

Miracles - Lesson Three Are Miracles Irrational?

1. As the arguments against miracles proceed, it becomes obvious that the matter is not simply a factual one; it is a philosophical one.
 1. In the final analysis it is not simply a matter of thought, but of choice.
 2. The choice has been expressed in "scientific" terms by British atheist Anthony Flew.
 1. Flew has been a lecturer in three major British universities, including Oxford.
 2. As a contemporary philosopher of the analytical school, Flew is well known in the philosophical world for his works in philosophical theology.
 3. He has authored and edited numerous books and articles in scholarly journals and has been especially recognized for his arguments against miracles.
 4. Flew debated Thomas Warren in 1976 on the issue of the existence of God. Much of brother Warren's argument was based on the marvelous design of the human body and its implication for a Designer. Anthony Flew has reportedly now embraced the concept of a designer but still balks at identifying the designer as God.
2. Flew's argument from unrepeatability.
 1. Flew argues against miracles on the grounds that they are unrepeatable.
 1. As Flew sees it, Hume's argument really amounts to something like this:
 1. Every miracle is a violation of the law of nature.
 2. The evidence against any violation of nature is the strongest possible evidence.
 3. Therefore, the evidence against miracles is the strongest possible evidence.
 2. Flew says that Hume was primarily concerned, not with the question of fact, but with the question of evidence.
 1. The problem was how the occurrence of a miracle could be proved, rather than whether any such events had ever occurred.
 2. However, Flew adds that our sole ground for characterizing the reported occurrence as miraculous is at the same time a sufficient reason for calling it physically impossible.
 3. He contended that this was so because "the critical historian, confronted with some story of a miracle, will usually dismiss it out of

hand."

3. On what grounds are miracles dismissed by the critical historian?
 1. "To justify his procedure he will have to appeal to precisely the principle which Hume advanced: the 'absolute impossibility or miraculous nature' of the events attested must, 'in the eyes of all reasonable people . . . alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation."
 2. In other words, even though miracles are not logically impossible, they are scientifically impossible, "For it is only and precisely by presuming that the laws that hold today held in the past . . . that we can rationally interpret the detritus [fragments] of the past as evidence and from it construct our account of what actually happened."
 3. As to the charge that this uniformitarian approach to history is "irrationally dogmatic," Flew answers with what is really the heart of his amplification of Hume's argument.
 1. First, "as Hume was insisting from first to last, the possibility of miracles is a matter of evidence and not of dogmatism."
 2. Further, "the proposition reporting the(alleged) occurrence of the miracle will be singular, particular, and in the past tense."
 3. Propositions of this sort "cannot any longer be tested directly. It is this that gives propositions of the first sort [i.e., of the general and repeatable] the vastly greater logical strength."
 4. Flew's argument can be stated thusly:
 1. Miracles are by nature particular and unrepeatable events.
 2. Scientific laws by nature describe general and repeatable events.
 3. In practice, the evidence for the general and repeatable is always greater than the evidence for the particular and unrepeatable events.
 4. Therefore, in practice, the evidence will always be greater against miracles than for them.
 5. He concludes from his argument that since the scientific or critical man will always base his beliefs on the greater evidence, the scientific or critical man will never believe in miracles. (This is a nice way of saying that if you believe in miracles you are unscientific and uncritical at best, and ignorant and superstitious at worst.)
3. An evaluation of Flew's argument.
 1. What is right with Flew's arguments.
 1. Miracles are particular and unrepeatable events; otherwise they would not be miracles.

2. Scientific laws, i.e. the laws of nature, describe general and repeatable events.
3. Properly understood, Christians should always base their conclusions on the greater evidence.
 1. This is what is meant by systematic consistency as a test for truth.
 2. The view that best explains the most evidence in a consistent and coherent fashion is held to be true; the opposing views are believed to be false.
2. What is wrong with Flew's arguments.
 1. Most modern naturalists, such as Flew, accept some irrepeatable singularities of their own.
 1. Many contemporary astronomers believe in the origin of the universe by a "Big Bang."
 2. Nearly all scientists believe that the origin of life on this planet is a singular event that has never been repeated here.
 3. But if Flew's arguments against miracles are correct, then it is also wrong for scientists to believe in these singularities that many of them consider to be natural events.
 4. Thus, Flew's argument against supernaturalism would also eliminate some basic naturalistic beliefs.
 2. Flew's assumption that the repeatable always evidentially outweighs the unrepeatable is also objectionable.
 1. It begs the question (assumes as true that which we seek to prove) that the evidence for the repeatable and general is always greater than that for the particular and unrepeatable.
 2. If this were so, then we could not believe in the historicity of any unusual events from the past, none of which is repeatable.
 3. In fact, if we cannot believe that unrepeatable events occurred, then I am not here since my birth can never be repeated.
 4. Historical geology is unrepeatable in practice, as is the history of our planet.
 5. Hence, if Flew is right, geology is eliminated as a science, as well it should be since our planet does not exist.
 6. If naturalists push their arguments far enough to eliminate miracles, by implication they thereby eliminate the grounds for their own beliefs.
 7. If they qualify them so as to include all the natural and scientific data they wish,, then they reopen the door for miracles.

3. Flew's view is subject to his own criticism of theists, namely, it is an unfalsifiable position.
 1. For no matter what state of affairs occurs (even a resurrection), Flew (contrary even to Hume's claims) would be obliged to believe that it was not a miracle.
 2. For Flew argues that "it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding 'there wasn't a God after all.'"
 3. Put more simply, if believers will not allow any evidence count against their believe in God, then neither may they allow anything to count for it; in short, their belief is actually unfalsifiable.
 1. But in like manner we may ask Flew (rephrasing his own words), "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of . . . your antisupernaturalism?"
 1. Flew has addressed the question, but his answer is insufficient.
 1. Flew's answer is that no event in the world would falsify his naturalism, because in practice he believes the evidence is always greater against miracles than for them.
 2. He argues that the possibility of miracles is a matter of evidence and not simply of dogmatism, but that the evidence is always against miracles happening since by nature they are particular and unrepeatable.
 3. The evidence is always stronger for the general and repeatable, he says, because it can always be tested at any place at any time.
 4. A miracle, on the other hand, cannot be tested so easily.
 5. Further, he argues, that even if the evidence for an event contrary to the laws of nature did occur, "that event could now no longer be described as truly miraculous."
 6. This statement, which clearly establishes his invincible naturalistic bias, may be summarized as follows.
 1. Whatever happens in the natural world is a natural event.
 2. Once an alleged miracle occurs in the natural world it is a natural event.
 3. Hence, once an allege miracle occurs it is *ipso facto* a natural event.
 7. This argument reduces to "everything that happens *in the*

natural world is caused *by* the natural world.

8. This argument clearly begs the question, because if there are some events caused from *beyond* the world, they will nevertheless have to occur *in* the world in order for us to experience them.
9. This argument means that if convincing evidence were presented to the naturalist that Christ was raised from the dead, the naturalist would simply shrug his shoulders and say, "We now know that resurrections are not miraculous."
2. Nor does it help for Flew to claim that his antisupernaturalism is falsifiable in principle but never in practice, on the grounds that in practice the evidence will always be greater for the repeatable.
3. In that case he would then have to allow the theist to claim that, in principle, the existence of God is falsifiable but that, in practice, no event could disconfirm God's existence.
4. The fact that Flew and other nontheists attempt to disprove God by arguing from the fact of evil in the world reveals their belief that falsification in practice is that with which they are truly concerned.
5. The truth is that Flew cannot have it both ways.
 1. If naturalism is unfalsifiable in practice, then belief in God can also be unfalsifiable in practice.
 2. On the other hand, if supernaturalism can never be established in practice, then neither can naturalism be established in practice.
 3. It is always possible for the theist to claim of every alleged "natural" event that God is the ultimate cause of it.
 4. The theist may insist that all natural events (i.e., naturally repeatable ones) are the way God normally operates and that "miraculous" events are the way God works on special occasions.
 5. On Flew's own grounds there is no way in practice to falsify this theistic belief.
4. Flew is much like the psychotic patient who thought he was dead. Seemingly, no empirical evidence could convince him that he was alive. He would claim that dead people can feel and see. Finally, in desperation, the doctor asked him if dead men could bleed. "No," he replied. "Aha," said the doctor, who promptly punctured the patient's finger with a pin. Seeing the blood, the

patient cried, "Eureka, dead people do bleed!"