

Believing in Miracles

Could one ever reasonably believe of some event that that event happened miraculously?

I. The concept of a miracle

A miracle is an event that occurs contrary to natural law.

As such, an event that happens miraculously cannot be explained by citing a law of nature.

Caused or uncaused?

According to the principle of sufficient reason, for anything that happens, there is some reason why it happened. Miracles have no natural cause and, thus, if the principle of sufficient reason is true, each miracle has a supernatural cause. A miracle, then, expresses the attitudes or intentions of a supernatural being. A correct interpretation of a miracle reveals the attitudes or intentions of the supernatural being responsible for it.

On the other hand, if the principle of sufficient reason is false, any miracle might be an entirely uncaused event (an event caused neither by something within nature nor by something outside of nature).

II. The possibility of miracles

The concept of a miracle is the concept of an event that occurs contrary to natural law. There is no inconsistency within the concept of a miracle. Thus, miracles might well occur.

III. A best-case scenario

Imagine the following:

- A light on a wall has flashed on and off every second for an hour, then it remains on for a full second, then it resumes flashing on and off every second.
- The light's flashing is regulated by the most accurate and dependable switch in existence and is powered by the most dependable generator in existence.
- The current from the generator passes through three excellent surge protectors before reaching the light.
- Engineers who disassemble and examine the light, the wires, the switch, each surge protector, and the generator can find nothing that would account for the light's remaining on a full second.

- You have been trained in the art of careful observation, you were paying close attention to the flashing light, and you saw the light remain on for a full second and then resume flashing. A video-tape recording of the light supports your testimony.
- You are one of the crack engineers who attempted to find something that would account for the light's remaining on. You are satisfied that your investigation was thorough, complete, and unsuccessful.
- You were the one who set up the video camera the tape from which bears out your observation that once and only once the light remained on for a full second. You examined the tape and the camera and found nothing that would suggest that the tape misrecorded what happened.

If anyone has ever been reasonable in believing that a miracle occurred, you are reasonable in believing that a miracle occurred!

IV. The two sources of explanatory belief

A belief about the cause of something we experienced can have one or the other of two sources:

- 1) It can rest on the innate or acquired habit of associating events of one sort with events of another sort.

Simon associates events of type A with events of type B, such that he will expect an event of type B to occur should he witness an event of type A, and such that he will suppose that it is possible an event of type A occurred should he witness an event of type B.

Simon witnesses an event of type B. He believes that an event of type A could have occurred and that no event of another type sufficient for an event of type B occurred. Simon forms the belief that an event of type A occurred, and that the event he witnessed occurred because an event of type A occurred.

- 2) It can rest on a desire that things be some way or on a preference that they be one way rather than some other way.

Simon would like that Mary is fond of him. Simon believes it is possible that Mary did what she did out of fondness for him. Simon forms the belief that Mary did what she did out of fondness for him.

(Sometimes explanatory beliefs rest on the fear that it would be too awful for something to have happened in some way.)

V. Explanatory beliefs held reasonably

1. An explanatory belief sustained by a habit of association is more likely to be true than is an explanatory belief sustained by a desire or preference or fear.

Thus: 2. Explanatory beliefs held on habits of association are beliefs held reasonably, while explanatory beliefs held on desires or preferences (or fears) are held unreasonably.

VI. You cannot reasonably believe that the light remained on miraculously

1. Your belief that the light remained on miraculously is sustained either by some associations you make among events of different types or it is sustained by some affective or conative attitude you have.

2. If it is sustained by your habits of association, it might be reasonable for you to hold it, while if it is sustained by an affective or conative attitude, it is not reasonable for you to hold it.

3. You could have had no range of experiences such as to produce in you the habit of associating events of one type with no other events.

Thus (from 3.): 4. Your belief that the light remained on miraculously is not sustained (could not be sustained) by a habit of association you have formed in experience.

Thus (from 4 and 1): 5. Your belief that the light remained on miraculously is sustained (must be sustained) by an affective or conative attitude you have.

Therefore (from 5 and 2): 6. It is not reasonable for you to believe that the light remained on miraculously.

VII. You cannot reasonably believe that there was some natural cause of the light's remaining on, either

1. You have looked hard in all the right places for the cause of the light's remaining on, and you have not found it.

2. There is nothing incoherent in the idea that the light's remaining on had no (natural) cause.

Thus (from 1 and 2): 3. To believe that the light's remaining on had a (natural) cause is to be dogmatic.

Therefore (from 3): 4. You are unreasonable in believing that the light's remaining on had a (natural) cause.

The only reasonable thing to believe in the situation is that the light's remaining on might have had a (natural) cause that has so far gone undetected or that it might have been miraculous.

VIII. Questions

i) What about inference to the best explanation? Might it not be reasonable to believe that something occurred miraculously when that belief is sustained by the thought that holding its occurrence to be without (natural) cause would best explain all the facts?

ii) What about observation? Can we not, at least in an ideal case, simply see that nothing that happened before some event was the cause of that event?

iii) What about the idea that all events in the world have sufficient causes also within the world? If they do, then it is not dogmatic to hold that the light's remaining on had a (natural) cause, though we might never know what it is. It is not dogmatic, for we have prior reason to believe that it must have had a (natural) cause.

iv) Are not habits of association themselves just as much beyond the purview of reason as are desires and emotions? If they are, then all our beliefs rest on what, from the point of view of reason, are arbitrary features of our psychologies.

v) Why care to be reasonable when being reasonable hurts? Why not believe in miracles when doing so satisfies your desires or warms your heart?