I. Miracles

a. Introduction

In WCB, Plantinga observes that faith, understood as a process of producing belief, is necessary in order to have such beliefs. The reason seems to be that religious belief, and Christian belief in particular, are rather extravagant in their claims. Plantinga observes that Christians believe that Jesus Christ not only died, a not uncommon event, but that Christ rose from the dead, a clearly uncommon event. Plantinga’s reflections invite the question whether it is rational to believe in miracles. Notice that this is simply a more specific question from the one that we have been asking all along, namely, whether religious belief is rational.

b. Contextualizing the issue

We have seen that Schellenberg’s Hiddenness argument has a problem in that it needs to motivate why the phenomenon of non-resistant non-belief is in fact satisfied and satisfied on a wide enough scale that would be inconsistent with what a perfectly loving God would do. We have also seen that there are two issues being conflated in the argument that non-resistance is satisfied: non-resistance understood as ‘not good enough logical/evidential arguments that God exists.” And non-resistance understood as “not having religiously informed experiences” such as a feeling that God loves me or whatever. The difference of course is that accepting the conclusion of an argument that God exists, bequeaths no knowledge about God.

- When Schellenberg observes that there is not enough evidence for God’s existence, we are led to believe that non-resistance has something to do with not accepting a key premise in an argument for God’s existence.
- We explored yesterday that understood as such, the Hiddenness argument faces a problem. Both the hiddenness argument and the contingency argument accept the principle of non-explicability. The existence of the universe is not explicable supposing that a necessary being has not created and sustained it. The existence of hiddenness is not explicable supposing that God does exist. If something is not-explicable on a supposition, then one may conclude the opposite of that supposition.
- But what this means is that to be consistent, Schellenberg would have to accept the key premise in the contingency argument and thereby accept the argument, at least, accept it as very plausible. Not to accept it would be arbitrary and inconsistent, two features of resistance.
- There is however, something left of the hiddenness argument, and that is that people do not have religious experiences whereby one is confronted with Divine reality – at least such experiences are not distributed equally. And so, non-resistance understood in the second ‘experiential’ sense the absence of which would count as evidence that a good and loving God does not exist.
And here is the motivation for addressing miracles. If miracles have occurred, then one would have evidence of a Divine reality wanting to relate to us and who loves us. We do not even need to be the recipients of the miracle, we just need a reliable report about it. It would not be rational for me to deny that certain quarks and leptons exist because I have not personally witnessed their existence. I trust what the physicists tell me. Likewise, it would not be rational for me to deny that God has intervened in someone’s life for their benefit because I have not witnessed such interventions myself. I may trust what a religious practitioner tells me.

So the issue now is what evidential status should miracle reports hold for those who satisfy non-resistant non-belief understood in the second experiential sense?

There are three issues when discussing miracle. There is the question of whether such miracles are possible? And there is the question of whether anyone can be rational in believing that a miracle has occurred? And finally, there is the question of identifying this or that event as an actual miracle. How can one identify an actual miracle?

c. The Problem

Suppose I were to tell you that I was in Mass the other day and when Fr. Peter came around from the altar I saw that he was levitating. I was shocked, but there I was, in the front row and could see it clear as day: his feet were not touching the ground! Do you believe me? If you don’t believe me why not? If you do, would you start going to church more often?

Those who had a problem believing me probably have a certain notion of what a miracle is, namely, a violation of a natural law. But how we define miracles brings into relief what theological assumptions we are making from the start.

Argument series A:
- A miracle is an event of action that is a violation of a natural law.
- Either natural laws cannot be violated or the evidence for the putative miracle will be cancelled out by the strong evidence for the natural law. That is, either natural laws are either necessarily true or very, very probably true.
- If they are necessarily true, then a NL cannot be violated.
- Therefore, no miracle could occur either.
- If they are very, very probably true, then the evidence for the miracle occurring is cancelled out or washed out by the evidence for the natural law holding (or, our understanding of natural laws and their interaction is not comprehensive enough to explain the putative miracle in naturalistic terms). This notion of washing out may be understood medically. If I take a drug that might make me drowsy (e.g., benadryl) but then pop myself full of caffeine, the caffeine washes out the effects of the benadryl.
- Therefore, belief that miracles have occurred is either irrational or implausible.

Argument series B:
Miracles are events caused by a supernatural agent(s). [Notice that this definition does not entail that a miracle lies beyond the causal capacity of natural processes. It may be that a supernatural agent uses the natural capacities of a thing to accomplish something, for example, so-called miracle healings may be a function of someone’s immune system being configured by the Holy Spirit to ward off cancer cells in such and such area of the body. It may be hard to discern whether such cases are miracles or medicine. And it may be the case that such overlapping agency, if you can call natural capacities agential, is of dubious evidential value for someone’s faith. But the definition seems to capture all of what we want given our folk intuitions on what a miracle is.]

You see, miracle as defined in the Humean tradition wants to define it in such a way that it has evidential value: a violation of a natural law would be surprising and if such a thing did occur, it would warrant my assent and my commitment to a religious tradition.

In any case, as defined for this series, miracles are not by definition, implausible or irrational to believe. But are they at all of evidential worth?

(i) If one believes that a miracle has occurred requires that one believe that a supernatural agent caused it.
(ii) Believing that a supernatural agent causes something entails believing that it exists.
(iii) Therefore, believing that a miracle occurred requires believing that a supernatural agent exists.

The idea: I must believe that a supernatural agent exists, and then believe that the miracle occurred.

[Now, it could be that I believe atheism to the tune of .3. I investigate a putative miracle and conclude that naturalistic explanations are exhausted and insufficient to explain why the event occurred. And I believe that to the tune of .7. Suppose that a supernatural explanation is sufficient, I understand that, and I also believe that no developments in naturalistic understanding will provide an explanation for the putative miracle – to the tune of 1.0. It now looks like I should consider there is a supernatural agent to the tune of .5. The point is that within a matrix of other beliefs and weighing their plausibility against or for each other can use the evidence for a miracle as evidence for God’s existence. In a way, this is exactly what arguments for God’s existence are trying to do. There is an event (the existence of all that is) that is best explained by the agency of a supernatural being. Creation is a miracle on the definition of miracle in Series B. But the only way to use it (the miracle) as evidence for God’s existence, is by ruling out naturalistic accounts of the events.]

The problem: Either belief in miracles is irrational, implausible, or it is of no evidential value for belief that God exists. For this third option, one must believe that God exists in order to believe that miracles may occur. And these options are strictly a function of how we define the term miracle. Because of this, they are the only options. Maybe?
d. The arguments

Borrowing some reflections from Norman Geisler’s work (2004), we can distinguish several different questions vis-à-vis the rationality of believing in miracles. The first, already mentioned, is whether it is rational to believe in miracles? The second is, if it is rational to believe in miracles, are they identifiable? That is, can we know that a particular event x counts as a miracle?

To the first question, David Hume answers no. His argument in rough outline is as follows:

1. A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.
2. Firm and unalterable experience is the evidence for these laws of nature.
3. A wise person proportions belief to the evidence.
4. Therefore, a wise person should believe that a putative miracle is explainable by a law of nature. (2 and 3)
5. Therefore, a wise person should not believe that a miracle has occurred. (1 and 4)

Specific to the resurrection, about which Bonevac and Plantinga mention, firm and unalterable experience confirms that dead people don’t come back to life. Therefore, any report that a person has come back to life meets with the evidence that many others have not come back to life. The low probability of coming back from the dead washes out, or overshadows the likelihood that the Apostles saw Christ after Christ’s death. The idea is stated by JL Mackie as follows, “whatever tends to show that it [a putative miracle] would have been a violation of natural law tends for that very reason to make it most unlikely that it actually occurred” (1982, 26). Any evidence that an event is a miracle, i.e. a violation of a natural law, is by that fact evidence that it did not occur, given the evidence in support of the natural law in question. Belief in miracles then is irrational.

• [Two-minute paper] Why does Hume’s argument not entail that miracles are impossible?

   Look for: laws of nature describe regularities in how the world behaves, but not how the world must behave. And miracles are described as departures from those regularities.

Now, one might quarrel with the idea that belief in miracles is self referentially incoherent – “if an event must violate a natural law in order to be a miracle, any evidence, such as testimony, supporting the proposition that the event is a miracle will also support the claim that the miracle did not occur” (Otte, 152). Suppose one believed in the following proposition. Laws of nature are descriptions of regularities assuming a closed system. Without begging the question one way or another, natural laws should be understood as supported by evidence. In this evidence is in the following form: (Following Otte, 1996).

E: In all of the evidence amassed so far, if God does not intervene, all A’s are b’s.

Now suppose that we witness the following event testified by someone:
T*: an event occurred in which God does intervene and an A was not a B.

Is E evidence against T*? Before answering this question consider a structurally similar inference pattern.

E: given the evidence amassed so far, when a plumber does not intervene, water comes out of my faucet when I turn it on.

T*: A plumber does intervene, and water does not come out of my faucet when I turn it on.

Notice, E is not evidence against T*. Not only that, it cannot be evidence against T* because the conditions specified in E are not met in T*.

- [Two-minute paper: this solution does what philosophers call kick the can. By this is meant that it only invites other questions. What question does this point invite? If silence, give the example of a patient recovering from Stage 4 CA on comfort care only. Look for: how can one know whether the event in question is simply an anomalous event versus caused by God.]

To the second question, skeptics answer no. The basic outline of the argument is as follows:

6. A miracle is an exception to a natural law.
7. In science exceptions are invitations to find a more comprehensive explanation, not an indication to stop research.
8. Therefore, acceptance of miracles prematurely frustrates the development of more comprehensive explanations of certain phenomena.

The idea with this argument is that even if it is rational to believe in miracles - and by rationality one means that the idea of God causing an event to occur is not preposterous - it still might be the case that we would never know which one of the events that we might experience count as an effect of God’s agency versus a really weird event with a hitherto unknown naturalistic explanation.

Now, the resurrection appears to be one of those events for which it is clear, either God caused it or if God did not cause it, the resurrection really did not occur and the resurrection reports are fictitious. [enter Bonevac].

e. Bonevac on the Resurrection

Last class period we discussed miracles. The progression over the last few sessions is already alluded to in the syllabus. When canvassing the evidential argument from evil, we discovered the principle of total evidence. In that regard, there are good things that occur, and in some
ways those good things can be said to be gratuitous – they suggest a divine inspiration to them. Miracles are typically such events.

Bonevac argues that the most unique of them, rising from the dead, is really improbable. But, he argues, if we suppose that the Apostles had normal functioning perceptual faculties, the probability that the resurrection occurred on the assumption that 12 people reported it is .998.

At issue is whether the testifiers were reliable. What reasons do we have for thinking that they were telling the truth, or at least, what they took to be the truth? Here is a handy argument for what they reported to be true is very likely true. You will see that the argument for their reliability involves consider two and only two options.

1. If JC did not rise from the dead, then those who reported that he did were either deceived or were deceivers. The options here are logically exhaustive. For any false claim you either know it to be false or if you believe it you are by definition mistaken. So, if you were to report this false claim to others you do so either not knowing that it is false (in which case your mistaken, you are deceived); or you do know it is false (in which case you are trying to deceive).
2. The Apostles + were very likely not deceived.
3. They were not deceivers.
4. Therefore, it is very likely not the case that JC did not rise from the dead (from 2,3&4).
5. (4) is logically equivalent to JC very likely did rise from the dead.

The logical form of this argument follows what logicians refer to as modus tollens. If I am in Chicago then I am in Illinois. I am not in Illinois. It follows that I cannot be in Chicago. If I am holding a trumpet in my hand then I am holding a musical instrument in my hand. I am not holding a musical instrument in my hand. Therefore I cannot be holding a trumpet. If it is not the case that the Apostles were deceived or deceivers, then premise 4 follows. Now let’s turn to see what can be said in favor of premises 3 and 4. Since 4 is easier to prove let’s consider that first.

Defense of 3 is that they were tortured and killed. To suppose that one would submit to being tortured and killed for a belief one knew to be false is impossible for a rational being to do. To stop the tortures all one would have to do is to assert what she truly believes.

The Defense of 2 observes that the error in question is a perceptual belief, not a belief about, for example, that the Eagles will win the Superbowl this year, or that Goldbach's conjecture is true, or that the bass I caught is 10# versus 10.5#. Think of it this way, I cannot be mistaken that I see that [so-and-so] is in the room with me right now. To see JC alive is a perceptual belief about which it is really unlikely that 500+ people would be mistaken.

[two-minute paper: respond to the following putative objection. The Jonestown massacre and other cults believe in some whacky things. If we accept 2 then we have to
say that any member of a cult is not necessarily deceived. Look for: these
counterexamples are not relevant because in each of those cases, they are not reporting
that certain miracles occurred, they just had radically false beliefs.]

In any case, even if they did report something it is unclear the extent to which they should be
distrusted. There is no reason to think that one’s presumably false cult beliefs would have any
negative affect on their ability to transmit certain kinds of knowledge. Suppose my bank teller is
a closet Goon. When I ask her what my account totals are she looks at the screen, punches in a
few numbers in the calculator and reports my account totals. I have no reason for thinking that
her testimony of what she sees on the screen is somehow clouded by her false cult beliefs. I have
no reason for thinking that her false cult belief affects the prestidigitation of her fingers as they
type in the correct numbers. The point is that having false beliefs in one area of reflection does
not mean that someone wholly lacks cognitive functioning in other areas.

So, at issue is whether the testimony of the Apostles is reliable concerning an event that they
perceived. And they could have had what many (e.g., atheists) might think are false beliefs; all
that is required is that one suppose that their perceptual faculties are intact. On this point it is
important not to beg the question against their perceptual reports. Suppose your friend has
reliable perceptual faculties, or at least, you and your friend see the same things in roughly the
same way. This might even be true for complicated perceptual scenes such as perceiving an
accident at a crowded intersection. Suppose one day she reports to use something that you find
rather astonishing, it does not matter what kind of astonishing fact this might be, it is just that
someone whose perceptual faculties you trusted previously have now reported something you
find astonishing. To believe that in this one instance, your friends perceptual faculties are
malfunctioning must be based on a belief that the astonishing event did not take place; you must
assume that the event did not take place in order to justify discounting your friends report.

[Two-minute paper: respond to the following objection. It might be tempting to assume that the
resurrection did not occur, and therefore infer that the Apostles’ perceptual faculties were not
reliable. After all, coming back from the dead is really unlikely. Isn’t it more likely that they
were deceived than that Christ came back to life?

- Look for: this argument obviously begs the question against the report. And here is
  Bonevac’s key insight: if we assume that the apostles had intact perceptual faculties and
  we have zero tolerance for epistemic discrimination, we have to take their reports
  seriously. Bonevac’s point then, is that even assuming a very low probability of a
  resurrection event, the background assumption of multiple reliable witnesses will offset
  that low probability. One would be rational to believe that the resurrection occurred, if
  that belief is based on what multiple reliable witnesses have reported.

- Consider the point this way: it is highly unlikely that I would be dealt a perfect bridge
  hand specifically, 1: 1,635,013,599,600. But if I am dealt such a hand, I am not going to
  infer that I don’t have a perfect bridge hand.
[Two-minute paper: Does accepting 2 require one to believe that aliens exist? Haven’t numerous people witnessed aliens? Or does accepting 2 require accepting that Bigfoot exists? Afterword on aliens:

- UFO’s understood as *unidentified* flying objects are certainly rational to believe in given the evidence. Inferring that aliens are piloting these things is an inference *from* a perceptual judgment.
- I would believe in the existence of non-human intelligent life if they presented themselves to people in the way JC reportedly presented himself to the Apostles.
- Bigfoot evidence?

f. A final note on non-resistant non-belief and wrap-up of the Hiddenness argument:

There is an inverse relationship between the conditions that satisfy nonresistant nonbelief, and the conditions that satisfy being rational in not believing P. The basic intention behind the hiddenness argument is that,

\[(rr): \text{it is not rational to believe that God exists because nonresistant nonbelief exists.}\]

If we convert this claim into a general principle we get the following,

\[(prr): \text{it is not rational to believe that P if and only if not believing that P satisfies the conditions for nonresistance.}\]

Suppose then that the conditions for nonresistance are set at a very high standard of evidence. So, for example, Bonevac’s argument that it is rational to believe the testifiers to Jesus Christ’s resurrection can be discharged or ignored if one’s criteria for satisfying nonresistance are set fairly high. So, suppose one thinks that multiple testifiers of fair reputability claim the same thing about E. Granted it is an astonishing claim, but as Bonevac points out, the *objective* probability of the event goes up significantly with 12 reliable witnesses. And I have pointed out that there is no argument against their reliability. If we assume that people are innocent until proven guilty, (or if w do not assume this, we have to be consistent) then the Apostles and 500+ were likely reliable.

So, include in the set of all testifiers, not only the apostles and the 500 other purported witnesses, but also the mystics, Saints, and theologians throughout the centuries who have reported various religious experiences, and we have a powerful base of testimonial evidence for the existence of God and one who is purportedly loving. To reject this evidence one would also have to reject quite a bit of our beliefs that are based on testimonial reports. Coady (1992) example.