Apologetics PODCAST SERIES

Miracles in general

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# Introduction

* Fr Ian Andrew Palko, ordained in 2017 in Dillwyn, VA, but assigned as a priest in New Zealand since then.
  + I taught at St Dominic’s College in Whanganui (North Island), New Zealand for 5 ½ years Scripture, Apologetics, Catholic Morality, and Doctrine, as well as serving as the Dean and Principal of the College, though slated to come back to the US District by the time this podcast is scheduled to air.
  + In addition to the graduate studies at the SSPX’s St Thomas Aquinas Seminary, I’ve studied at Georgetown University, University of Kansas, and Bethlehem Tertiary Institute in New Zealand and have a degree in Chemical Engineering and a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education.
  + Fr Robinson indicated that since I had taught Apoligetics, but also due to my background in education and natural sciences, he thought I should tackle the question of miracles.

# Science and Miracles

* First point to address, why someone versed in science is tackling the question of miracles? Aren’t miracles where God suspends or violates the laws of nature (i.e. physics, or chemistry, or biology) since He has power over all these things?
  + This is based on a false notion of miracles, which Rationalists and Skeptics, like David Hume and Immanel Kant held, but it is not the Catholic view, which is very much pro-science.
    - I can say, for myself, the fact that Natural Sciences and Reason support Catholic Theology, is one very strong argument for me as to why I profess the Catholic Faith. It’s all one Truth, and since God is God, there is no conflict.
    - This is why we can see already Hume and Kant, and this idea that miracles are violations of nature is a mistaken approach.

# Intro to Miracles

* So what are miracles?
  + Probably good to start by looking at erroneous ideas about miracles, then give a definition:

1. So, the first is this idea that a miracle is when God works against Nature. This idea is embraced by many Catholics and most Protestants, as well as many atheists or skeptics to reject the Gospel or other accounts of miracles.
2. The second false notion about miracles is that these are just extraordinary events which seem to have no natural explaination, but that’s just because were dumb. We’re not yet able to explain it, but, you know, it’s just a rare natural event or chance and with the progress of science we would understand it at some point. In other words, a miracle is just a name for when we cannot explain something, not actually a Divine work. Many protestants hold this idea, and so for them a miracle is not God working, but a symbol which is meant to remind us of the Divine. For atheists or agnostic skeptics, it is just a way of denying miracles exist at all.
3. Another false idea is the gnostic idea that a miracle is not a violation of nature, but just an effect of someone with special knowledge of hidden laws of nature secretly passed down to them. It looks like magic, but it is just that the miracle worker knows more about nature than us.
   * Okay, so if those are the false ideas of miracles, what is the correct notion, or the Catholic notion?
     + First let us consider the origin of the term “miracle”
       - It comes from the Latin *admiratio* (“admiration, wonder”) and *miror, mirare* (“to wonder, admire”)
       - Wonder arises when an effect is seen but the cause is not. *e.g.* stage magic is impressive because it causes wonder. We see the empty top hat hit by a wand, and then see the rabbit pulled from the hat, yet know that tapping a hat with a stick doesn’t spontaneously generate full-grown rabbits.
     + **Miracle [=]** **an effect perceptible to the senses and whose cause is beyond all created causes (i.e. all nature)**.
       - It is worth pointing out that “beyond” and “against” are different words.
       - Something can be beyond (or above, Latin *super*) nature, without being against it.
         * If you lend me $1000 to help buy a chalice on eBay, in Justice I owe you $1000.
         * If I do not pay you back, or only pay $500, I am sinning against Justice.
         * If I get a windfall from the lottery and thank you by giving $1500 back as a small gift, I have not only complied with Justice, but gone beyond Justice, but no one would say I have violated Justice by this.
       - Miracles do not violate the laws of nature, but change the course of nature without violating nature, but by going beyond nature.
       - Miracles are effects where the cause is beyond, but not against nature.
       - It could be said that in a miracle, God is not violating or changing nature, but He is causing an effect in accord with nature, without the normal processes of nature being required. He is changing the course of nature
         * If I hold a pen, I am not violating the law of gravity, rather I am acting in accord with gravity, but by introducing a normal force which counteracts the force of gravity. You see my hand, but, a hand is not necessary for God to generate the same kind of force, which would make the pen seem to float in the air.
       - Perhaps it should be said in passing that miracles are relatively rare, but this is not a quality of miracles. There is a miracle everytime the Blessed Sacrament is consecrated, so relative rarity is a feature, but not a property of a miracle. St Thomas Aquinas writes that “even if a blind man were to receive sight every day, it would still be a miracle.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**The Author of Miracles (Who Causes Miracles)**

* + We hear of “miracle workers” and often think a miracle is some effect produced by a person, Saint, or angel. This is especially the case with Protestants.
  + But, an effect which surpasses all created power necessarily must have God for its cause.
    - This is actually why miracles are such an important motive of credibility
    - They show that God is acting, and thus testify to His confirming a message, or the holiness of some person or their work.
    - No Creature can effect something beyond Nature, because every Creature, even an angel, exists within nature (the angelic nature is higher than the physical world, but still not on the same level as God who exists outside of His Creation). If we see a miracle which is above nature, God must be the cause.
    - If we are speaking strictly, a creature (such as a mud, spittle, or even a man) *cannot even be the instrument* by which a miracle is caused.
    - Loosely speaking, we can consider persons (like Our Lord, or the Apostles) or things (like Our Lord’s spittle, mud, or the ointment given to Tobias) as instruments, but these are not causing any miraculous effect, they are just the occasion for God to cause the effect.
    - Why then does God use these things?
      * They help us to understand that God does work through secondary causes, and that the world He created is Good,
      * They help show precisely what God is trying to confirm (e.g. the holiness of a person, or the truth of a message), when they relate to the thing.

# Kinds of miracles

Miracles could be divided in several ways, but the best way is by looking at how they surpass the power of nature. This is St Thomas Aquinas’ preferred division.[[2]](#footnote-2)

* + - 1. **The effect is completely beyond any created cause**

*Nature could never in any situation produce this effect.*

*Examples : Glorified Bodies, Christ walking through the wall/door into the Cenacle, the Eucharist (not the transubstantiation, but the fact that the appearances/accidents of bread & wine remain without the substance of bread & wine remaining, plus that every part is the whole Christ).*

* + - 1. **Nature can cause this effect, but not in this person/thing**

*Not beyond nature itself*

*Resurrection of a Dead Body — Nature can bring a fetus to life, but not dead bodies.*

*Restoration of a Sense — Nature gives senses to a child as it develops, but does not restore them to adults*

* + - 1. **Nature can cause this effect, in this person/thing, but not in this way**

*Instantaneous or very quick healing — Nature can heal, but not instantaneously or quickly.*

*Infused knowledge — We can learn all naturally knowable truth, but normally this takes a process using the senses and reasoning.*

**Absolute and Relative Miracles**

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| --- | --- |
| **Relative Miracles**  *Miracula quoad nos —*   * + The effect is not beyond the power of pure spirits   + These will only occur due to the express or permissive will of God | **Absolute Miracles**  *Miracula simpliciter —*   * + The effect is beyond the power of even pure created spirits   + Only God can produce this effect. |
| ***By the good angels***  Because the good angels never act outside of nature without God’s will, from an apologetical standpoint, these are equivalent to absolute miracles. They bear the same *signum divini* (sign of the divine power) | ***By the fallen angels***  To distinguish these, we commonly call them “prodigies”.  Though done only thanks to God’s permissive will they will not bear a *signum divini*, and often clearly are pointless or vain.  God will never permit a man of good will to fail to detect some error in the prodigies of a diabolical agent. |

# The purpose of miracles

Everything has a purpose, even if we do not understand it. So do miracles.

Miracles do not have a final cause, or purpose in nature. They have a supernatural purpose. Even if a miraculous healing helps someone in this life, it’s true purpose is more than just a few more years and an easier of earthly life for a person. It is to glorify God, and perhaps recognise the holiness of a Saint.

This purpose which is always about God’s glory and some supernatural purpose helps us to detect false miracles or “prodigies” done by the devils, or sleight-of-hand or stage magic from real miracles. The purpose will always be supernatural. This can include

* + - Testifying to God’s Goodness or His anger at certain evils,
    - Recommending the practice of a virtue,
    - Manifesting the holiness of a saint,
    - Authenticate a message from God, or a messenger.

This also helps us understand the value of miracles in Apologetics. St Thomas Aquinas says that “in order to confirm those truths that exceed natural knowledge … [God] gives visible manifestations to works that surpass the ability of all nature. Thus there are wonderful cures of illnesses, there is the raising of the dead … and what is more wonderful, there is inspiration given to human minds, so that the simple and unlearned persons, filled with the gifts of the Holy Ghost, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom and the most prompt eloquence.”

In fact, as we hopefully will talk about later, St Thomas and St Augustine think that the best apologetic arguments from miracles come from moral miracles, rather than specific physical miracles.

# How to recognise miracles

In order to establish that a miracle has happened two things need to be established :

1. **The Historical Truth** — the effect actually occurred (e.g. that a man was cured).

*This is shown by the same method any historical fact is shown, and he we have historical accounts, eye-witness testimony, scientific study, etc.*

1. **The Philosophical Truth** — that the effect was caused directly by God (or an angel); not by some natural or diabolical cause.

*This is shown by exclusion : all reasonnably possible natural causes will be ruled out by using reason and science. Thus, for example, apparent medical miracles will be submitted to doctors.*

***Some important points:***

David Hume, and many skeptics and rationalists reject miracles because they say that we cannot trust eyewitnesses. While an eye-witness is not a guarantee that a miracle happened, certainly we would never reject the value of eye-witness testimony in other realms like history and court cases.

We should give the same value to an eye-witness testifying to an apparent miraculous effect as to a robbery. An eye-witness could be wrong about certain things due to emotion or inattention, but eyewitnesses provide reliable testimony when they have

1. Normal use of their senses
2. Sufficient attention (and an usually extraordinary event will usually provoke this)

They do not need to be an expert to testify to witnessing an effect happening. An expert might be needed to rule out natural causes for the effect.

Eyewitnesses provide trustworthy historical testimony: the value of such testimony does not decrease with time, because the eye-witness was at the event. We can trust Caesar on his report of the wars he fought in as much in the year 100 as now. So too with reports of miracles.

Some of their testimony will also help establish the philosophical truth of a miracle (exclude natural causes).

* + Man does not have a perfect knowledge of natural power, but many natural laws are known i.e. we do know many things that nature can and cannot do.
    - Storms cannot be silenced by a verbal command.
    - Saliva mixed with dirt cannot cure blindness.
    - No human being can lift one ton.
    - Nature cannot give life to a corpse.
    - We know when something will sink and when it will not.
  + If we see such things, we know that there must be some force beyond nature acting.
  + It would be enough to show that this effect could not be done with the technology available at that time, and often this is possible to establish with sufficient eye-witness testimony alone.

**OBJECTION :** In the past Christians were very gullible and easily accepted as miraculous events which can now be shown to have natural causes

**RESPONSE :**

* + - This may be true, and probably at least in some cases is, given our advancement in science which allows explainations of fantastic things through natural causes, but,
    - It does not follow that no miracle can be know with certitude.
    - If it is true that some cases were falsely considered miracles, this would only call particular claims into doubt, or maybe particular persons, not an entire group, nor allow us to reject the possibility of certitude of any miracle.
    - Nor, does it follow that every single miracle that has been claimed was insufficiently investigated before modern science.
      * For example, we have many historical sources which attacked Christianity in its infancy, Jewish and Pagan.
      * Very few reject that Christ’s miracles happened. When they mention them, the historical fact is admitted, only the philosophical truth called into question,
      * but then the attack on these being actual miracles often pre-supposes that Christ had some special knowledge of medicine that no one else had, or other unreasonable explainations.
    - In general, Christian miracle-workers tend not to be scientists or candidates for expert scientific knowledge beyond that of those who saw the miracles.
    - If these miracles were frauds, because the miracle-men had expert knoweldge centuries before others knew it, we are just substituting a miraculous knowledge for a miraculous event.
    - Many medical-technological-scientifc inventions have been used to investigate miraclous events, images, etc. and been unable to provide a natural explaination
      * E.g. the Shroud of Turin cannot be reproduced by any artistic process known today, let alone the technology of the middle ages (when skeptics claim it was made).

Excluding Diabolical Causes.

* Devils can do nothing without divine permission and God would not let honest men be inevitably deceived.
  + Therefore: something will always give the devil away if event is carefully examined.
  + Context is very important! *n.b. Devils have more power in pagan lands!*
  + The triviality of the work performed.
  + The character of the human accomplice: dishonest, proud, selfish, unbalanced.
  + If the doctrine endorsed is absurd, evil, or contradicts a previous, certain revelation.
  + Goal of the prodigy: to fuel curiosity (empty display), to breakdown morals, to nourish pride or disobedience.
  + Circumstances: if anything obscene, shameful, cruel
  + If a credible divine messenger warned about it in advance.

*Relevant Truth – Is there a connection between the miracle and some purpose (the ones already mentioned)? What is the relevance of the miracle (the “so what”)?*

* Usually a simple question because the miracle worker appeals to the miracle as proof of his divine mission.
* The only real complication is this…Would God ever allow an evil person or a non-Catholic to work a miracle?
  + Yes, there may be circumstances when one of the four purposes give before could be fulfilled even if the miracle worker were not a good Catholic.
  + To authenticate Catholicism.[[3]](#footnote-3)
  + To manifest the holiness of someone: not miracle worker but the saint invoked.[[4]](#footnote-4)
  + To glorify the name of Christ in Whose name the miracle was done e.g. Protestant missionaries in Africa.
* But note that this person would never be the first herald of the message i.e. the founder of the religion!
* Discerning the relevance is key!
* Note that the historical and philosophical truth are enough to prove that there was a true miracle, but the relevant truth is necessary to give the miracle some apologetical value.

**Moral Miracles**

A moral miracle is **an action or series of actions, perceptible to the senses which are so difficult to exist or occur in this manner, that man’s power alone is not able to produce these.**

*e.g. The eminent Holiness of Christ, the rapid spread of Christianity, the endurance of the martyrs, etc.*

* + These are more difficult to describe and observe, because there is no physical law which seems to prevent these things.
    - They are not seen as outside normal physical laws or the course of nature,
    - They are seen as outside the normal “laws” of human behaviour or experience.
  + Moral Miracles include two types :

1. A perfection of an action (e.g. the holiness of Christ),
2. The universality/breadth of the the effect out of proportion to the cause (e.g. the rapid spread of Christianity)
   * + In the case of the latter, we usually need a “large sample size” to see this (e.g. the endurance of the martyrs was not limited to one person, but thousands of people from many different backgrounds and cultures, and through many times in the history of the Church).

# some considerations & objections about miracles

**Miracles are possible because secondary causes are not necessary.**

* Once God created the universe, secondary causes are necessary (once you exist, chemical reactions are necessary), but,
* No creature had to exist in the first place, and so the only necessary cause is the First Cause or God.
* The universe does not add anything to God.
  + If God can produce an effect using secondary causes, He could do so without secondary causes (because secondary causes are not necessary, and in creating He gave the power to cause this effect to the secondary cause).
  + If God can produce an effect without secondary causes, He can produce an effect which is beyond the power of secondary causes.
  + If God created secondary causes, He can interviene and restrain a secondary cause from acting in a way it would normally act, without violating the nature of that cause, or Natural Law.

**OBJECTION:** Miracles are abusrd because the laws of nature are immutable.

**RESPONSE :** We have to distinguish between the *laws of nature* and the *course of nature*

* + Everything operates according to its nature (*Agere sequitur esse*) and follows the *laws of nature*, but sometimes a secondary causes can interviene to prevent the natural effect and interrupt the *course of nature*
    - A man jumps off a cliff, but a harness and rope prevent him from falling to the ground. The rope (a secondary cause) interveined to prevent gravity’s effect, but this does not violate the nature of anything in this system, nor has it changed any natural law.

**OBJECTION :** Miracles are exceptions to the natural order, so if God can produce miracles, then He can make exceptions to the natural order and natural law.

**RESPONSE :** First we have to define Natural Law or a law of nature. ***A law of nature is a kind of relationship between creatures based on their natures*.**

* + In a miracle God does not make an exception to a **law** of nature, but interveines at the level of secondary causes to alter the **course** of nature.
    - In the man jumping example. Gravity causes massive things to be attracted to other massive things. The man’s body is attracted to the centre of mass of the Earth and would fall towards this, unless there is something holding the man up with an equal force. God interveines to hold the man up with an equal force. The law of gravity remains, but there is now an equal force upward.
  + The moral law is also a relationship between creatures according to their natures, but if God does not change the nature of creatures in miracles, so neither would he change the moral law. (Tease future podcast on morality)

**OBJECTION 3 :** Miracles contradict God’s wisdom and immutability

**RESPONSE :**

* + God’s Immutability
    - God saw and chose to do all that He did and would do from eternity (He is outside of time), and so does not move from possibility to actuality (from able to do to doing).
    - God’s acts are not sequentrial or separate. God’s will is a single act which has effects in time. It only appears to us in time so it seems sequential to us.
    - God would “change” only if He commanded a contradictory thing.
  + God’s Wisdom : His intervention is never for natural reasons, but supernatural.

1. St Thomas Aquinas, *II Sent.*, d.18, q.1, a.3, ad 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 105, a. 8) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name and cast out devils in Thy name and worked many miracles in Thy name…Depart from Me, you that work iniquity.” (Matt 7.22–23)  
   “If I should have prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I should have faith so that I could move mountains and have not charity, I am nothing.” (1 Cor 13.2) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “And God wrought by the hand of Paul more than common miracles so that there were even brought from his body to the sick, handkerchiefs and aprons, and the diseases departed from them and the wicked spirits went out from them.” (Acts 19.11–12) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)