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## CAN A NATURALISTIC EXPLANATION OF MIRACLES BE SATISFACTORY? THE CASE OF THE MAN BORN BLIND (JOHN 9:1-12)

**Abstract.** Naturalism rejects the possibility of something being explained independently of the material reality given in empirical cognition. In particular, miracles have to be explained in a naturalistic way to keep this rejection valid. Nevertheless, it is an empirical question itself what exactly defines a miracle. The English word “miracle” means “an extraordinary and welcome event that manifests or is attributed to divine intervention in human affairs” (The New Penguin English Dictionary). In fact, the Biblical account introduces the term “miracle” in the context of the empirical experience of an entire nation. The Hebrew words *אוֹתוֹת וּמוֹפְתִים* (‘signs and miracles’) are used, as follows: “And the Lord shewed signs and wonders, great and sore, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his household, before our eyes” (Deut 6:22, KJV). Notably, these wonders had been announced and performed in the context of the survival and death threat of a nation. It was not just an exciting show religiously explained, it was a disaster escaped via the strict following of the instructions, which enabled us to explain the meaning of these ‘signs’. Since the meaning of the message was the main component of the miracles, no naturalistic explanation of the events could be satisfactory. Methodological naturalism can be applied to natural laws, but not to interpersonal communication or message interpretation. In this context, the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-12) appears as another public experience with a verifiable initial state, a performed action and a final result. While the established facts passed verification successfully, it was nonetheless necessary to reject the facts in order to reject the message behind them.

**Keywords:** miracle; interpersonal communication; supernatural; naturalism

1. Introduction. 2. The definition of a “miracle”. 2.1. Dictionary definitions. 2.2. A miracle in the Biblical context. 2.3. A communicative supernatural event. 3. The case of the man born blind. 4. Further implications. 4.1. The limitations of methodological naturalism. 4.2. Contemporary miracles. 4.3. A matter of choice. 5. Conclusion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary Western world, the cultural dominance of the naturalistic paradigm is undisputable. In general terms, naturalism rejects the possibility of something existing and being explained apart from the material reality, even if it is given in empirical cognition and even noting that “different philosophers use the word ‘naturalism’ to mean different things” (Colyvan, 2009). Naturalism can be considered a trend in philosophy connected with science and culture, rather than a specific doctrine. Daniel Andler emphasized that “its starting point is the belief that nothing exists outside nature” (Andler, 2015). It is possible to distinguish between the ordinary naturalism relying on commonsense and everyday experience, and scientific naturalism, which takes for granted the explanation of nature given by physics and recognizes no knowledge except the one provided by natural science. Despite the success of sciences closely connected with a naturalistic methodology, Wojciech Załuski suggests that there exist “good philosophical reasons for rejecting materialistic naturalism” (Załuski, 2017).

For instance, the possibility of miracles has been traditionally discussed from a philosophical perspective. For instance, David Hume formulated his argument against miracles based on the veracity of human testimony and the probability of its falsehood (Hume, 1900). Notably, many counterarguments were proposed taking into account the independence of witnesses and additional evidence other than testimonies (Gosiewski, 2024). In general, the arguments against miracles can be classified as “Arguments that miracles are impossible” and “Arguments that miracle claims could never be rationally believed” (McGrew, 2011). McGrew also identified arguments “from inauspicious conditions,” “from the passions of surprise and wonder,” “from ignorance and barbarism,” and “from parity.” He listed some main structural categories of arguments for miracles, including deductive, criteriological, explanatory, and probabilistic ones.

Robert Larmer, taking miracles as literal interventions of God in the course of events, justified belief in miracles in the modern intellectual context and acknowledged also “false miracles” performed by spiritual agents other than God (Larmer, 2013). His approach and arguments are widely discussed (Wiebe, 2016; Walczak, 2025). An interesting concept in favor of the miracles of the Christian faith, based on warrant, was proposed by Alvin Plantinga, who wrote, “if theistic and Christian belief is true, then very likely it has warrant. A consequence is that if Christian belief is true, then very likely (in the typical case) an evidential challenge to theism is an insignificant challenge” (Plantinga, 2000, 388).

The present paper discusses the relation between a miracle and its naturalistic, scientific explanation. Andler admitted that “God could well have chosen to proceed precisely by those means that science can identify,” thus putting God’s actions to the areas where science was silent (Andler, 2015). According to Jon Jacobs, “Naturalism is an approach to philosophical problems that interprets them as tractable through the methods of the empirical sciences” (Jacobs, 2024). In this context, it is assumed that the empirical world can be investigated and explained paradigmatically by the sciences, with no need of additional explanatory help (Gasser, 2007, 4).

As a result, miracles that by definition belong to the supernatural domain should be explained in a naturalistic way. Since it is an empirical question what exactly qualifies as a miracle, an issue occurs. Logically, it is impossible to explain the empirical experience of a supernatural power by means of natural phenomena. That is why Nancy Murphy concluded that “liberal theologians gave up on all notions of special divine action – that is, miracles, answers to prayer, and so forth” (Murphy, 2007).

However, scientific methodology urges us to explore any empirical systems around us, including what we call miracles. Thus, let’s first define “miracles,” and then analyze the way of dealing with them by using the case of the man born blind, as described in John 9:1-12.

## 2. THE DEFINITION OF A “MIRACLE”

In the debate on the degree of validity of religious experience, it is argued that belief in God is intellectually acceptable, providing there is sufficient evidence for it (Briedis, 2024, 140). In other words, a belief is rational only if its evidential support is specified, and persons act rationally only if they accept a belief supported by empirical evidence.

### 2.1. DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS

Can a miracle be this sort of evidence? The English word “miracle” means “an action done by esp[ecially] a holy person that is impossible according to the ordinary laws of nature” (Longman, 1987, 662). With this definition, no naturalistic explanation can be given of a miracle, since a miracle is impossible according to natural laws, and nothing exists outside nature and its laws.

Other English dictionaries provide more flexible definitions: “1 an extraordinary and welcome event that manifests or is attributed to divine intervention in human affairs. 2 an astonishing and wonderful event, thing, or accomplishment” (Allen, 2000, 885). Here one can find a way to see a miracle as the manifestation of the divine, and take it as evidence for God’s existence. The discussion would then focus on whether it is truly a manifestation of the divine, or it is just attributed to a non-existing entity called “God of the gaps” due to our ignorance of the causes (Albright, 2013, 955-956).

Interestingly, some Polish dictionaries propose *a priori* naturalistic definitions of the term “miracle.” For instance, the Polish word “*cud*” is described as an extraordinary and amazing phenomenon, which is explained according to religious beliefs by God’s action, not by natural laws (Szymczak, 2002, 294). This sort of understanding suggests that outside religion, there is no miracle and no need to explain it.

However, when one defines miracles as events that break through the known strict cosmic order and manifest the presence

of an extramundane authority, four elements are crucial to keep this definition viable (Vollmer 2007): 1. The existence of a cosmic order; 2. The infringement of the latter; 3. The exceptional character of such infringements; and 4. The active participation of an extramundane authority.

## 2.2. A MIRACLE IN THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

However, in Hebrew the true context of the term ‘miracle’ is a confrontation that might have led to a massacre. The word מִוִּפְתָּה (‘miracle’) appears in the Bible no earlier than in the story of Exodus, and its first appearance is in an announcement: “And the Lord said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand” (Ex 4:21, KJV). The event of the burning was not called a miracle in Hebrew, it was just מִרְאֵה, a vision, sight, or show to attract Moses’s attention (Ex 3:3). This event was never referred to as miracle in New Testament, either. In fact, the Biblical account describes the empirical experience of a whole nation with the Hebrew words וּמִפְתִּים אֹתָת (‘signs and miracles’) as follows: “And the Lord shewed signs and wonders, great and sore, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his household, before our eyes” (Deut 6:22, KJV). Notably, such wonders had been announced and performed in the context of the survival and death threat of an entire nation. It was not just an exciting show religiously explained, or a welcomed manifestation of the supernatural. It was a disaster escaped via the strict following of the instructions given by a known and trusted person who had power. This power was not necessarily supernatural, as it is suggested by many linguistic definitions, but it certainly exceeded any other known power in the World (see Ex 8:15). Moreover, the person in power explained the meaning of these ‘signs,’ clarifying the message confirmed by powerful miracles. This way miracles became the crucial element of interpersonal communication, understood as “the strategic

social process of message transaction between two people to create and sustain shared meaning” (West, Turner, 2022). Thus, what constituted the miracle was the following: 1. The events were announced; 2. The events happened; 3. The events delivered a certain message; 4. Nobody was able to imitate them; and 5. The events were called ‘signs and miracles’ (Hebrew: ומפתים אותם).

### 2.3. A COMMUNICATIVE SUPERNATURAL EVENT

It should be emphasized that the Biblical context presents at least two tasks, which are logically distinct: the observation of a supernatural event and the understanding of the message behind it. Two different questions can be formulated. First, “Did the event really happen?” and second, “Why did it happen?”. Apparently, the criteria for determining whether an event occurred are different from the ones that constitute its explanation, though both the reality of the event and its meaning are crucial for it to qualify as a miracle. The ‘message’ is not synonymous with ‘meaning.’ It can be conveyed by words, signs, or material objects and it involves an addresser, an addressee, and a context (Danesi, 2004). To draw an analogy with a famous example (Meyer, 2009, 15), to analyze a fax device, paper and ink in Los Angeles is a task different from understanding the message received there from the boss in New York.

Thus, no naturalistic explanation of the events seems to be satisfactory since it would require the exclusion of the main person from the act of communication. If the person is removed, the entire act of communication and its shared meaning make no sense. “An extraordinary and welcome event” may happen or not, but without the interpersonal communication between God and humans it is not a miracle. A supernatural event without meaning is not covered by any of the original, Biblical terms for a miracle (מופת, נס, פלא). In the communication context of Exodus, the powerful escape of an

entire nation from the death determined the shared meaning of the term “miracle.”

Here, science does not define what could happen supernaturally or naturally, but it can play an important role in understanding who is responsible for a miracle and what its meaning is. According to Feynman, “Science [is] a method of finding things out. This method is based on the principle that observation is the judge of whether something is so or not” (Feynman, 1998, 15). When we find things out through observation, excluding any of the possible causes of a certain event seems unreasonable.

Here methodological naturalism fails because of at least two reasons. First, it demands to eliminate God from the set of possible causes, and second, it wants the results to be duplicated and confirmed by others (Anderson, 2013). In the original communication situation where the Hebrew term מִוִּפֶת (‘miracle’) emerged, individually centered interpersonal communication theory can be applied, since the focus is on planning, producing, and processing the messages, seeing the “communication as an individually centered cognitive activity” (Braithwaite, Schrodt, 2014).

To sum up, when Israel came out of Egypt it was not about the supernatural, it was not about amazing things, and it was not about explaining old beliefs from Abraham and other ancestors. It was about interaction, relationships, interpersonal communication, and power. It was about life and death. It defined a miracle as a real event, previously agreed upon and announced, then carried out and experienced by many as the manifestation of God’s power with a certain message. Thus, no naturalistic explanation of the events of Exodus seems to be satisfactory.

### **3. THE CASE OF THE MAN BORN BLIND**

Vollmer suggested that a convincing proof of miracles would refute naturalism effectively (Vollmer, 2007). However, this contradicts

“the general empirical methods of science, such as observation, measurement and experiment, and thus the very production of empirical evidence,” that presuppose a no-supernature principle (Mahner, 2012). As a result, the methodologically correct way of collecting and analyzing the available evidence must end up with the denial of facts in order to keep the naturalistic viewpoint.

The healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-12) appears to be a public experience with a verifiable initial state, a performed action, and a final result that can be analyzed by means of the natural sciences. The real problem lied in accepting the message behind the manifested power, which forced those interested to look for a naturalistic explanation. In John 9:1-12 there is a detailed account of what happened with the man born blind, after he met Jesus Christ: (1) A miracle was announced (9:3); (2) A message was formulated (9:4-5); (3) Repeatable natural actions were carried out (9:6-7); and (4) A unique result appeared, impossible to imitate (9:7).

Here we can see an additional problem with the naturalistic explanation of a divine intervention. Methodological naturalism would predict that everybody could do the same, or at least that somebody would create repeatable conditions to obtain the same results. In fact, however, the inability to imitate is an important feature of miracles. Anybody could make clay out of spittle and anoint with it the eyes of the blind man, but healing is only for Jesus.

In this communication situation, the performed actions were forbidden for humans, that clearly indicated the divine nature of Jesus (Rucki, 2016). This message was confirmed by the unique effect of the miracle, impossible to imitate. Understanding the action implies understanding the message.

Since it was the Sabbath day, and Jesus’s action was intentionally imitating the Creation, Pharisees rejected any possibility of God’s involvement. According to their viewpoint, the final message that Jesus was God was unacceptable. Thus, they proposed several naturalistic explanations of what happened, as follows: 1. No healing took place

at all; 2. The man had not been blind; 3. Jesus had no power to heal on Sabbath; and 4. God was not behind the miracle.

Facing the testimony received from witnesses, including the healed man, Pharisees decided that he was a sinner and casted him out. However, they themselves did not consider their own naturalistic explanations satisfactory, since they did not match the observed, experienced facts.

They asked again and again to explore the healing process, looking for another naturalistic explanation. However, there is no causal connection between some mud put on the eyes and a man's ability to see. Naturalistic explanation failed by definition. There is no possibility to interpret the result through the methods of the empirical sciences, because the empirical knowledge proved no physical connections between the formal action performed and the result achieved.

Thus, it seems necessary to deal with miracles with a methodology suitable to any sort of scientific research, but without assumptions on the "naturalness" of the cause. Notably, this is quite easy for believers without necessarily assuming a supernatural cause, while it seems impossible for naturalists to leave aside their presumption regarding the non-existence of God. Robinson expressed this difficulty as follows: "Naturalists typically reject the existence of *a priori* knowledge. They also typically reject the possibility of purely logical truths, if construed as something like analytic truths" (Robinson, 2022). The non-existence of God is the *a priori* knowledge, which constitutes the core of naturalism itself.

However, it is always possible to investigate and verify the initial state, the action, and the final state by means of the empirical sciences, and then to propose hypothetic explanations of the event (Carhart, 2018). Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE) is considered a typical way of dealing with a scientific inquiry (Fraassen, 2015, 79).

From this perspective, the Pharisees facing the healed man born blind conducted a good deal of verification. They checked the initial state, the action, and the final state, collecting the available

evidence from the man himself, from witnesses who knew him before the healing, from his parents, from people who witnessed the action of healing, and from their own observation of the man who was able to see after the action. This verification process is shown schematically in Figure 1.

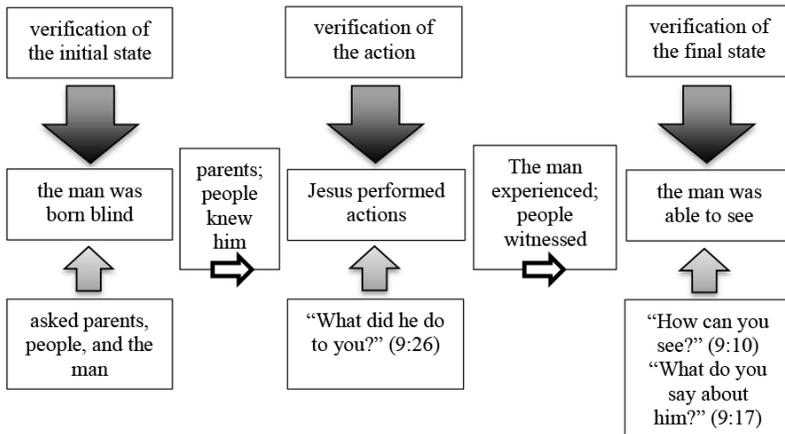


Figure 1. The verification procedure performed by the Pharisees

Most importantly, the collected “physical” evidence had to be matched with any sort of announcement and respective semiotic meaning, which constituted the message and the interpersonal communication. Keeping in mind the abovementioned Biblical definition of the Hebrew term מִוִּפֶּה (‘miracle’), there is no point to perform a miracle with no meaning. It seems that the Pharisees matched the message to both the natural action and the supernatural result quite correctly, but their presumptions prevented them from acknowledging the miracle and led them to the denial of the obvious facts.

## 4. FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

### 4.1. THE LIMITATIONS OF METHODOLOGICAL NATURALISM

Even though a miracle is not by definition the repeatable result of a natural law, the accompanying facts are verifiable and the casual chain traceable. The facts manifest the unique power of God, impossible to imitate, thus confirming the main message. The complex nature of what we call a miracle is expressed by three words used together, σημεῖον ('sign'), τέρας ('miracle, wonder'), and δύναμις ('power, strength') (2 Cor 12:12; Acts 2:22).

According to Forrest (2000), "supernaturalism remains little more than a logical possibility" due to the following factors: 1. The demonstrated success of methodological naturalism; 2. The massive amount of knowledge gained through it; 3. The lack of a method or epistemology for knowing the supernatural; and 4. The subsequent lack of evidence for the supernatural.

Apparently, the success of methodological naturalism does not guarantee that it covered all possible knowledge and there is no other way to know something new. These remarks are direct ways to reject any facts related to a supernatural action of God. Notably, the Pharisees had a good method for knowing the supernatural, but in the abovementioned situation they kept their own position and thus did not accept the obvious evidence for the supernatural.

### 4.2. CONTEMPORARY MIRACLES

There are contemporary examples of this same approach. Scientific naturalists expected that a scientific experiment would help to study the effects of prayer, despite the answer to prayers is by definition an individual act of free will. Nevertheless, when John Tyndall issued a challenge in the form of "prayer – gauge controversy," he questioned the causal connection between the prayers and the recovery

of the prince of Wales in 1871 (Brown, 2012). John Tyndall did not propose any sort of naturalistic explanation. The fact was against his assumption, so the fact was rejected.

Another interesting case is that of Floribeth Mora Diaz. It was processed by the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints, with its board of medical experts obliged to examine the properly documented and authenticated healings (Misztal, 2011-2012). Having full documentation of the illness before and after the healing, and considering the testimonies of her and her husband, all the necessary elements of a miracle can be found: the healing was asked for, the message was explained, the power to overcome the illness was demonstrated. It was not performed by accident or by an unknown natural cause. It was an act of interpersonal communication involving the supernatural, ending up with a spectacular, publicly visible healing after a long, publicly witnessed illness. In fact, after her inoperable brain aneurysm disappeared in 2011, Dr. A.V. Roman admitted: "If I cannot explain it from a medical standpoint, something non-medical happened" (Pasquini, 2016, 34). No satisfactory naturalistic explanation of this event can be found, because it would exclude the act of interpersonal communication, thus presuming the non-existence of God, which is directly against the experience of the people involved. They did not look for an explanation, naturalistic or supernatural, they experienced interpersonal communication and a healing impossible to imitate. Adherence to the impossibility of God's action requires either rejecting facts or accepting a "naturalism of the gaps" claiming that we will gain more naturalistic knowledge and perhaps someday we will know how this happened.

#### 4.3. A MATTER OF CHOICE

From a scientific perspective, the appearance of an individual outstanding fact does not question the "massive amount of knowledge gained by methodological naturalism" appreciated by Forrest (2000).

The existence of singular facts produced by supernatural causes does not make invalid the understanding of natural laws. It is rather about the message, which naturalists are not interested in.

As for communication, astronomers sent a call out into the cosmos in 1974. After 50 years of no read receipts, it was decided that the message should be sent more than once, or to more spots in the sky, and that the message was sent to prove we were able to reach out to the universe, rather than to obtain a reply (Rosa-Aquino, 2024). On the other hand, when in 2023 a simulated message from aliens was received, 5000 scientists for 10 days worked to extract the signal from the raw radio data, and after more than a year the signal was deciphered. However, the question of the message meaning still remains open (Chaffin, Chaffin, 2024). People interested in communication can make efforts to receive a message from nowhere and understand it, but when they are not interested, they choose to reject the message and the accompanying facts. This does not apply specifically to the adherents of methodological naturalism, but it can explain the choice made by at least some naturalists. Citing van Fraassen, “The good scientific Naturalist, I would say, must be one who is fully aware of the specter of a third-person view on his situation, in which that choice appears in a horizon of philosophical alternatives, and hence, is a choice for which responsibility is inescapable” (Fraassen, 2015, 80).

The question of the choice is fully applicable to the available contemporary evidence, but also to past facts documented in reliable sources such as New Testament books.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A proper understanding of the term “miracle” can be achieved only considering the context of its appearance. When Jesus healed the man born blind, he and his opponents were fully aware that the message confirmed by the manifestation of power should be accepted or at

least discussed. Following the definition of a miracle, the message was individual and the power manifestation was unique. From this perspective, the supernatural is not just another natural law of the higher order; rather, it is the personal decision to do or not to do something, and the ability to do it. Personal decisions are not in the scope of physics, chemistry and other natural sciences. A person's decisions cannot be generated by anyone who wanted to repeat the experiment.

No naturalistic explanation of miracles could then be satisfactory, since methodological naturalism requires a result to be reproducible in the same conditions. Obviously, this methodology is not applicable to acts of free will and interpersonal communication.

Hence, it can be concluded that a naturalistic explanation of miracles cannot be satisfactory by definition. The facts of supernatural intervention in human affairs can be well rejected when they bear unwanted messages. In that case, however, the rejection has nothing to do with science or naturalism.

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