

of human experiences and ideas. At one extreme, theological anti-realism can seem akin to atheism. There is also a more orthodox tradition of mystical and 'negative' theology which emphasizes the gulf between the transcendence of God and the limited cognitive powers of mere humans, and draws the conclusion that it would be presumptuous to suppose any human formulation could grasp divine reality. One problem with this is that if human reason is too weak to make any true statements at all about the attributes of God, then it would seem that the statement that God exists does not amount to much. For that reason, many have continued to try to look beyond the seen to the unseen, hoping to succeed in the apparently impossible task of drawing back the veil of phenomena to discover how things really are.

Among those who believe they have succeeded in seeing behind the veil, there are conflicting accounts of what is to be found there - an impersonal cosmic machine, a chaos of matter in motion, a system governed by strict natural laws, or an omnipotent God acting in and through his creation. Which should we believe?

Supernatural signs and wonders have historically performed an important social function, marking out individuals, movements, or institutions as endowed with special God-given authority. The ability to perform miracles has been ascribed to revolutionaries, teachers, prophets, saints, and even to particular places and physical objects. The apparent power to resist the most irresistible of all forces - the forces of nature - has provided inspiration and hope to many communities facing persecution, poverty, or natural disasters.

Take, for example, the story of an early Christian martyr called Agatha. This beautiful and chaste young woman was a member of a group of persecuted Christians in 3rd-century Sicily. She rejected the amorous advances of a local Roman official, who punished her by banishing her to the local brothel. The legend has it that when Agatha refused to give up either her purity or her faith she was subjected to further tortures and punishments, which included having her breasts cut off with pincers. In Roman Catholic iconography, Agatha is sometimes depicted carrying her amputated breasts on a plate. Although her wounds were said to have been healed miraculously by a vision of St Peter, Agatha was condemned to further punishments, including being dragged across burning coals and broken glass. During this final punishment, the story goes, an earthquake was sent by God,

Chapter 3

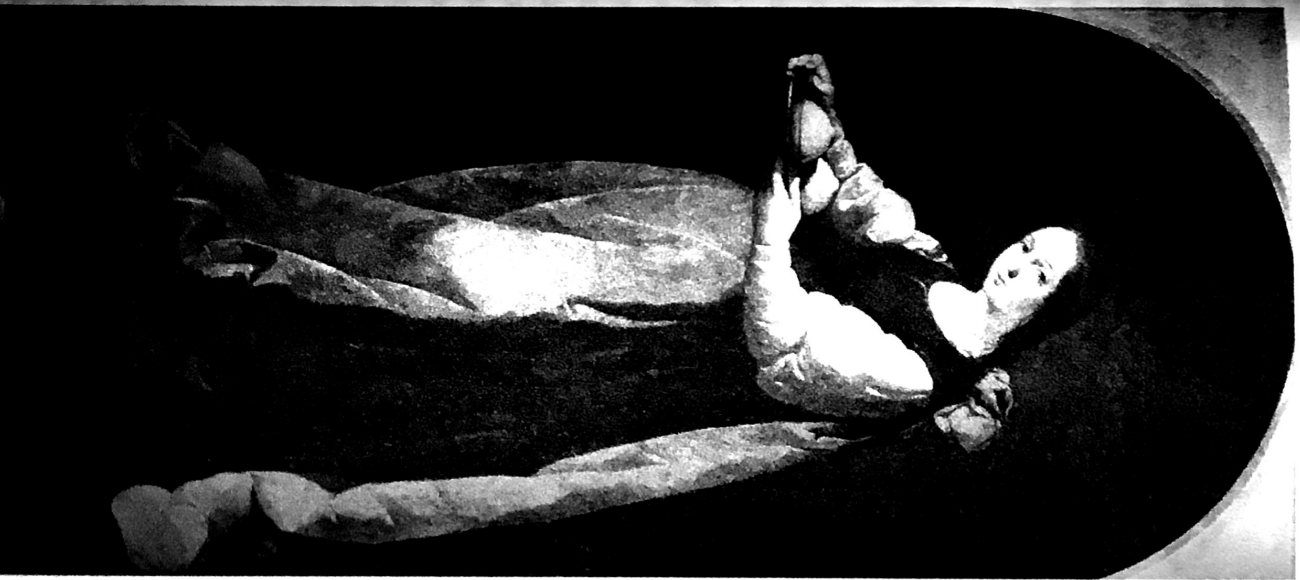
Does God act in nature?

which killed several Roman officials. Shortly afterwards Agatha herself died in prison.

The story of St Agatha, virgin and martyr, does not end there, however. After her death, Agatha was adopted by the people of Catania in Sicily as their protector and patron saint. According to local folklore, in the year after Agatha's death Mount Etna erupted, and when the martyr's veil was held up towards it, the volcanic lava was seen to change direction, leaving the city unharmed. The veil is reported to have protected the inhabitants of Catania from volcanic eruptions in the same miraculous way on several subsequent occasions. St Agatha's intercession is also credited by some believers with having prevented the plague from spreading to Catania in 1743. In these cases, the supernatural intervention of a particular saint was sought as protection against natural disasters which were themselves interpreted as acts of God. The supposed interactions between natural and supernatural agencies are not straightforward, but the message is clear: God cares for the people of Catania and, because of their association with St Agatha, will protect them.

Science and Religion

The ability of God, either directly or through the intercession of specially chosen saints and prophets, to contravene the laws of nature in order to achieve his will is asserted by all the major religious traditions. God's various revelations of himself to Moses, to St Paul and the apostles, and through the angel Gabriel to Muhammad are themselves believed to be miraculous. The Bible records that Moses divided the Red Sea, that God sent plagues upon the Egyptians to punish them, and provided manna from heaven to feed his chosen people. The gospels assert that Jesus walked on water, healed the sick, brought the dead back to life, and was himself miraculously resurrected after dying on the cross. The Quran includes reports of miracles performed by Moses and Jesus, including an episode, not included in the Bible, when Jesus is said to have fashioned clay into the shape of a bird and miraculously breathed life into it to create a real bird.



Agatha carrying her breasts on a plate, as depicted by the Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán

Although there has been debate among Muslims about whether Muhammad himself performed any miracles, there is a reference in the Quran to the splitting of the moon, which was interpreted as miraculous confirmation of Muhammad's prophetic status.

Reports of miracles persist to this day. They frequently come in the form of miraculous cures of the kind sought by pilgrims to the shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Lourdes in France, or by those who attend revivalist religious meetings presided over by charismatic preachers offering divine healing. From time to time there are reports of religious statues weeping blood or, as occurred in New Delhi in September 1995, drinking milk. When the story spread that statues of the Hindu deities Ganesha and Shiva had seemed to drink spoonfuls of milk, the phenomenon was soon being replicated in temples not only in India but all around the world, including in Britain, where some supermarkets experienced a sudden increase in demand for milk. In this case, as in most others, a rational and scientific explanation was soon offered – namely that the liquid was being drawn out of the spoon by capillary action (the same process that allows sponges and paper towels to absorb liquid), and was then simply running down the front of the statue. There was also a political explanation readily to hand. The ruling Congress Party in India claimed that the news of the alleged miracle was being spread by their Hindu nationalist opponents for electoral gain. The leader of one right-wing Hindu party, speaking in defence of the miracle, said: 'Scientists who dismiss it are talking nonsense. Most of them are atheists and communists.'

Signs, wonders, and miracles have a central place in religious traditions, whether as evidence of the special status of particular individuals, as proofs of the truth of particular doctrines, or as support for the broader secular and political aspirations of a movement. Although some believers welcome such things as apparent proofs of the reality and power of God, others are embarrassed by them. Reports of miracles seem, all too often,

to be the results of such human weaknesses as wishful thinking, credulity, or even fraud, rather than anything supernatural. They can make religion seem superstitious and primitive. Believers as well as sceptics ask themselves whether stories of the miraculous and the supernatural are really credible in a scientific age. And, as we shall see in this chapter, the theological, philosophical, and moral questions raised about miracles are every bit as difficult to answer as the scientific ones.

The theologians' dilemma

The poor theologians! They are faced with a seemingly pitiful dilemma when it comes to making sense of divine action in the world. If they affirm that God does act through miraculous interventions in nature, then they must explain why God acts on these occasions but not on numerous others; why miracles are so poorly attested; and how they are supposed to be compatible with our scientific understanding of the universe. On the other hand, if they deny that God acts through special miraculous interventions, then they are left with a faith which seems to be little more than Deism – the belief that God created the universe but is no longer active within it. If God is real, should we not expect to be able to discern at least some special divine acts? The theologian seems to have to choose between a capricious, wonder-working, tinkering God and an absent, uninterested, undetectable one. Neither sounds like a suitable object for love and worship.

The job of the theologian is to try to articulate how God can act in and through nature while avoiding the two unattractive caricatures indicated above. Various distinctions have been employed to try to achieve this. One of these differentiates between the basic primary cause of all reality, which is God, and the secondary, natural causes employed to achieve divine purposes. Another distinguishes between God's 'general providence' – the way that nature and history have been set up

France at a time when it was confronted by many secularist and rationalist detractors.

'As if God lived in the gaps?'

Protestant theologians have traditionally been somewhat more suspicious than Catholics about miracles (other than those recorded in the Bible). At the time of the Reformation, Protestants used the Catholic cult of the saints, especially of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and belief in the miraculous powers of holy relics, to portray the Church of Rome as superstitious and idolatrous. In more recent times, evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Protestant worship have involved wonders and miracles such as healings and speaking in tongues. However, there has been a continuous tradition of Protestant thought asserting that the age of miracles has passed and that divine activity is to be perceived in nature and history as a whole rather than in special interventions.

Two Protestant theologians illustrate this reinterpretation of the miraculous. The German thinker Friedrich Schleiermacher went so far as to redefine 'miracle' as 'merely the religious name for event, rather than as a happening which violated the laws of nature. In other words, a miracle was in the eye of the believer. In a series of lectures delivered in Boston in 1893, almost a century later, the Scottish evangelical theologian Henry Drummond, engaging the question of the proper Christian attitude to the theory of evolution, told his audience that a miracle was 'not *something quick*'. Rather, the whole, slow process of evolution was miraculous. 'Through that process God had produced not only the mountains and valleys, the sky and the sea, the flowers and the stars, but also 'that which of all other things in the universe commends itself, with increasing sureness as time goes on, to the reason and to the heart of Humanity - Love. Love is the final result of Evolution.' Drummond's point was that it was this product - love - rather than the particular process, natural or supernatural, which was the real miracle.

It was in this same lecture that Drummond introduced the idea of the 'God of the gaps'. He spoke of those 'reverent minds who ceaselessly scan the fields of Nature and the books of Science in search of gaps - gaps which they will fill up with God. As if God lived in the gaps?' God, he said, should be sought in human knowledge, not in human ignorance. He pointed out that if God is only to be found in special and occasional acts, then he must be supposed to be absent from the world the majority of the time. He asked whether the nobler conception was of a God present in everything or one present in occasional miracles. Drummond concluded that 'the idea of an immanent God, which is the God of Evolution, is infinitely grander than the occasional wonder-worker, who is the God of an old theology'.

The Medical Committee at Lourdes which finds signs of God only in those cases where a natural and scientific explanation is lacking, and proponents of 'Intelligent Design' who base their arguments for a designer on alleged inadequacies in evolutionary science, all seem guilty of advocating a God who resides only in gaps in current knowledge. As Drummond asked his audience, 'Where shall we be when these gaps are filled up?' On the other hand, what are we to make of Drummond's immanent God, and of the God of those contemporary theologians who see divine activity in the emergent complexity of the natural world? If God is in all natural processes equally, and even in all human actions and historical events equally too, then how can it be claimed that God is good, rather than bad or indifferent, or that God takes any special interest in human lives?

The whole history of modern science could be read as a parable designed to reinforce Drummond's warning against placing God in the gaps in current knowledge of the natural world. Isaac Newton, to take one very famous example, when confronted with questions such as why the planets in our solar system remained in their orbits rather than gradually slowing down and being drawn towards the sun, or why the distant stars were not all drawn

towards each other by gravity, was prepared to hypothesize that God must intervene from time to time in order to keep the stars and planets in their proper positions. Newton's German rival and critic G. W. Leibniz attacked this hypothesis on theological grounds. Newton's God, Leibniz wrote in a letter of 1715, lacking sufficient foresight to make a properly functioning universe at the first attempt, apparently needed 'to *wind up* his watch from time to time' and 'to *clean* it now and then' and 'even to *mend* it, as a clockmaker mends his work; who must consequently be so much the more unskilful a workman, as he is oftener obliged to mend his work and to set it right'. Leibniz preferred to see God's involvement in the universe as one of perfect and complete foresight. As the theoretical and mathematical models of the solar system became even more accurate during the 18th and 19th centuries, there were increasing numbers who went even further. When asked by Napoleon about the place of God in his system, the French physicist Pierre Simon de Laplace allegedly replied that he 'had no need for that hypothesis'.

The histories of geology, natural history, and biology reveal a similar pattern of special divine actions (floods, volcanoes, and earthquakes; separate creations of the different species; intelligent design of each individual adaptation of creatures to their environments) gradually being pushed out of the scientific picture to be replaced by more gradual, uniform, and law-like natural processes. As we shall see in the next chapter, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published the year after Bernadette had her vision at Lourdes, made references to God, but only as the author of the laws of nature – those 'secondary causes' which seemed to be able to achieve the most wondrous results when impressed on matter, without any need for further interventions by the Creator.

The laws of nature

It was never the intention of the pioneers of modern science – men such as Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, or René Descartes – to

undermine religious belief. Far from it. They envisaged nature as an orderly system of mechanical interactions governed by mathematical laws. And they hoped that people would see in this new vision the strongest possible evidence of divine power and intelligence. In 1630 Descartes wrote to the Catholic theologian Marin Mersenne: 'God sets up mathematical laws in nature as a king sets up laws in his kingdom.' Most early modern scientists also took it for granted that God, who was responsible for determining the regular way in which nature would normally operate, was also quite capable of suspending or altering that normal course of nature whenever he so chose. Nonetheless, the method they adopted was one that has favoured a view of God as designer and lawgiver rather than as interventionist wonder-worker. The collaborative enterprise inaugurated by these scientific pioneers are indeed governed by strict laws, which can be given precise mathematical expression. A further assumption made by many is that these laws will ultimately be reduced to a single unified theory. Does the success of science in explaining nature in terms of such laws amount to proof that God cannot act in nature?

Not necessarily. There are different ways of thinking about laws of nature. They need not be seen as entities or forces that somehow constrain all of reality. Instead, they can be interpreted in a more modest way as the best empirical generalizations we have so far arrived at to describe the behaviour of particular systems in particular contexts (often highly restricted experimental conditions that can be created only in laboratories). Nor are we obliged to believe that the laws of, say, physics are more 'fundamental' than the knowledge acquired through biology, sociology, or everyday experience. Although quantum theory provides exceedingly accurate empirical predictions when dealing with atomic and subatomic entities, it is not applicable to larger and more complex systems such as volcanoes, veils, or virgins, the behaviour of which can be more successfully explained by geology,

materials science, and psychology, respectively. Furthermore, two of the most successful physical theories – general relativity and quantum mechanics – are both supposed to apply universally and yet are not compatible with each other. As the philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright has put it, what modern science seems to show is not that we live in a world governed by a single systematic set of natural laws that apply at all times and in all places, but rather that we live in a 'dappled world' in which pockets of order emerge, or can be made to emerge, using a patchwork of different scientific theories (from physics, to biology, to economics), none of which is applicable across all domains.

Another assumption behind the claim, made by some polemical atheists, that modern science has shown that miracles are impossible is the belief that the natural world is deterministic – in other words, that if we had perfect knowledge of the current state of the material world and of the laws that governed it, then in effect we would also have perfect knowledge of the future of the world (and that future would be as fixed and unalterable as the past). Again, these are not things that can be proved by experience or by science (not least because there is no prospect of our ever reaching the position of omniscience required in order to test the hypothesis). Belief in determinism rests on a range of related assumptions about such basic concepts as matter, causation, and laws of nature. It is, however, as professional philosophers have repeatedly and frequently proved, in the nature of such basic concepts that they rapidly start to crumble when subjected to attempts at clear and uncontroversial definition.

Quantum mechanics

In addition to the considerable philosophical perplexities involved in articulating, let alone defending, any kind of determinism, an important scientific challenge to the doctrine arose in the early 20th century in the form of quantum mechanics. Quantum

theory' resulted from physicists' attempts to understand the world of the very small – the behaviour of atomic and subatomic particles. Max Planck and Albert Einstein showed that light, then understood as an electromagnetic wave, also behaved as if it were made up of discrete particles, which came to be known as 'photons'. The implications of the theories later developed in the 1920s by quantum pioneers such as Erwin Schrödinger and Werner Heisenberg were wide-ranging, and their interpretation is still the subject of controversy. Einstein himself was unhappy with the probabilistic and indeterministic interpretations of quantum theory that came to predominate, saying that 'God does not play dice with the universe'. Some philosophers and physicists still share Einstein's unease. Having an instinctive preference for deterministic explanations, they hope to find a different interpretation of the laws of quantum physics.

The main reason, then, that quantum theory is controversial is that it seems to overturn many of the basic assumptions of classical Newtonian mechanics. It suggests that physics can no longer be reduced to a series of deterministic interactions between solid particles of matter. According to quantum theory, entities such as photons and electrons are simultaneously both particles and waves. Whether they seem to behave like one or the other depends on how the experimental apparatus interacts with them. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle further dictates that the momentum or the position of a quantum entity can be known, but never both. Finally, the observer has a key role in quantum theory, not just as a passive recipient of data, but as an active contributor to it. Quantum systems are governed by probabilistic 'wave functions' which do not take on a determinate value until they are observed. The act of observation is said to lead to the 'collapse of the wave function' and to resolve the system into one determinate state or position rather than another. Prior to observation, the system is held to be a 'cloud' consisting of all the possible observable states, each with a different probability assigned to it.

Even this brief and inexperienced summary of some of the findings of quantum physics is hopefully enough to give a sense of how far we have come from the world of classical materialistic determinism. Quantum mechanics suggests that at the most basic level material reality is not deterministic (nor does it even seem to be 'material'). We are in a world of clouds, of wave functions, of probabilities – not the reassuringly picturable clockwork universe of the Enlightenment. Quantum theory also undermines the idea that the physical world exists objectively and independently of human observers, since it is the act of observation, or measurement, that collapses the wave function. The solid physical world of our everyday experience and of Newtonian physics in some sense comes into existence only by being measured.

Quantum physics is an absolutely central part of modern science, and the fact that the picture of physical reality that it offers is so strange and indeterministic has unsurprisingly proved of great interest to philosophical and religious thinkers. The prospect of a new and more holistic philosophy of nature in which the observer is integrally involved and in which determinism is denied is one that appeals to proponents of many different world views, from traditional religions to more modern 'New Age' ideologies. Attempts by theologians to make use of quantum physics as a more permanent source of 'gaps' in which God might be able to act have had a mixed reception. Such attempts do not help to answer the sceptic's question of why God would act on some occasions rather than others; nor do they satisfy those religious believers who hold that, as the author rather than the slave of the laws of nature, God can override or suspend them at will without needing to tinker with the states of quantum systems.

The first cause

But perhaps the fundamental laws of the physical universe themselves – rather than isolated suspensions, violations, or

manipulations of those laws – provide the strongest evidence of divine purpose. This is to return to the simple idea suggested by many philosophers, theologians, and scientists through the ages that, although we might generally explain natural phenomena in terms of other secondary natural causes, we must, to avoid an endless regress, at some point posit a first cause, a 'prime mover', and that what we know of the world suggests that this prime mover is that same God whom many have encountered through sacred texts and religious experiences.

We cannot expect the natural sciences to help us with the question of a first cause. Science is unable to tell us why there is something rather than nothing. Cosmological theories can try to explain how the something that does exist works and how it is related to other cosmic somethings that have existed in the past, present, or future, or even in numerous parallel universes or extra dimensions. That is what is attempted by theories about big bangs and big crunches, about superstrings and membranes, and about quantum fluctuations and multiple universes. But physical science cannot go beyond that to explain why the things that we call matter-energy and laws of nature ever came to be. Here we have an unclosable gap in our scientific knowledge, and one which all theists agree is filled by God.

Atheists respond that even if we suppose the universe to have a creator or a designer, that does not answer the question of who created the creator or who designed the designer. This is true, but not very surprising. Every explanatory journey has a terminus. That terminus might be matter, or mystery, or metaphysical necessity. It might be a featureless first cause or it might be God. Wherever one decides to end the explanatory journey, there will always still be the possibility of asking 'Why?' or 'But what caused that?' The answer in all cases – whether religious or secular – is that something or other just is. A much more serious problem for the theist is how to close the large gap between positing a first cause for the universe and identifying that unknown cause with

the personal God of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or any other religious tradition.

Fine tuning

For those who see God in the arrangement of the laws of nature rather than in their occasional violation, it is notable that the universe seems to be 'fine tuned' for carbon-based life. If the physical constants of the universe had been very slightly different, then such life (including human life) would not have been possible. If the Big Bang had banged only slightly more vigorously, for example, matter would have been blown apart too fast for stars and planets to be formed. If the force of gravity had been even infinitesimally larger or smaller, then life-sustaining stars such as our sun could not have come into existence. Does this show that, to quote the physicist Fred Hoyle, 'a superintellect has monkeyed with physics' and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature? Some think that this fine tuning is indeed best explained by supposing that a creator with an interest in producing intelligent life designed our universe. Others are more persuaded by the idea that our universe is just one of countless universes in a 'multiverse' or a 'megaverse'. If that were the case, then at least a small proportion of those multiple universes would have the right conditions for producing life and, inevitably, we would find ourselves in one such universe.

What people on both sides of this argument agree about, but which should not be taken for granted, is that there is something here to be explained – whether by God or by multiverses.

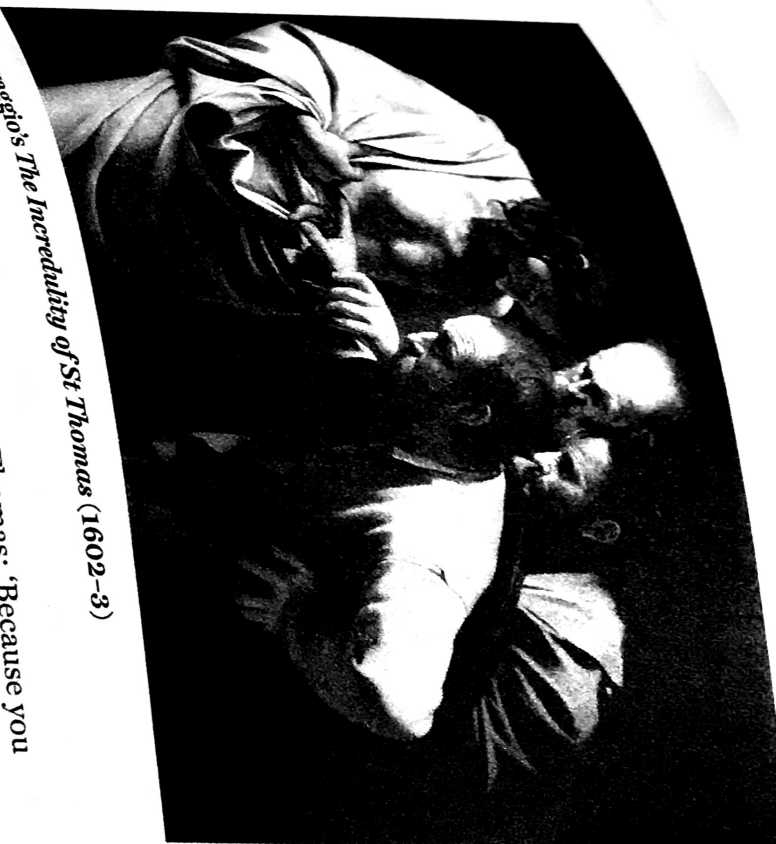
Both sides start with the premise that the values taken by the fundamental constants in our universe are surprising, improbable, and in need of explanation. But how do we know the probability of any given configuration of physical constants? Surely any specified combination of infinitely variable constants is equally, infinitely improbable? How, in any case, can we be confident that these constants are free to vary in the way these arguments

assume they are, and are not simply fixed by nature or linked to each other in a way we do not understand? And should the actual existence of trillions of other universes, as opposed to their merely possible existence, really make us any less surprised about the existence and physical make-up of our own? As the character philo put it in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779),

Religion (1779),
having found, in so many other subjects much more familiar, the imperfections and even contradictions of human reason, I never should expect any success from its feeble conjectures, in a subject so sublime, and so remote from the sphere of our observation.

Not seeing and yet believing

Not seeing and yet believing is the most famous expression Hume was also the author of the most famous expression of rationalist scepticism about miracles. In a 1748 essay 'Of Miracles', Hume argued against miracles on the basis of the relative weakness of the evidence in favour of them. Since the laws of nature are, by definition, generalizations that conform as closely as possible to the universal experience of humanity, Hume said, then they are as empirically well grounded as any statement can be. However generous we wish to be about the strength of the evidence in favour of miracles – that is, the reports of supposed eye-witnesses to the events, such as those recorded in the scriptures and in lives of saints – that testimony will never be as strong as the evidence that supports the laws of nature. Which, Hume asked, would be the greater miracle – that the laws of nature had actually been overturned or that those attesting to the miracle (possibly even including yourself) were mistaken? A rational person, Hume concluded, would have to answer that the falsity of the testimony was the more likely option. In short, a rational person could not believe in miracles. To put this in terms of the different sources of knowledge discussed in Chapter 2, Hume's argument was that collective sense experience trumps testimony.



7. Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St Thomas* (1602-3)

risen Jesus, and believes. Jesus says to Thomas: 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' In his anti-Christian polemic *The Age of Reason* (1794), Thomas Paine remarked that if 'Thomas could refuse to believe in the resurrection until he had 'ocular and manual demonstration,' then so could he, 'and the reason is equally as good for me, and for every other person, as for Thomas.' More recently, Richard Dawkins has described Thomas as the 'only really admirable member of the twelve apostles,' because of his scientific demand for empirical evidence.

Divine inaction

The rebellious and sceptical Ivan, one of the brothers in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), like doubting Thomas, demands evidence. He is disgusted by the human cruelty and suffering that he sees all around, and does

For those accepting the empiricist spirit of Hume's approach, even if not his conclusions, the evidence of one's own senses indeed be the final court of appeal. No matter what your beliefs about physical science, the laws of nature, or the strength of the testimony of others to miracles, your own experience will override all of these. If you have never witnessed a miracle, that will probably be the most significant obstacle to your believing that such a thing can occur. If, on the other hand, you had witnessed with your own eyes St Agatha's wounds being instantaneously healed, or a flow of lava suddenly and inexplicably changing direction when a veil was held up to it, you would have to admit that you had seen something truly extraordinary, which, in spite of Hume, you might well consider a miracle.

Even then, however, there would be a gap between the observation that something had happened which was contrary to the normal course of nature, and the belief that you had witnessed a supernatural or divine event. A more scientific attitude would be to treat the event as an unexplained anomaly – like an experiment in the laboratory that does not produce the result predicted by your theory. Such anomalies might lead to new discoveries about how the natural world works, or they might remain recalcitrant and unexplained. They need not take on religious significance, however. It is the experience of remarkable and unexplained phenomena in a specifically religious context that turns an anomaly into a miracle.

One religious response to the rationalist's demand for better evidence for miracles is to suggest that religious truths are to be accepted not on the basis of empirical evidence but through faith. The importance of faith is strongly emphasized in the New Testament – most famously in the story of the apostle Thomas, who says that he will not believe Jesus has risen from the dead until he sees him in the flesh with the marks of the nails in his hands and the wound in his side. Thomas then encounters the

not accept that the promise of a future life in which all will be well is a satisfactory recompense. 'I want to see with my own eyes the lion lie down with the lamb and the murdered man rise up and embrace his murderer,' Ivan tells his brother. 'I want to see there when everyone suddenly finds out what it has all been for.' But until that happens, Ivan cannot believe that the suffering of innocent children at the hands of torturers and abusers can ever be made up for by any future heavenly rewards. If that is the price of eternal truth and of admission to heaven, Ivan says, then the price is too high, and 'I hasten to return my ticket of admission.'

Ivan's rejection of Christianity is one that has been echoed by countless other critics of religion. If God exists and has the power to intervene in nature, and on occasion apparently uses that power, they ask, why does God fail to intervene in so many other cases of horrific injustice, cruelty, and suffering? Why, for example, did God allow Agatha to be tortured, abused, and mutilated before miraculously healing her through a vision of St Peter? Why would God allow some to be killed by volcanic eruptions and plagues, while bestowing special protection on the inhabitants of Catania? Why, in any case, does God need to use the powers of an object such as St Agatha's veil to achieve this protection, rather than acting directly to prevent the eruption or the disease in the first place? More generally, why is one person miraculously cured while another of equal faith and virtue suffers and dies? We might say that God moves in a mysterious way - which certainly seems to have been the case if we are to believe the many religious tales of wonders and miracles through the ages - but is that a good enough response? If God created us and our moral sense, then why do God's own ways of acting in the world seem to us not to meet our own standards of what is just and good?

These are among the most difficult questions with which religious believers have to grapple. As Henry Drummond put it, 'If God

appears periodically, He disappears periodically. If He comes upon the scene at special crises, He is absent from the scene in the intervals.' Science and philosophy certainly do not require us to believe in determinism or to deny the possibility of miracles. However, the theologians' dilemma will not go away: divine inaction is just as hard to explain as divine action.