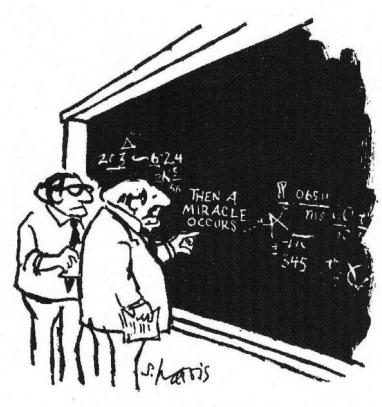
Miracles



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

What is a miracle?

In everyday speech we use the term much without much precision. Someone might say that locating a parking space in a crowded lot was a miracle, by which she would mean no more than that, in her own estimation, the odds of such a happy outcome were vanishingly small. Some people might want to go a step further and assert that the odds of the happy outcome were so small that it could not have occurred unless the normal course of nature – or of parking – had yielded to some kind of interference. The average motorist, however, beholding that beautiful availability, probably experiences no more than a moment of elation before parking her car and returning to the business of her life. Later, telling the tale of her good fortune, she might say, "it was a miracle that I found an empty space in that crowded lot." But she would not mean to suggest that higher powers had intervened on her behalf.

A more heartfelt assertion of miracle attended many Britons' thoughts when the English Channel remained uncharacteristically calm during the Dunkirk evacuation of May, 1940. In that case, too, there was a happy outcome, and it just made sense to many of the fortunate survivors and their grateful countrymen that

something had intervened to keep the Channel safe for the boatlift. It seemed as if some entity with the power to control nature had enforced an unnatural calm on the English Channel *so that* the evacuation would succeed.[1]

The deeper meaning of "miracle," then, is not just a piece of good fortune such as finding a parking space in a crowded lot but good fortune resulting from a purposeful suspension of the common course of nature. Many people believe that miracles of this kind have occurred and continue to occur. But how good are we at detecting miracles? perhaps a review of some definitions of "miracle" will provide an answer.

Robert A.H. Larmer[2] has defined four properties that make an event a miracle. On his definition, a miracle

1. "Is a physical event beyond the ability of unaided nature to produce"
2. "Is brought about by a rational agent"
3. "Is extraordinary"
4. "Has religious significance"

The first criterion necessarily relies on our current grasp of what unaided nature can produce. The smaller the scope of our theories, the more events we may refer to as miracles. But then, if the scope of our theories expands, we may find that we can explain an event that, earlier, we could not. We will then find ourselves in the embarrassing predicament of making prosaic what had been divine. Moreover, the longer we do science, the wider the scope of our theories becomes, hence it seems likely that there will be ever fewer events that will be miracle candidates. No matter

1 Winston Churchill, speaking in the House of Commons on June 4 called it "a miracle of deliverance, achieved by valour, by perseverance, by perfect discipline, by faultless service, by resource, by skill, by unconquerable fidelity." NYRB for 30 Nov 2006, p. 26. Niall Ferguson's review of Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man*.

2 Robert A. H. Larmer, *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1988), p, 5. Cited by Christine Overall, "Miracles and God: A Reply to Robert A.H. Larmer," in Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier (eds), *The Impossibility of God* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), p. 155.

how resistant any particular miraculous event may be to prosaic explanation, the possibility will always exist that someday our knowledge of unaided nature will allow us to offer an explanation that does not rely on a suspension of the common course of nature.

On the other hand, we may, at this moment, be holding a theory that attributes a truly miraculous event to the common course of nature. People used to believe that the blood of a murder victim would flow again in the presence of the murderer. Were we to observe such an event today, we would be hard pressed to explain it, but seventeenth-century Europeans would have accepted it as part of the common course of nature. So we cannot ever be sure that any event "is a physical event beyond the ability of unaided nature to produce."

Criterion 2: "Is brought about by a rational agent". What test could be offered for the influence and judgment of a rational agent on the event? One hears of spontaneous cures of fatal diseases, or complete recoveries from devastating injuries, referred to as miracles. But if these happy outcomes do in fact demonstrate the rationality of an intervening agent, then we are left to wonder whether there is rationality in the intervenor's failure to intervene in cases where, as we say, "nature takes its course." We also have to wonder how often intervention goes unnoticed. The English Channel must have been and will be again unexpectedly calm on certain days. Yet without an important consequence on any of those other days, we will be content with a natural explanation of that day's weather. Quite possibly, a rational intervening power has reasons of its own for periodically calming the Channel, war or no. In that case, our rational-agent detection apparatus would mislead us because we cannot but be guided by our own sense of what is important. Ignorant of the motives of the

intervening power, we cannot know how it will act. So we cannot know that any event "is brought about by a rational agent."

Criterion 3: "Is extraordinary." What does this mean? Many natural phenomena are extraordinary. Consider this list: 1) ice, 2) a conjunction of all the planets in a single astrological sign, 3) bioluminescence, 4) ball lightning, 5) the revivification of an ancient Egyptian mummy (such as described by Edgar Allen Poe in "Some Words with a Mummy"), and 6) quantum entanglement.

Of these, the least likely to make us think "extraordinary!" is ice. But that is only because of where we live and what technology can do for us. In certain times and places, ice would have been quite extraordinary. The conjunction of all planets in a single astrological sign occurred in 1524 and was the occasion for much disagreement among astrologers (perhaps contributing to the beginning of the split – all but complete a century later – between astrologers and astronomers). But this event, too, is not extraordinary in the sense meant because it is an inevitable and predictable consequence of known rates of planetary motion.

Bioluminescence is a striking phenomenon. Fireflies, deep-sea fish and even some single-celled creatures called dinoflagellates can create light. Take a dip after dark in the bioluminescent bay on the south coast of Vieques and you will have an extraordinary experience. But the enzymatic reactions that cause bioluminescence are well understood. We know how to clone the gene for luminescence into bacteria and make them produce it. Is that still extraordinary? How trustworthy is our sense of the extraordinary, anyway? A random number generator, programmed to produce a number between 1000 and 9999, will evoke more wonder when it yields 7777 than when it yields 3725, even though the odds of either one appearing are the same.

So in asking whether an event is extraordinary we face problems similar to those faced when addressing Criterion 1: What can unaided nature produce? Who's view of extraordinary? Again, it is always possible that miracles – if due to the intervention of a rational power – might not be extraordinary. Why should a rational power act only by means of what would appear extraordinary to us?

Ball lightning is sufficiently different from other natural phenomena to be called extraordinary. Perhaps here we are getting at what Larimer means. Ball lightning has been attested only by occasional witnesses and is difficult to create in a laboratory. But it is extraordinary only in the sense that it is rare. No one has suggested that our failure so far to explain ball lightning from within accepted physical theory means that ball lightning will never be so explained.

The revivification of the mummy would certainly be extraordinary, because our current theory denies that it can happen. But again, if it were to happen, it would remain extraordinary only as long as the revivification of mummies remained a rare and unexplained event.

Even quantum entanglement, which has to be the most extraordinary phenomenon known to us, is extraordinary only in the sense that it surprises our intuitive understanding of the world. The phenomenon was derived as a consequence of quantum mechanics by Einstein who hoped to show that, because this obviously absurd consequence could be drawn from it, QM must be flawed. But the phenomenon has been shown to occur. Is a phenomenon that follows from our theories still extraordinary? Again, as with Criterion 1, our detection of the property "is extraordinary" depends completely on our current knowledge of the world.

Criterion 4: "Has religious significance." Certainly there are religiously significant

events that are not miracles, so the question here is, are there miracles that are without religious significance? How would we know? What was the religious significance of the calm Channel? As suggested above, God might have, for his own inscrutable reasons, calmed the Channel on any number of days before or since Dunkirk, and not even a close perusal of nautical logs will reveal which calm days were natural and which divine. Would those divinely caused calm days not be miracles because they lacked religious significance?

Having examined these four criteria, it's hard to escape the conclusion that a miracle is in the eye of the beholder. A confluence of events with a happy and unexpected outcome is likely to be seen as a miracle by those immediately affected. The Catholic church, however, realized centuries ago that the reports of individuals – along with their firm conviction that they had witnessed a miracle – were insufficient evidence that a miracle had in fact occurred. The determination of an actual miracle is crucial to the Church because the promotion from a *beatus* to a saint requires that three miracles can be attributed to the *beatus post mortem*. Consequently, the Church has established methods of determining whether a given event was in fact a miracle. These methods involve committees of priests, none of whom were witnesses to the event under review. The conviction of witnesses that they have beheld a miracle is inadmissible as evidence.

If there is an analogous inquest outside the realm of religion, it is in courts of civil law, where, too, the personal convictions of those involved are not admissible as evidence, to the point that officers of the court with personal involvement in the case are asked to recuse themselves lest their deliberation be clouded by prejudice.

How accurately do criminal courts find guilt or innocence? We know that

guilty verdicts are sometimes overturned. Death Row inmates have been exonerated by DNA evidence, so the process that convicted them is not perfect. When that process fails, where does it break down? A judge or a lawyer may be inattentive or disregard the rules. Jurors, too, may be inattentive or be inordinately persuaded by irrelevant aspects of the case or by their own prejudice.

Imagine that jurors have prayed for guidance in deciding how to vote.[3] We have no way of knowing what proportion of criminal verdicts later overturned were handed down by juries in which some members prayed for guidance, but it has very likely happened more than once, given the large proportion of Americans who tell pollsters that they believe in a God who answers prayers. If so, prayer has not helped those jurors reach a fair verdict. Perhaps, however, there are people who are better at prayer than most of us – better, at least, at the kind of prayer that requests an answer to a question. These would be the kind of people we would want on our juries.

How much testimony would such juries need to hear? How much physical evidence would they need to see? The Church committee that determines if an event is a miracle requires testimony and physical evidence, while also relying on prayer. So even people who are very good at interrogatory prayer cannot rely on prayer alone.

Perhaps the comparison between a criminal jury and the Church committee is misleading. A criminal jury operates under the direction that the event in question was a crime and is charged with determining whether the defendant was responsible for it. The jury must believe – if they are to be fair – that it is possible that the defendant is guilty, just as the Church committee must believe that it is possible that this event is a miracle. But there is a crucial difference here. A jury in a murder trial presented with

3 In a recent case, a death sentence recommended by a jury was overturned because jurors had consulted a Bible.

evidence that the defendant was, say, performing in a stage play in front of a packed house at the moment the crime was committed, could conclude that the likelihood of his guilt was vanishingly small. The jury could reasonably assume this because of their understanding of space, time and matter. A person on stage at Lincoln Center at 8:30pm EST cannot have pulled the trigger in Chicago at 7:30 CST. That's just the way the world is.

The Church committee has an oddly inverse judgment to make. Their job is to apply what we know about the rules that govern the world of nature in order to show that an event broke the rules. A man rescuing a child from a burning building is valorous but not miraculous. If, however, the man was on stage at Lincoln Center at 8:30pm EST and was witnessed rescuing a child in Chicago at 7:30pm CST, the Church committee would have to allow for the possibility that the witnesses in New York and Chicago were not mistaken and that a miracle had occurred, while a committee convened to bestow an award for bravery would have to reject the nomination of the man in New York.

Frequently, miracles that fulfill a requirement for sainthood are cures of maladies that, barring holy intercession, just don't happen. Or do they? Spontaneous remission of various maladies does occur beyond the event horizon of any holy relic. Not, perhaps, beyond the efficacy of prayer, but neither has the Church committee any way of eliminating prayer – rather than the saint's intercession – as the true cause of remission.