

I recently learned of a new book that has come out arguing *against* the idea that miracles happen. It is a collection of essays edited by John Loftus, an interesting who in some has had a similar faith trajectory as I: started as a very conservative evangelical, studied at evangelical schools, and ended up leaving the faith and becoming an atheist. Among other things, for one of his master's degree he studied with the evangelical philosopher and apologist William Lane Craig, whom some of you have heard of.

The book is called [The Case Against Miracles](#), and I thought it would be interesting to see some bits of it here on the blog. As you know, I like to have a variety of points of view represented here, most recently Mike Licona, who is the author of the popular book [Evidence of God](#), and whose views of miracles, I think it is safe to say, is almost precisely the *opposite* of John's.

The next two posts will be the Foreword of the book written by Michael Shermer, who is an expert on the history of science, a long-time contributing writer for the magazine [Scientific American](#), the of [The Skeptics Society](#), and editor-in-chief of its magazine [Skeptic](#).

Both John and Michael are on the blog, and they will be able to respond to your comments and questions. Here is part 1 of Michael's Foreword to the book. I think it's safe to say they will clearly be dealing with the problem of miracle head-on!

Foreword for The Case Against Miracles, edited John Loftus, loftusjohnw@gmail.com

On Miracles and Truth

By Michael Shermer

Have you ever gone to the phone to call a friend, only to have the phone ring first and find your friend on the line? What are the odds of that? Not high, to be sure, but the sum of all probabilities equals one. How many times did you phone your friend and he or she didn't call? How many times did your friend phone and you weren't thinking of him or her? Multiply that by a couple hundred million people in the U.S. alone making dozens of calls a day, and it becomes almost inevitable that this seemingly miraculous connection—which many people attribute to synchronicity or Karma or a supernatural force or God or whatever—is fully explained by probabilities. Given enough opportunities, outlier anomalies—even apparent miracles—will happen. And thanks to the confirmation bias in which we look for and find confirming evidence for what we already believe and ignore or rationalize away disconfirming evidence, we will remember the hits and forget the misses.

A miracle may be defined in many ways, so let's start with this colloquial meaning of a highly unusual event, as when someone exclaims "it's a miracle!" when winning the lottery, or "it was miraculous" when recovering from a serious illness, or most famously at the end of the 1980 Olympic hockey game when the underdog U.S. team defeated the might Russian juggernaut and the ABC TV sports commentator Al Michaels exclaimed "Do you believe in miracles?!" Let us quantify this intuitive sense of a highly unlikely event as one with million-to-one odds of occurring. Now let's apply some back-of-the-envelope calculations along the lines of the apparently miraculous phone call above. Assuming we're awake and alert for 12 hours a day and that, say, one bit of information flows into our brains through our senses

per second, that generates 43,200 bits of data per day, or 1,296,000 per month. Even assuming that 99.999 percent of these bits are totally meaningless (and so we filter them out or forget them entirely), that still leaves 1.3 “miracles” per month, or 15.5 miracles per year. That is, with enough data accumulating from the world there’s bound to be highly unusual occurrences that we notice. How unusual? One in a million.

I once employed a similar back-of-the-envelope calculation to explain death premonition dreams, you know, the type where someone has a dream about a loved one dying and the next day they find out that a grandparent or parent or close family member or friend passed away in the middle of the night, maybe even around the time of the dream. How unusual is that? Well, the average person has about five dreams per night, or 1,825 dreams per year. If we remember only a tenth of our dreams, then we recall 182.5 dreams per year. Let’s say that there are 300 million adult dreaming Americans who thus produce 54.7 billion remembered dreams per year. Sociologists tell us that each of us knows about 150 people fairly well (the so-called Dunbar number named after Robin Dunbar who discovered this in his research on human social networking), thus producing a network social grid of 45 billion personal relationship connections. With an average annual death rate of 2.4 million Americans per year (all causes, all ages), it is inevitable that some of those 54.7 billion remembered dreams will be about some of these 2.4 million deaths among the 300 million Americans and their 45 billion relationship connections. In fact, it would be a *miracle* if some death premonition dreams did *not* come true! Here’s an announcement you’ll never hear on television:

Next on Oprah: a woman who has had numerous death premonition dreams not one of which has come true yet, but stay tuned because you won’t want to miss her incredible story.

But this is not what most Christians, theologians, and religious apologists mean by the word *miracle*. They mean something more than a highly improbable event within the natural laws of nature. They mean something divine has happened, and to make this case Christian apologists go deep into the weeds of philosophy and theology (and sometimes even science) to make their case, for example Lee Strobel’s 2018 book [The Case for Miracles](#), which includes a chapter on my own journey from religious belief accepting miracles to scientific skepticism rejecting miracles.

It is vital that we have a viable response to the claims of Christians and others that miracles are real, and John Loftus has done just that in this, the most comprehensive work ever compiled for, as it is aptly titled, [The Case Against Miracles](#). The chapters span the range of miracle claims, including the philosophical arguments of Christian apologists, biblical miracles from the Old Testament to the New, the miracle of creation, the miracle of life, the miracle of Noah’s Flood, the miracle of the virgin birth of Jesus, the miracles Jesus’ allegedly performed such as turning water into wine (I’ve seen Penn & Teller perform this one!) and raising the dead, and of course the biggest miracle of them all (for Christians anyway), Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and ascendancy into heaven. I thought I knew a lot on these topics—inasmuch as I was once a born-again Christian myself and made these arguments, then became a born-again Skeptic debating believers—but I learned more from reading this one book than all other works combined. *The Case Against Miracles* belongs in every library and personal bookcase of both believers and skeptics.

Let’s start with how the word “miracle” is defined. In John Loftus’s introduction to *The Case Against Miracles* he notes that the pre-scientific biblical “signs and wonders”

definition applied to just about everything that happened in the world, from the ordinary to the extraordinary—from normal births to virgin births, from rain to deluges, and from famines to feasts. Clearly this will not suffice. If everything is a miracle then nothing is a miracle. And as Loftus notes, as science developed over the centuries more and more of these signs and wonders were explained by natural law, leaving fewer and fewer divine miracles.

Enter the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, who, in his 1758 *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* famously defined a miracle as “a violation of a law of nature,” and less famously as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or...some invisible agent.” In fact, his Section X, “Of Miracles,” provides a generalized, when-all-else-fails analysis of miraculous claims. That is, when one is confronted by a true believer whose apparently supernatural or paranormal claim has no immediately apparent natural explanation, Hume gives us an argument that even he thought was so important (and Hume was not a modest man) that he placed his own words in quotes and called it a maxim. I think it is so useful an argument that I have called it (in my 1997 book *Why People Believe Weird Things*) *Hume’s Maxim*:

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.” When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

In the two and a half centuries since Hume wrote this passage we have learned much about deception and self-deception from the study of human perception, memory, and cognition, especially the plethora of cognitive biases that distort our picture of reality, so *Hume’s Maxim* is even more supported today than it was in his time. People are routinely deceived by others, self-deceived by themselves, and misperceive how the world works. When someone tells us of a miracle they witnessed, or of a miracle someone told them about, it is far more likely that they “either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened.”

THE FOREWORD WILL CONTINUE IN THE NEXT POST. **This first half is free and open to the public. Most posts on the blog are for members — but the good news is that it is very easy to join. So why not do so? It costs very little and you get a boatload for your money. It’s about 50 cents a week for five lengthy posts on matters of interest. And every cent goes to charity.**



[More on the Case Against Miracles: Michael Shermer Guest Post
Guided Tours of Heaven and Hell in a Christian Mode](#)