists to deny that it occurred. This, however, is to confuse the grounds for judging that an event took place with the grounds for judging that it has a natural explanation. It will not do to insist that an event be dismissed as unhistorical on the sole ground that its occurrence defies naturalistic explanation.

#### CONCLUSION

The view that belief in events plausibly viewed as miracles can only be justified if there exists extraordinarily strong evidence in their favour is mistaken. Such a view rests on the mistaken assumption that the evidence for such events must inevitably conflict with a body of conflicting evidence against their occurrence, such as the evidence for the laws of nature or the existence of evil. Given there is no necessary conflict, it cannot be urged that belief in events best understood as miracles requires extraordinarily strong evidence before it is justified. Newman writes this:

While we reasonably object to gross ignorance or besotted credulity in witnesses for a miraculous story, we must guard against the opposite extreme of requiring the testimony of men of science and general knowledge. Men of philosophical minds are often too fond of inquiring into the causes and mutual dependence of events, of arranging, theorizing, and refining, to be accurate and straightforward in their account of extraordinary occurrences. Instead of giving a plain statement of facts, they are insensibly led to correct the evidence of their senses with a view to account for the strange phenomenon.... Miracles differ from other events only when considered relatively to a general system, it is obvious that the same persons are competent to attest miraculous facts who are suitable witnesses of corresponding natural ones.... A physician's certificate is not needed to assure us of the illness of a friend; nor is it necessary for attesting the simple fact that he has instantaneously recovered. It is important to bear this in mind, for some writers argue as if there were something intrinsically defective in the testimony given

by ignorant persons to miraculous occurrences. To say that unlearned persons are not judges of the fact of a miraculous event, is only so far true as all testimony is fallible and liable to be distorted by prejudice. Every one, not only superstitious persons, is apt to interpret facts in his own way; if the superstitious see too many prodigies, men of science may see too few.... It may be said, that ignorance prevents a witness from discriminating between natural and supernatural events and thus weakens the authority of his judgment concerning the miraculous nature of a fact. It is true; but if the fact be recorded, we may judge for ourselves on that point.<sup>41</sup>

His assertions that “miracles differ from other events only when considered relatively to a general system,” that “the same persons are competent to attest miraculous facts who are suitable witnesses of corresponding natural ones,” and that “a physician’s certificate is not needed to assure us of the illness of a friend; nor is it necessary for attesting the simple fact that he has instantaneously recovered” are, therefore, correct.

Two final comments are in order. First, I have emphasized that there is no *necessary* conflict of evidence. This is not to say that in a particular instance there might not be conflicting bodies of evidence; for example, the testimony that a healing occurred might conceivably be at odds with the physical evidence from an x-ray scan, or the testimony of another witness. It is to say that the critic is not entitled to assume a conflict of evidence, but must demonstrate such conflicts, rather than simply taking for granted that they are inevitably present. Reports of extraordinary events that would plausibly be viewed as miracles—supernatural interventions in nature to produce an event that could not otherwise occur, and which reveal divine purpose—can certainly be scrutinized and evaluated. The point is not that no or weak evidence is sufficient to ground belief in reports of miracles, but rather that the evidence required need not be extraordinary in terms of quantity or quality.

Second, nothing in what I have said suggests that for a great many events best understood as miracles there is no extraordinarily strong evidence. For example, for a cure to be recognized as miraculous at Lourdes, the illness must be organic or caused by injuries, serious, and with an irrevocable prognosis. Further there must be no treatment at the root of the cure, the cure must exceed the known laws of the illness’s evolution, and the cure must be instantaneous, total, and lasting, without convalescence.<sup>42</sup> Such extraordi-

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<sup>41</sup> NEWMAN, *Two Essays*, 81–83.

<sup>42</sup> “Doctor Who Analyzes Reported Miracles at Lourdes,” Catholic Online, accessed July 18, 2011, <http://www.catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=1252>.

nary evidence is certainly welcome as a witness to the reality of miracles, but it is not a necessity for belief in them to be rationally justified.

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#### BELIEF IN MIRACLES AND THE PRESUMED REQUIREMENT OF EXTRAORDINARY EVIDENCE

##### Summary

In this paper, I criticize the commonly accepted view that belief in events plausibly viewed as miracles can only be justified if there exists extraordinarily strong evidence in their favour. Such a claim rests on the mistaken assumption that the evidence for such events must inevitably conflict with what is taken as evidence against their occurrence, such as the evidence for the laws of nature or the existence of evil. Given the arguments I develop that such presumed conflict is apparent rather than genuine, it cannot be urged that belief in events best understood as miracles requires extraordinarily strong evidence before it is justified. This being the case, John Henry Newman's observation that "miracles differ from other events only when considered relatively to a general system ... the same persons are competent to attest miraculous facts who are suitable witnesses of corresponding natural ones ... a physician's certificate is not needed to assure us of the illness of a friend; nor is it necessary for attesting the simple fact that he has instantaneously recovered" can be seen to be correct.

**Keywords:** evidence; evil; Hume; laws of nature; miracles; naturalism; Newman; pantheism; pantheism; testimony

#### WIARA W CUDA A DOMNIEMANY WYMÓG NADZWYCZAJNYCH ŚWIADECTW

##### Streszczenie

W tym artykule krytykuję powszechnie akceptowany pogląd, że wiara w zdarzenia rozsądnie postrzegane jako cuda może być uzasadniona tylko wtedy, gdy istnieją wyjątkowo mocne świadectwa na ich korzyść. Twierdzenie takie opiera się na błędnym założeniu, że świadectwa na rzecz takich zdarzeń muszą nieuchronnie stać w sprzeczności z tym, co uznaje się za dowody przeciwko ich wystąpieniu, takie jak świadectwo na rzecz praw natury czy istnienia zła. Biorąc pod uwagę argumenty, które przedstawiam na rzecz tezy, że taki domniemany konflikt jest raczej pozorny niż realny, nie można twierdzić, że wiara w wydarzenia najlepiej rozumiane jako cuda wymaga wyjątkowo mocnych świadectw, zanim będzie uzasadniona. Dlatego trafne wydaje się spostrzeżenie Johna Henry'ego Newmana, że „cuda różnią się od innych wydarzeń tylko wtedy, gdy są rozpatrywane w odniesieniu do ogólnego systemu [...] osoby, które są kompetentne, by potwierdzić cudowne fakty, są również wiarygodnymi świadkami odpowiadających im faktów naturalnych [...] zaświadczenie lekarskie nie jest potrzebne, aby zapewnić nas o chorobie przyjaciela; nie jest też ono konieczne, aby potwierdzić prosty fakt, że natychmiast wyzdrowiał”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** świadectwa; zło; Hume; prawa natury; cuda; naturalizm; Newman; panenteizm; panteizm; sprawozdania innych osób