

The way in which one
philosopher
understands the term
miracle essay



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Thomas Aquinas understood miracles to be ' those things done by divine power apart from the order usually followed in things'. So in other words those things that God did, that nature cannot do, this is the most traditional approach to defining a miracle. It is effectively a breach of a law of nature, contradicting our regular experience of how the world works.

Aquinas gave the example of a reversal in the course of the sun; this is the first type of miracle put forward by Aquinas. Apart from this conventional approach to defining a miracle, Aquinas put forward two other additional types of miracles; Acts that God did, that nature could do but not in the same order. For instance, recovering from a terminal illness, it's not logically impossible for this type of miracle to happen; they are just not usually expected. Nature can bring about a natural remission or recovery, but we would not expect this to happen (would you expect someone to recover from the latter stages of cancer overnight?) and do if it does happen it may be attributed to the acts of God. And finally Aquinas' third type of miracle; acts done by God that nature could do, but God did it without using the forces of nature.

For instance, recovering from a cold or flue, we would expect this to happen naturally but if it happened quicker than usual we may call it miraculous. Aquinas allowed for a range of possible events that we could call miracles but he didn't limit them to simple violations of a natural law. A miracle according to Aquinas is primarily identified by Gods intervention; it is an act of God, which has beneficial consequences for the recipient and that may include breaking a natural law but does not necessarily have to do so.

Consider the arguments which may be used to discredit beliefs in miracles and the way in which belief in miracles might nevertheless be strong.

One of the key arguments in discrediting miracles is down to the fact that the definition is too broad. Probably one of the best known definitions of a miracle is by David Hume who defined a miracle as; ' A transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent.' David Hume doesn't say miracles don't happen, but, as an empiricist he questions the amount and integrity of the evidence, he tries to demonstrate that no one could prove with certainty that a miracle had occurred. He argued that a miraculous event had never been proven to be true because, no miracle has had a sufficient number of witnesses of reliable character to confirm it as true, e. g. people with a good, non-bias reputation, however, many regard Hume's criteria for testimony to be too harsh, if applied consistently to past historical events, everything in history may be false testimony! He also forgets to mention what would be sufficient testimony? Hume also says the laws of nature are so firmly established that it would take an almost infallible claim to confirm such testimony, though, this is self defeating; Hume's own definition claims that miracles are the transgression of the laws of nature.

He goes onto say in his book (Enquiry concerning human understanding (1778) that different religious claims cancel one another out, since all claims cannot be true we should assume that none are, for instance if a miracle in Islam discredits Christianity as a true religion, then equally any claim of a Christian miracle will likewise discredit Islam making them both null and void, undermining the evidence. This argument that miracles have a <https://assignbuster.com/the-way-in-which-one-philosopher-understands-the-term-miracle-essay/>

self-cancelling nature has again been questioned; there seems little reason to think different religious accounts cancel each other out. At least one could be true, and some miracle accounts are shared across religious traditions. Hume also went onto say that, nations that claim the miraculous are barbaric and backward, nonetheless, nearly every society, even developed, modern nations claim miracles have happened.

For instance, in the USA Helen Keller, the deafblind woman who claimed her recovery to be miraculous. Even so, many still see miracles as mere coincidences; as very unlikely events that can be seen as signs and interpreted religiously as a miracle, but which ultimately fall within the laws of nature, the idea of coincidence suggests that we cannot label something a miracle even if there is the slightest chance that it can occur without God. Ray Holland, on the other hand presents a completely different point of view on defining miracles with the 'coincidence' theory in mind. He said that coincidental occurrences might still be thought of as being 'miracles', he uses the example of the boy on the train track.

He refers to this as a 'contingency miracle' in that there is religious significance in form of an invisible agent, so God intervenes. However, this acceptance that God can intervene and doesn't also raise's questions about the problem of evil, if God is omnipotent then why are there so few miracles? Why doesn't God make more use of miracles by helping people who are suffering if he's all loving? Where were the miracles in Auschwitz? Why doesn't a God who seemingly intervenes to heal an individual watch as millions die? According to Maurice Wiles miracles cannot happen on moral

grounds. If God can alter the laws of nature, then why not save all those lost in disasters'..

. yet even so it would seem strange that no miraculous intervention prevented Auschwitz or Hiroshima...' according to Wiles a God who acts in such a way is not worth of worship.

However, others have rejected this argument saying that God has reasons for acting the way he does; people might say God allowed Auschwitz so we could learn from it, for our own benefit. Pointless miracles also to an extent discredit beliefs in miracles. As Swinburne claimed, without an apparent aim or purpose it is hard to credit 'miraculous' happenings with being an act of God. He used the example of a feather '...

land here rather than there...' this seems to have no deeper religious significance, and so Swinburne went onto say a miracle must have an ultimate purpose and we should be able to see religious significance.

Hence in conclusion, the belief in miracles is ultimately up to the believer, miracles are always going to be incoherent for atheists as for them God does not exist so they will automatically look to a different premise. At the end of the day nothing about miracles is incoherent if you believe that God exists and has all the powers described in classical theism. On occasion it is perfectly reasonable that he might break the epistemic distance, so despite arguments against miracles, belief in miracles is nevertheless strong.