

What do we mean by ‘miracle’?

DEFINITIONS OF ‘MIRACLE’

There are different ways to define what a miracle is. Three important definitions are:

1. an event that has religious significance;
2. an event caused by God; and
3. an event that violates (or is otherwise not in accordance with) the laws of nature, caused by God.

The appeal of the first definition is that people talk of events as miracles even when the event isn’t outside the laws of nature. This is the sense of miracle as a ‘sign’ discussed above, without any further commitment to the sign being extraordinary. It allows an element of subjectivity or interpretation, on whether an event has ‘religious significance’ or not. However, some religions specify the idea of religious significance further. For instance, in Christianity, miracles are connected to the events reported in scripture, such as healing. Therefore, not any event can be said to have religious significance. Nevertheless, the event may only have religious significance for religious believers, and then only those of a particular religion.

The second definition rules out subjective interpretation, as miracles are only those events that are in fact caused by God. The theologian Paul Tillich points out that this view fits smoothly into a pre-rationalist understanding of the world. Until people formulated scientific laws of nature, and believed everything happens in accordance with them, there can be no way of thinking of miracles as violations of such laws (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. I). Instead, miracles are events directly connected with the divine.

However, as it stands, the definition says that every act of God is a miracle, e.g. God’s continuous creation in sustaining the existence of the universe or all genuine religious experience. Tillich is more specific – a miracle must also be an astonishing, shaking event, but also that points to the ‘mystery of being’. Miracles are given only to those for whom they are signs, and are received in faith.

The third definition has been most common with philosophers. Aquinas says a miracle is ‘beyond the order commonly observed in nature’, while Hume talks of it as a ‘transgression’ or ‘violation’ of a law of nature. It is also clear from many miracle stories that, even if they are described only as signs, if events unfolded just as described, then something that violated the laws of nature must have taken place.

The third definition allows for greater objectivity. Whether an event violates the laws of nature may secure more agreement than whether it is of religious significance; and it is very hard to show that some event is genuinely an act of God. But for this reason, we should also add that a miracle should be a public event.

MIRACLES AND THE LAWS OF NATURE

It can seem merely technical, but if we adopt the third definition, it is important to be very precise about the relation between miracles and the laws of nature. If we say a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, we risk defining miracles out of existence. Here's how: a statement is only a law of nature if it is true, general (or universal), and contingent. (It must be general to be a law, and it must be contingent to be a law of nature rather than a law of logic – 'all bachelors are unmarried' is true and general, but not a law of nature!). However, the occurrence of a natural event that violates the law makes the statement either not true or not general. But if it is not true or not general, it is not a law. Any statement that is a law of nature cannot be violated while remaining a law. Therefore, by definition, there can be no violations of a law of nature; if a miracle is a violation of a law of nature, then a miracle is a contradiction in terms. But this is wrong. Miracles are not logically impossible.

So how are miracles related to laws of nature?

1. A miracle is a violation of known laws of nature. Objection: If the miracle occurs, then it would be wrong to call what we believe to be laws of nature laws. Instead, we should say
2. A miracle is a violation of what we believe the laws of nature to be. Objection: This means that whether an event is a miracle depends on what we believe. Suppose God causes an event, which is in accordance with the real laws of nature: if we know these laws, it isn't a miracle, but if we don't know these laws, it is. This isn't right. It also implies that miracles are not exceptions to the real laws of nature.
3. A miracle is an event that is outside or not in accordance with the laws of nature. This definition preserves both the idea that miracles are somehow 'at odds' with the laws of nature, and the idea that they are still laws.

One argument for (3) is this: the laws of nature only apply to natural events. If an event is caused by God, it is not a natural event. So the event doesn't violate the laws of nature, it just falls outside them. (You aren't breaking the US speed limit of 55 mph if you drive at 60 mph on the motorway in England.) Because it is outside the laws of nature, a miracle is physically impossible. But that doesn't mean it is logically impossible.

Non-repeatable exceptions

Richard Swinburne defends a fourth definition. He argues that the 'generality' of a 'law of nature' is not absolute; the law describes what happens in terms of regularity and predictability. A miracle, therefore, is not logically incompatible with a law of nature as a counter-instance to it. So if an event 'violates' a law of nature, we should not conclude that the law is not genuine unless we think that the counter-instance could or would recur under similar conditions. To formulate or revise laws of nature, science needs to be able to test and repeat events. If we think the miracle is 'one-off', then we shouldn't revise the law – it remains a good and accurate predictive tool.

So Swinburne argues, we shouldn't say (3) miracles aren't natural events, because then they aren't genuine exceptions to the laws of nature. They are natural events because they happen within the natural universe to natural objects. So we should say miracles are genuine, non-repeatable exceptions to the laws of nature.

However, some philosophers reject Swinburne's notion of 'laws'. They argue that the laws of nature are not just descriptions of what normally happens, but define the limits

of what is physically possible. On Swinburne's account, miracles aren't physically impossible, strictly speaking; they just fall outside the usual and regular pattern of events.

A second objection to Swinburne's analysis is that while we may not be able to repeat the miracle, we might think that if God acted in the same way again, then the miracle would happen again. For example, could the many cures of diseases count as 'repeatable' events from the perspective of God's activity? If so, then miracles aren't non-repeatable events. It's just that we can't repeat them.