

A week ago Michael Shermer posted his Foreword to the new book The Case Against Miracles, edited by John W. Loftus. The book is a collection of essays by various authors who all make arguments that what we think of as miracles — that is (as they understand it) supernatural interventions in the natural world (not just weird things that happen) — cannot be shown ever to have happened, and so should not be believed. John himself has now provided us with an introduction to the volume to describe what it tries to achieve, given below. As you will see, he lends his whole-hearted support to the views most famously advanced by the great 18th century philosopher David Hume. He and some other contributors think Hume’s arguments have not been refuted.

So, what do you think?

Introducing “The Case against Miracles” by John W. Loftus.

This new anthology is about miracles and why there isn’t enough objective evidence to believe in them. Along the way it’s also a major defense of Scottish philosopher David Hume’s (1711-1776) ground-breaking arguments against miracles, especially seen in chapters one, three, and the Appendix.

Hume 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.”¹ His most famous definition simply says a miracle is “a violation of a law of nature.”² This expresses the same idea. Violation or transgression? It’s the same difference. A miracle must be an event discovered to be caused by a supernatural force or being, a god. Such an event could not take place on its own in the natural world without the action of a god. It must be an event which involves the interfering, or suspension, or transgressing, or breaching, or contravening, or violating of natural law. Such an event could not be explainable by science because ...

This is a highly controversial subject among thinking people who also have religious commitments. Want to see more about the issues Read on! To do that you will need to belong to the blog. But joining is dead easy and inexpensive, and all your small fee goes to large causes, helping those in need.

Such an event could not be explainable by science because it would be an event impossible to occur by natural processes alone.

David Hume offered a good reasonable general maxim for dealing with miracle testimony:

“Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of nature...There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation...The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), ‘That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior.’”³

According to Hume a miracle is an extraordinary event of the highest kind. That means it

demands an extraordinary amount of quality evidence to overcome the extraordinary amount of quality evidence that repeatedly shows nature to operate uniformly from place to place on earth and from galaxy to galaxy in the universe. In the former case, this allows for earth sciences like geology, meteorology, and oceanography, and in the latter case, the sciences of astronomy and astrophysics. That's because the amount and strength of the evidence required is dependent on the type of claim being made. Since miraculous claims go against the course of nature they cannot be established by a supposed witness or two, and certainly not by ancient lists of people whom we cannot cross-examine for deception, consistency and/or misperception.

A miracle is not merely an extremely rare event within natural world. Period. We know from statistics that extremely rare events take place regularly in our lives. How many times have you heard believers say their god did a miracle, or answered a prayer, based on a very unlikely set of circumstances? You hear this from Mennonites, Methodists, Moonies, Mormons, and Muslims, and every other believer who possesses a prayer-answering god. [If there aren't a plethora of different gods answering these prayers then one god answers them all, thus creating conflict and wars between believers over who possesses the right god.] Believers will quote their believing doctors who say the odds of being healed were "one in a million," as evidence of a miracle healing. Listen, a one in a million healing is not equivalent to a miracle. The reason is because of the statistics of large numbers.

Statistician David Hand shows us this in his book, *The Improbability Principle: Why Coincidences, Miracles, and Rare Events Happen Every Day*. He convincingly shows that "extraordinarily rare events are anything but. In fact, they're commonplace. Not only that, we should all expect to experience a miracle roughly once every month." He is not a believer in supernatural miracles though. "No mystical or supernatural explanation is necessary to understand why someone is lucky enough to win the lottery twice, or is destined to be hit by lightning three times and still survive. All we need is a firm grounding in a powerful set of laws: the laws of inevitability, of truly large numbers, of selection, of the probability lever, and of near enough."⁴ There are a growing list of books making this same point.⁵ Extremely rare events within the natural world are not miracles. Period. We should expect extremely rare events in our lives many times over. No gods made these events happen. The reason believers see evidence of miracles in rare coincidences is simply because they're ignorant about statistics and the probabilities built on them. There can be no reasonable doubt about this.

The focus of this anthology agrees with atheist philosopher Michael Levine:

"There are basically three philosophical questions of interest about miracles. The first is whether miracles are possible. The second is whether anyone can ever be justified, epistemologically speaking, in believing that a miracle has occurred. *With regard to this question it is important to note that the fact one can imagine conditions in which belief in a miracle would be justified does absolutely nothing to show that anyone has been so justified.* The third question is whether anyone is or has been so justified...The first two questions have sheltered philosophers from dealing with the only philosophically significant question about miracles per se—the third question. The first two questions...may be worth pursuing in their own right, but they are of little consequence when it comes to the important third question about miracles. Is anyone epistemologically justified in believing in a miracle—for example, on the basis of Scripture and historical evidence?"

“Philosophical discussion about miracles frequently ignores the question of whether there exists historical evidence, testimony—including testimony in the form of Scripture—or first-hand experience, that justifies belief in the miraculous. Those who wish to champion miracles either argue that such evidence exists or else they merely assume it. But the question of whether such evidence does exist, by itself, is the crucial question about justified belief in miracles.”⁶

For more, click on “Look Inside” the book at Amazon [<https://amzn.to/2sksWdU>] then scroll up to see the Contents, and back down to read as far as you can.

1 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X “Of Miracles,” footnote 21, online at: <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/43811/hume-on-miracles.htm>.

2 David Hume, *Enquiry*, Section X “Of Miracles” Part 1 #90.

3 Ibid.

4 David J. Hand is an emeritus professor of mathematics, a senior research investigator at Imperial College London, and former president of the Royal Statistical Society. His book is published by Scientific American/ Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

5 Other important books are as follows: Jeffrey S. Rosenthal, *Knock on Wood: Luck, Chance, and the Meaning of Everything* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), and his earlier book, *Struck by Lightning: The Curious World of Probabilities* (Joseph Henry Press, 2006). Rosenthal is a professor of statistics at the University of Toronto, having received his PhD in mathematics from Harvard. Joseph Mazur, *Fluke: The Math and Myth of Coincidence*, (Basic Books, 2016). Mazur is an emeritus professor of mathematics at Marlboro College in Vermont. Leonard Mlodinow, *The Drunkard’s Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives* (Vintage; Reprint, 2019). Mlodinow co-wrote with Stephen Hawking *The Grand Design*, and previously earned his PhD in theoretical physics from the University of California at Berkeley. John Allen Paulos, *Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and its Consequences* (Holt-McDougal, 2001). Paulos is a professor of mathematics at Temple University.

6 Michael Levine, “Philosophers On Miracles” in Graham H. Twelftree, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 291-308. Italics mine, since this one sentence destroys so much of what we see by philosophers of religion. It also explains why I called for that discipline to end in my book, *Unapologetic: Why Philosophy*

of Religion Must End (Pitchstone Publishing, 2016).



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