

Waiting for a Miracle . . . Miracles, Miracism, and Discrimination

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Abstract: We argue that the use of publicly funded medical facilities for patients who are waiting for a miracle amounts to discrimination against atheists, agnostics and advocates, of faiths that do not accept miracle claims. The only exception is when this use can be justified by considerations that demonstrate that waiting makes it more likely that a miracle will occur and will aid the patient's recovery. Such justification can be grounded on considerations of faith or of reason. We consider both possibilities and suggest conditions of acceptability for both. In arguing this way, we steer a middle path between discrimination against atheists, agnostics, and advocates of faiths that do not accept miracle claims – miracism – and a failure to respect religious belief.

Key Words: discrimination, faith, miracle, miracism, reason

Consider the following: following a brain injury, a patient is rendered deeply unconscious and kept alive in a hospital with the use of life support systems. Received medical opinion is that the patient has no possibility of ever recovering consciousness and being taken off life support. After some time passes, the patient's family is advised of the hopeless prognosis and it is recommended that life support is switched off. However, the patient's family objects to this on the grounds that they are waiting for a miracle which will enable the patient to live a normal life, and they argue that he should be allowed to remain on life support until this occurs.

Acceding to such a request might be unobjectionable in cases where the family is willing to meet the costs of the further use of life support. However, when the family requests the use of publicly funded medical facilities to wait for a miracle, then doctors and medical administrators are faced with a difficult dilemma. The use of life support is expensive and it seems that the use of it in circumstances that are not available to atheists, agnostics, and advocates of faiths that do not accept miracle claims amounts to *discrimination* against these people.¹ We call this form of discrimination *miracism*. All of these groups are entitled to object to the use of public



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monies that, by way of the tax system, they have contributed being spent on particular religious groups. On the other hand, believers may argue that they deserve exceptional care in such circumstances on grounds of respect for religious belief.

Ordinarily a doctor would be willing to support a request for the further use of life support in situations where, despite initial appearances, he or she was persuaded to think that the patient had a not insignificant chance of recovery. There would need to be a rational basis for such a belief, such as some prognostic factor or new diagnosis. So it seems that the family of the patient needs to provide a reason to think that waiting for a miracle makes it more likely that a miracle will occur, which will increase that patient's chances of recovery. It might perhaps be argued that we should expend public resources waiting for a miracle, regardless of considerations of the benefits of waiting, simply out of respect for religious belief, even if the family in question does not believe that this will increase the patient's chances of recovery. But for now let us assume that the family in question really does believe that waiting will make it more likely that a miracle will occur. Why might they believe this? Could this be *rational*, like identifying some new relevant prognostic indicator? We think that there are basically two sorts of considerations that might motivate their belief. First, they may think that it is rational to believe that a miracle is to be expected under certain circumstances. Second, they may be motivated to believe that a miracle has a significant chance of occurring, in virtue of considerations of faith. It is common among nonbelievers to suppose that it is not possible to provide evidence that a miracle is to be rationally expected. Although both authors of this paper are nonbelievers, we do not share this view. We will show that under some circumstances it is rational to believe that a miracle has occurred, or to believe that a miracle may occur in the future. But first let us consider the motivation that faith provides for belief that a miracle may occur.

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Faith

Sometimes those who claim that a miracle has occurred turn out not to be claiming evidence of supernatural intervention in the natural world. Instead, they claim that an event has occurred which has evoked a sense of wonder in them and thereby reaffirmed their faith. When people talk about the 'miracle of birth,' this is typically what they mean. They are not claiming that God had a special role in causing a particular birth. They may, however, be making the further claim that their experience of a sense of wonder, as a result of observing an event, such as birth, has caused them to believe in God, or has reaffirmed their faith in God's existence.

This sense of the term 'miracle' is a subjective one. One person might experience a sense of wonder when a remarkable event such as a birth occurs, while another has no such experience. The event is, therefore, a miracle for the former but not the latter. The legitimacy of this subjective sense of the miraculous is recognized by a number of individuals including R.F. Holland² and Peter Winch.³ We have no objection to this kind of talk about miracles; however, we do not see this as relevant to the case under discussion. People who expect, in defiance of medical opinion, that their unconscious relatives will awaken do not merely expect that their faith will be reaffirmed; rather, they are claiming that they expect God to intervene and alter the natural world.

No doubt some considerations of faith do motivate people to expect God to intervene and alter the natural world. However, the most significant theologians who represent most mainstream Christian faiths do not encourage belief in faith as a legitimate basis for expectation of divine intervention. Mainstream protestant theologians and liberal Catholics have long been opposed to the idea of God intervening in the natural world—"special divine action"^{4,5}—which we take to be a necessary condition for a miracle (in the nonsubjective sense of the term) to occur. Even the bare possibility of special divine action is a subject of dispute among scientifically informed theologians.⁶ Traditionalist Catholic theological authorities, who do allow for the possibility of special divine action, apply very strict evidential standards before they are willing to accept that a miracle has actually occurred.⁷ It seems that most of those who are waiting for a miracle on the basis of faith are unlikely to receive theological encouragement to continue, at least in Western countries with Christian majorities. Furthermore, it seems that it would be irresponsible of religious leaders of these faith groups not to actively discourage their members from placing their faith in the expectation of miracles. A miracle is an intervention in the natural world by a supernatural agent, such as God, and is not subject to human prediction or human control. A person who was actually able to influence when a supernatural intervention was to take place would be a magician rather than a miracle worker.⁸

It may be that some believers belong to churches and other religious organizations that do provide theological en-

couragement for belief in miracles. Similarly, some members of more mainstream religious groups may believe that they have a special reason to have faith in miracles, although they may not believe this to be true of most other members of their own faith group. However, before we would consider a faith-based motive for waiting for a miracle to be an acceptable ground for the expenditure of extra resources on believers, we would need to see a further piece of justification for the act of waiting. God may be capable of intervening in the natural world and may be inclined to do so, to heal some ill individuals. However, it is very hard to see why waiting for God's intervention is going to make it more likely for any particular individual. What exactly are we supposed to be waiting for, and how long should we wait—a day, a week, a month, a year? We do not dismiss outright the possibility that there might be a faith-based justification for the belief that the recovery of a patient on life support becomes more likely if we are willing to wait for a miracle. However, we think that the prospects for making this case are difficult. They require both a theological justification for the belief that miracles are at least somewhat likely and a coherent justification for the claim that keeping a person on life support alive is a way to increase the likelihood of a miracle occurring. But as we have seen, neither of these justificatory claims is easy to provide.

Reason

The second way to justify the claim that a miracle is likely to occur is via reason. How might one go about providing evidence to back up the claim that a miracle can reasonably be expected to occur? The best way that we can think of is to demonstrate that similar miracles have occurred in the past. If this can be shown, then it may be possible to provide evidence that further miracles may occur in similar circumstances. One stumbling block here is that there is a strong tradition in philosophy of regarding the very concept of miracles as incoherent. Indeed David Hume⁹ is often interpreted as arguing for just this conclusion. On this reading – influentially advocated by Antony Flew in his introduction to Hume's *Of Miracles* – Hume defines a miracle as "a violation of a law of nature" and then shows us that laws of nature cannot be violated because this would involve them having exceptions. Laws of nature, then, are exceptionless regularities, and evidence of an exception to a law of nature would be evidence that we were mistaken in our initial formulation of the law of nature. Therefore, it would be impossible to find evidence of the existence of miracles; indeed the very concept of 'miracle' is understood by Flew's Hume to be incoherent.

We argue, following Clarke,¹⁰ that there is an important distinction to be drawn between a violation and a mere exception to a law of nature. A violation is the interference in an otherwise law-governed nature by a supernatural agent, such as God. Laws of nature govern the behavior of the natural realm when it is not interfered with by supernatural agents. A

natural exception to a law of nature would indeed be incoherent, but a supernatural violation of a law of nature is perfectly coherent. We do not want to insist that every miracle necessarily involves a violation of the laws of nature – perhaps there are aspects of the natural world that are un-governed by laws of nature and God might intervene in these without violating any laws. However, we do want to insist that in all miracle reports which might be rational for us to accept, there must be evidence of violations of natural laws. Without a violation of a well-established law of nature, we have no good reason to believe that the event is unnatural. It seems generally true that many of us are unfamiliar with the range of possible ways in which natural objects may behave. In cases where we have established laws of nature we have *prima facie* grounds for believing that an object that behaves in ways that are discordant with relevant laws of nature has behaved unnaturally. In cases where we only have a partial understanding of the range of the behaviors of natural objects, we are in no position to rule out naturalistic explanations, and so we are also in no position to rule in explanatory appeals to the supernatural.

To appeal to the miraculous is also to explain the occurrence of an event by appeal to supernatural intervention in the natural world. Before we accept any given instances of this form of explanation, we need to consider our alternatives. One option is provided by possible rival explanations that only appeal to natural factors. Another is proved by demonstrating that apparently unnatural phenomena are, despite appearances, natural. A third alternative is to simply withhold judgment. We can concede that we do not currently know how to explain the occurrence of a particular event: appeal to the supernatural may be the best currently available explanatory alternative, but we may nevertheless decide to withhold judgment because we have some reason to believe that new evidence may come in that provides a basis for a natural rather than a supernatural explanation. A final alternative is to deny that the alleged event actually occurred. Rather than seek to explain how it is possible that an event may have taken place we look for an explanation as to why a particular person or persons is claiming that it has taken place.

It is not rational to accept that a miracle has occurred when even one of the above four explanatory alternatives is viable. This is because it is reasonable to believe that instances where it is appropriate to employ one of the alternatives are much more common than instances where appealing to the miraculous is appropriate. Explanations that petition only to natural factors are very common; instances when apparently unnatural phenomena turn out to be natural are not uncommon; instances where new evidence becomes available that enables us to provide a naturalistic explanation of an event that appeared supernatural are not uncommon; and instances where people allege events to have occurred that have not occurred are depressingly common.

Even when we have identified an apparent exception to a law of nature – an anomaly – we may have not done enough

to establish that the prospects for naturalistic explanation have been exhausted. Some apparent exceptions to reliable law-like generalizations can be explained by appealing to the activity of other natural factors that interfere with the way in which natural phenomena would otherwise behave. It is a law that all objects on the Earth's surface are gravitationally attracted to the Earth, and indeed most objects fall to the ground when dropped. However, helium balloons do not fall to the ground when dropped, and neither do pigeons. These anomalies are not exceptions to our law; rather, they are explained by appeal to what philosophers call *ceteris paribus* clauses. We are entitled to appeal to implicit *ceteris paribus* clauses in the formulation of laws, such as the law of gravity, precisely because we are able to provide convincing reasons to explain away apparent exceptions. We can explain why it is reasonable to believe that the force of gravity really operates on helium balloons and birds, but does not, nevertheless, cause them to fall to the ground. Other apparent exceptions to laws of nature can be dealt with by revising our laws of nature or by accepting that we do not, after all, have knowledge of laws of nature that are relevant to the behavior of the object in question.

As we have already argued, epistemic humility is generally a better option than acceptance of the occurrence of supernatural intervention in the natural world. There is much that we do not know about the behavior of objects in the natural world and mostly it is better to admit ignorance and accept that law-like generalizations sometimes turn out not to be genuine laws. Mostly this is a more sensible option to take than the drastic alternative that nature has been supernaturally violated. However, this will not always be the case. Giving up very well-established laws of nature involves giving up a lot of explanatory power. If we manage to establish a genuine exception to the law of gravity with no prospect of explaining by legitimate appeal to a *ceteris paribus* clause then we better seriously consider appealing to supernatural violation of the natural realm. Many scientific explanations involve the assumption that the law of gravity holds, and it seems foolhardy to give up all of these explanations rather than accept that a miracle has occurred.

In line with the above discussion, Clarke¹⁰ has considered the rational acceptability of miracles and considers that it is reasonable to accept that a miracle has occurred when the following five conditions are met:

1. We are confronted with repeated, reliable reports of a type of event which is an anomaly to a well-established law of nature.
2. The relation between the law and the anomaly is such that we are unable to rationally justify allowing the exception as a *ceteris paribus* clause to the law, and we have no realistic expectation of being able to do so in the foreseeable future.
3. Accepting that the anomaly is a supernaturally caused violation of the well-established law of nature, a mir-

acle does allow us to explain its occurrence by placing it within a theological framework.

4. Explaining the anomaly as miraculous allows us to retain the well-established law as an exceptionless regularity, when appropriately restricted to the description of naturally caused events.
5. The theology we commit ourselves to when postulating the occurrence of miracles does not itself raise too many further problems for the coherence of our stock of accepted beliefs to warrant its rejection.

It is possible to provide sufficient evidence to support the claim that a miracle has occurred and it is possible, on the basis of such evidence, to ground the claim that it is *prima facie* plausible to think that a relevantly similar miracle may occur in the future. But as we have seen, the evidential standards that we require here are demanding. We are not aware of any rationally-grounded request to wait for a miracle which has ever occurred.

Conclusion

Our concern is to navigate a path between discrimination in favor of those who hold religious beliefs and unfair dismissal of religiously based beliefs. Our approach has been to argue that the expenditure of additional resources might be justified in cases where it can be shown that particular believers have a faith-based theological justification for the belief that miracles are at least somewhat likely and have a coherent justification for the claim that keeping a person alive on life support is a way to increase the likelihood of a miracle occurring. It can also be justified, in cases where a *prima facie* case can be made for the rational plausibility of the claim, that there is evidence that a particular miracle has a not insignificant chance of occurring on the basis of a rationally based case for the occurrence of past miracles. We do not think that either of these forms of justification will support many attempts to justify the use of public resources to keep patients on life support while waiting for a

miracle, even if they succeed in supporting a few. To grant special access to public resources to those who are waiting for a miracle would be unfair discrimination in favor of miracle-believers.

We anticipate that some will hold that we have not shown genuine respect for religious belief. Our view of respecting others is, in the tradition of Kant, closely tied to respecting their normative reasons and their rational nature. Genuine reasons must be capable of rational defense. So we do think that we are showing respect to others by asking for an articulation of their reasoning. In any case, if we are to authorize the expenditure of additional resources in circumstances in which an articulated justification is not provided, we would be opening the door to many similar claims, as there are few constraints on an “unjustified religious belief.” So we would be indulging in rampant discrimination against atheists and agnostics – miraculism – which is unacceptable.

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■ *The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet.*

—Aristotle