10. Is There Evidence for Miracles?

John Warwick Montgomery, "Sensible Christianity" [audio series]
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I. **Introduction**
   A. If we knew ahead of time that miracles did not occur, then it would not be necessary to spend any time at all on the historical evidence for particular miracles.
      1. would not make any difference that the historical documents of the New Testament are tremendously good as documents
      2. would not make any difference that they record miracles (and principally the resurrection of Christ)
      3. If we knew ahead of time that miracles do not occur, there would *have to be* something wrong with these documents.
   B. We want to consider whether there is any philosophical way of getting rid of the miraculous.
      1. The idea is to attempt to get a philosophical "claw-grip" on the question, one which will eliminate the necessity for any kind of historical examination.
      2. An attempt is made here to "cut Christians off at the pass" by eliminating any reason to even check whether miracles occur or not.
   C. But are such attempts successful?
      1. The classic attempt along this line is that of David Hume, the eighteenth century Scottish philosopher.
      2. This is the argument that comes up again and again in different forms right up to the present time.
         a. This argument is usually placed in the "Religion" section of introductory philosophy texts.
         b. But it *should* actually be placed in the "Logic" section as a perfect example of circular reasoning!
            i. It would help the philosophy student see how *not* to reason!

II. **Hume's Folly**
   A. What is Hume's argument? We quote it from Hume's *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding:*

1. ‣ "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. Why is it more than probable that all men must die, that wood cannot of itself remain suspended in the air, that fire consumes wood and is extinguished by water, unless it be that these events are found agreeable to the laws of nature, and there is required a violation of these laws—in other words, a miracle—to prevent them? Nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happens in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die all of a sudden, because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life, because that has never been observed in any country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event. Otherwise, the event would not merit that appellation, and as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, 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 incredible by an opposite proof which is superior. The plain consequence is that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish, and even in that case, there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force which remains after deducting the inferior. When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived or the fact with he relates should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other and, according to the superiority which I discover, I pronounce my decision and I always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates, then and not until then can he pretend to command my belief or opinion."

III. ‣ **The Fallacy of Circular Reasoning**
A. ‣ Hume says that any time any evidence comes up for the miraculous, you don't need to check it out.
  1. ‣ Why not"
  2. ‣ because it would be more miraculous if the person giving this evidence were actually telling the truth than it would be if the miracle occurred
    a. ‣ According to Hume, there is a "firm and unalterable experience against miracles."
    b. ‣ There are, Hume says, "natural laws" against miracles.
    c. ‣ Where do these natural laws come from?
      i. ‣ They come from "firm and unalterable experience," Hume says.
    d. ‣ When someone comes along and claims that a miracle has occurred, there is no sense in going through a lot of historical investigation to deal with a problem like this.

e. ▸ You will always find a situation in which it would be more miraculous if the person were telling the truth, since "…there is firm and unalterable experience against the miraculous."

B. ▸ I've tried to present this as persuasively as an utterly illogical argument can be presented. But it takes great effort!

C. ▸ What is the trouble with Hume's argument?
1. ▸ The only way you could know that there is "firm and unalterable experience against miracles" would be to check out every individual claim of miracles.
2. ▸ Until you've checked them all out, how could you possibly know that "experience is uniform against them?"

D. ▸ You see, Hume's *premise* is that "…there is a firm and unalterable experience against miracles," and his *conclusion* is that "miracles don't occur."

E. ▸ Of course miracles don't occur! Why?
1. ▸ Because this simply says that "if there are no miracles, then there are no miracles!"

IV. ▸ **Natural Law Equals Observed Law**

A. ▸ What are "natural laws" after all?
1. ▸ Natural laws are the product of experience.
   a. ▸ "Natural laws" don't drop down from heaven like the golden tablets from the angel Moroni; natural laws are nothing more than our generalizations from experience.
   b. ▸ After much observation Isaac Newton concluded that apples generally fall on philosophers' heads (rather than philosophers' heads rising up to meet apples)
      i. ▸ After observing this kind of phenomenon with fair regularity, he stated a general principle on the basis of it.

B. ▸ The people of the eighteenth century got hypnotized by their own "natural laws!"
1. ▸ They thought they were getting to know the universe like an English Rugby field, in which all the rules were perfectly clear.

V. ▸ **Acknowledge the Exceptions**

A. ▸ 18th century people did *not* understand everything as tightly as they thought they did.
1. ▸ Hume, while admitting that "natural laws are the product of experience," then simply asserted that there is always "firm and unalterable experience for the laws."
2. ▸ If you are an observer of the dead, you find that in general dead people stay dead.
   a. ▸ In fact, you find a tremendous number of people dying and staying dead!
   b. ▸ So you state a general rule: "People who die, stay dead."
3. ▸ Though that may be the product of general experience, it is certainly not "the product of firm and unalterable experience"—unless you have checked out any and all claims of people dying and not staying dead.
4. ▸ What you need to do is revise your "general statement."
   a. ▸ You need to say, "In general, people who die stay dead—with one very important exception."

b. ‣ That very important exception is, of course, Jesus Christ.
c. ‣ His resurrection is based upon reliable observation that, as a matter of fact, He did not die and stay dead, but instead rose from the dead!

VI. ‣ **The Elemental Surprise**
A. ‣ The true scientist does not get hypnotized by his own generalizations, and refuse to check out exceptions.
   1. ‣ The true scientist is constantly analyzing particular cases to see if particular cases go along with the general rule.
   2. ‣ Example: The Periodic Table of Elements (which was a reasonably successful nineteenth-century attempt to classify all the elements according to their combining properties)
      a. ‣ The atomic theory as first set forth in the nineteenth century was generally expressed in a kind of physical model in which each element was a kind of miniature solar system.
      b. ‣ Around the central nucleus revolved electrons, and in the outer electron ring were electrons which either combined with other electrons to form chemical compounds or else didn't combine.
      c. ‣ Those elements that had outer electrons available for chemical combinations were called "active elements" and those that lacked such outer electrons were called "inert elements."
         i. ‣ example: Argon and Krypton are classed among the so-called inert elements.
   3. ‣ But in the last few years, successful attempts have been made to combine certain so-called "inert elements" (the fluorides of Xenon and Radon, for example).
      a. ‣ The interesting thing is that these combinations were brought about by ordinary chemical means.
      b. ‣ So why didn't people try this a long time ago?
         i. ‣ Because of "the elegance and aesthetic satisfaction" that came from the Periodic Table! Everything was so neat!
      c. ‣ It had been possible all along for compounds of these elements to come about.

VII. ‣ **The Spectre of Humean Illogic**
A. ‣ Suppose Hume's view had prevailed in these matters.
   1. ‣ For years, there had been uniform experience against the combination of the inert elements.
      a. ‣ In other words, a "natural law" had established the structure of the Periodic Table. So when somebody finally came along and said, "I have managed to create Xenon Hexafluorochloronate," the proper reply would be, "Would it be more miraculous that he really created this, or that he was deceived?"
      b. ‣ What we're saying is simply that experimentation and observation and checking of particulars must always precede and criticize generalizations.

c. ▸ Nobody knows the universe so well that he can declare that "there is absolute, uniform, unalterable experience" against *anything*!

d. ▸ The universe is a very complex place, posing all kinds of difficulties, and because it is so complex, you can't rule out events; you can only investigate the claims to events.

B. ▸ Neither can you appeal to a "statistical" variant.

1. ▸ You cannot say, "The statistical pressure of all the regularities is so heavy that it outweighs the evidence for anything that goes against these regularities."

   a. ▸ That is simply another way of saying that ". . . the weight of regularity is so gigantic that you never need to investigate anything that violates the probabilities."

2. ▸ If that view were put into action, it would destroy all scientific investigation!

   a. ▸ Human exploration would cease with what is existent—nothing new would ever arrive!

3. ▸ This argument is another one of those "two-edged swords."

   a. ▸ If you use it outside the religious realm, you suddenly discover that it destroys science and innovation.

   b. ▸ This forces you to an illogical conservativism—one that makes newness impossible.

   c. ▸ Thus you must make a choice: You must either (1) give up all exploration in both respects, or else (2) continue to explore both secular and sacred phenomena with an open mind.

VIII. ▸ **The Impossible Giraffe**

A. ▸ Example: An old farmer went to the zoo and looked at a giraffe for the first time. He said, "There ain't no such animal!"

1. ▸ Why? Because it was outside his experience.

2. ▸ The farmer had two choices:

   a. ▸ Either (1) to expand the definition of his experience, or (2) to deny that the giraffe was there—regardless of evidence.

   b. ▸ In this case, the farmer denied the existence of the giraffe rather than alter his world-view.

B. ▸ That is the question before the non-Christian.

1. ▸ Is he willing to be honest in the face of the data?

2. ▸ Is he willing to allow these data to have the same effect on him as other data do that go against his standard experiences?

C. ▸ If he is willing to accept such new data as the fluorides of Xenon and Radon, but is unwilling to face the evidence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, why is this?

1. ▸ The reason is that coming to terms with Jesus Christ involves a moral change.

2. ▸ If you can help the non-Christian see that this is what is happening, you are "bringing him to the cross."

3. ▸ You are helping him see that he must make a moral decision relative to Jesus, and that he can't rationalize his way out of this decision on the bases of miracles not occurring.

IX. ▸ **Pebbles and Probabilities**

A. ▸ C. S. Lewis used an analogy to point out the difference between "antecedent probability" and "subsequent probability" to show that you can't use probabilities.

B. ▸ Here is Lewis' analogy, slightly modified:

1. ▸ A bird flies along with a pebble in its beak, and you as a bird-watcher would like to find out where the pebble falls, so you jump onto your motorcycle and follow the bird. As you drive along, you calculate the probabilities against the stone falling in any particular one-foot-square area in the bird's possible flight pattern, and as you do this you discover that the probability is simply staggering that the stone will not fall in any particular square-foot-area as compared with all the other places it could conceivably fall. Suddenly the bird hiccups, and the stone drops out of its mouth and falls to the ground. You find the spot and draw a one-foot-square around it, but then you point out the tremendous probability against a thing like that ever having happened. Do you see the illogic of this? Of course it is improbable that the stone would have landed in that exact spot, but once it did, probabilities are irrelevant.

X. ▸ **You Must Face the Facts**

A. ▸ Think of the probabilities against you having come about!

1. ▸ You are the product of a particular genetic union that is statistically miniscule, yet here you are!

2. ▸ There is no sense in trying to "probabilistically calculate away your existence" once you're arrived!

B. ▸ In other words, people who try to argue against miracles on a probability basis are simply going back to the same illogic that Hume was using.

C. ▸ You can't calculate the probabilities against factual reality; you've simply got to face it.

D. ▸ As someone has said of giraffes, "It's improbable that anything would look like that. But there it is, there it is!"