

MIRACLES? A HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE

Two different kinds of events are sometimes described as **miracles**: firstly, events that are **unlikely coincidences**, and secondly, events that **break the laws of nature**. Examples of the first kind include someone recovering from a serious illness or surviving a life-threatening event. Examples of the second kind might include a human being walking on water, or a dead person returning to life. Some people believe that these events provide evidence that there is a god who interferes in the natural world. However, others think all such events have a natural explanation.

HAPPY COINCIDENCES

In the case of unlikely but happy coincidences, many people think that they are just that: **coincidences**. Given the enormous number of events that happen every day, we should not be surprised that unlikely events sometimes naturally occur. Indeed, we might suspect there were higher forces at play if there were never any unusual events. When does an ordinary coincidence become a 'miracle'? There doesn't appear to be anything that makes a 'miracle' any different from those unlikely coincidences that regularly occur naturally.

In cases where people recover from a serious illness or escape the consequences of natural disasters, some people can be quick to thank a god for such an outcome. However, an atheist might ask why this god did not prevent the disease or disaster from happening in the first place. Is that god also responsible for the deaths of others who were not so lucky? Gods are often used to explain happy coincidences, but they are rarely mentioned in connection with unhappy coincidences. Because of these difficult questions, there are also many religious people who don't believe in miracles.

Credit: NASA



CARL SAGAN,
Astronomer

'Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.'

BREAKING THE LAWS OF NATURE

When it comes to those miracles that apparently break the laws of nature, many people believe that they either have a natural explanation, or they simply didn't happen.

When presented with 'miracles' from the past, many people would typically say the most likely explanation is that they didn't take place. They are most likely stories rather than true events. The evidence (if there is any) is often unreliable. Even today, people can often be mistaken in what they think they saw or heard. Miracles very rarely seem to happen in situations where they can be properly investigated. Many unusual events that were difficult to explain in the past can today be explained by science, and for those things we can't fully explain, many people believe we should continue to look for natural explanations.

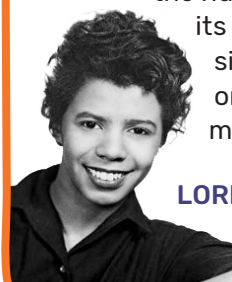


QUESTIONS:

- Are there any unusual events that can't be explained as a coincidence?
- How much evidence would be needed for a miracle to conclude that the laws of nature had been broken?



'I don't believe in God. I don't even think about it. It's just that I get so tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no God! There is only Man, and it's he who makes miracles!'

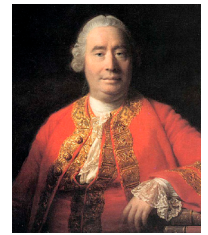


LORRAINE HANSBERRY,
playwright (1930-1965)



The philosopher David Hume argued that we should always examine the **evidence** for any 'miracle' and weigh up the different possible explanations. Hume believed we should always ask whether it is more likely that the normally secure laws of nature broke down for a moment or that something else happened. Perhaps, for example, we were mistaken about what we saw or heard (we can be more susceptible to error when it is something we want to believe). Or perhaps someone is tricking us or lying to us. Hume would say that both these explanations are more likely than that the laws of nature broke down, so it is rational to conclude that we are mistaken or are being deceived.

'When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately [wonder] whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact ... should really have happened.'



DAVID HUME, philosopher (1711 – 1776)

Many people believe Hume's logic applies today to claims about faith healing, alternative medicines, UFO sightings, and the supernatural. Today, money can be made from such claims – this, they believe, should make us wary.

'MIRACLE?'

POSSIBLE HUMANIST RESPONSES

Whilst most people die in a plane crash, a few survive.

There are accidents involving bikes, cars, boats, and planes every day. It would be surprising if nobody ever survived. Surviving a plane crash is unlikely, but it is not impossible. One could ask, why did god not save the rest of the people? Should we also ask whether god was responsible for the plane crash in the first place?

A statue of the Virgin Mary weeps.

Many examples of such a 'miracle' have been revealed to be hoaxes. There are also scientific explanations: water builds up in the porous clay of the statue and oozes out of tiny flaws in the glaze. Why would a benevolent god make a statue weep but let thousands of people die from natural disasters and disease?

A parachute fails but the parachutist lands in a tree and survives.

This is an unlikely, but not impossible, event. Given how many different things happen around the world in a day, it is likely that some of them will be unlikely events.

Someone walks barefoot over hot coals.

This has been explained by science. The embers are not good conductors of heat, and the feet are not in contact with the ground long enough to burn. Sweat produced on the base of people's feet can also produce a protective water vapour.

Someone says a prayer for somebody who is ill and they get better.

There is no evidence that the prayer caused the person to get better. People sometimes recover even when doctors say they won't, and sometimes we can't explain why. However, we should always look for natural explanations. There were many things we could not explain in the past, but now can. Therefore, the fact that we don't have a natural explanation now does not mean we won't in the future.

Someone turns water into wine.

It didn't happen. This 'miracle' may be a story from a long time ago so we should be sceptical. If you think you saw this happen today, then it was probably a trick. We should ask whether it is more likely that the normally secure laws of nature broke down, or if we are simply mistaken about what we think happened.

Someone claims somebody was raised from the dead.

This is only a claim. For such a claim, which contradicts everything we know about human beings, we should ask for powerful evidence. We should ask whether it is more likely that the normally secure laws of nature broke down, or if those making the claim are mistaken.