Unmasking Assumptions about Miracles

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Lauren Fronius

Thesis Advisor
Eric Hedin

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

This thesis examines miracles with a specific focus on how a naturalist worldview impacts one’s understanding of whether or not they occur. The author’s personal journey of understanding miracles is recounted, followed by six assumptions that can affect one’s perception of miracles. Refutations to the assumptions are included when applicable. Many of the opposing arguments came from conversations that the author has had with people who hold a naturalist worldview. Verifiable accounts of miracles are also included. Hopefully this thesis will challenge readers, regardless of their worldview, about the assumptions they bring to their understanding of miracles.

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MY JOURNEY WITH MIRACLES

What comes to mind when the word “miracle” comes up in conversation? A few years ago I would have said that I think about televised healing meetings that drip with emotionalism and hype. I would have imagined individuals acting hysterical as they claimed being healed right before the so-called evangelist leader asks for money. Whenever I came across these types of shows growing up, I would often pause on the particular channel either out of curious intrigue or to have an opportunity to scoff at the gullibility of those involved. I thought, “If these healing evangelists are so good at their job, why are there any sick people in the world?” I would have said that miracles were possible but improbable.

A few years ago I began changing my views about miracles when I crossed paths with credible witnesses who said they had experienced miracles. Even though I was skeptical, I could not deny that these people were intelligent and reliable; some of them had even become my close friends. While attending Ball State University, I met my friend Carly, who had the greatest effect on my perspective about miracles. She relayed to me that her sister, Amanda, had experienced two different healing miracles. Carly said that Amanda was born with scoliosis and had legs that were different lengths. The doctors confirmed this when they determined that one leg was shorter than the other and that her hips were not aligned properly. Two separate times at her church during prayer, Amanda witnessed healing take place in her body in response to prayer. The first time her hip realigned, and the second time her shorter leg physically grew to the same length as the other. When Amanda went to the doctor, the new physical measurements of her legs proved the physical growth of her shorter leg. In fact, the doctors were afraid that Amanda’s family was going to sue them for their previously “inaccurate” measurements. Amanda’s story had the most
impact on me because of the scientific, medical documentation. The use of medical documents led me to believe that there was less room for falsification.

After hearing many other testimonies of miracles over the next year, I decided to sign up for a mission trip to Asia through a church program called Catalyst Training School in Tacoma, Washington. My team visited many villages in different areas of Cambodia and had the wonderful opportunity to become well acquainted with the Khmer, the predominant ethnic group of the country. Our team noticed very quickly that the Khmer function with a supernatural worldview. The mindset of the Khmer regarding physical healing and spirits is very different than the mindset of Americans. All of the Khmer we met had access to a witch doctor, to the best of our knowledge. When a person gets sick in Cambodia, he or she will often visit a witch doctor, who claims to use spiritual powers to heal. Because of the Khmer’s beliefs, when our team communicated that we have different spiritual beliefs, that the supreme Spirit we pray to is different than theirs, the villagers expected that the God we follow might have the power to heal their ailments, similar to their witch doctors.

Some of the times that my team prayed for healing resulted in Khmer people claiming to have been healed of their ailment. For example, on our first day going out in the villages in Cambodia, we met an older man who really wanted prayer for his back. He told us that he sometimes had trouble walking a few feet because the pain was so severe. We prayed for a while and nothing happened, so we said goodbye and traveled to a different part of the village. Several hours later, several miles down the road, he came walking up to us saying, "I've been healed!!" He proceeded to ask us to pray for his ankles, but he told us that he did not want to follow our God. We prayed for him again. He told us that the pain in his ankles did not change, and we went on our way.
Another time in Cambodia, part of our team went to a hut to discuss religion and to offer prayer to the Christian God. They prayed for a lady with arthritis, and after receiving prayer she started flailing her limbs around to see if there was any pain in her joints. She told the translator that she felt no more pain in her joints. The team also prayed for a man who had poor eyesight. After the team prayed for him, he started picking up the smallest objects in the dirt and holding them at an arm’s length away exclaiming, “I can see it!” My team said they could not even see the items he was holding due to the darkness of the hut. After these two occurrences, other neighbors from surrounding huts started coming to receive prayer as well.

Stories like these could be explained away since they do not have much evidentiary backing: no medical doctors were present nor did we have the ability to follow up long term. Doctors normally have the ability to make before and after evaluations in order to confirm any physiological or pain change. Following up with an individual is important, because sometimes people can believe that they are instantly healed when in reality they merely do not feel pain for a short period of time. This phenomenon is related to psychosomatic elements that will be addressed in the assumptions section of this thesis. Other factors I considered when people claimed that they were healed in Cambodia were the cultural barrier of the language and the desire to please foreigners. Due to the language difference, sometimes it is difficult to be certain of what the person receiving prayer is trying to communicate, even with a translator.

Additionally, I thought that the Khmer could be claiming healing merely to satisfy foreign, white Americans.

However, not all of the Khmer we met were eager for us to pray for them. Once my team asked to pray for two older ladies, one with an enormous round growth on her neck. The ladies said that they did not want prayer, because they believed that if we prayed for them, the spirits
around their hut that they worshipped would start attacking them. In the Western world, if someone asks to pray for another person, it would be very atypical if the receiver declined because they believed that they would be attacked by spirits surrounding their house. We encountered another example of their supernatural worldview when a village told us about their beliefs about the causes of death. We found out that if someone died in this village without knowing the cause of death or if drowning was involved, no one in the village was allowed to enter their house. The family of the deceased would have to sacrifice a buffalo, and live in the forest for a period of time before people could enter their house. The contrast between this culture and the Western culture inspired me to study in greater detail the assumptions that can affect Westerners’ views about miracles.

UNMASKING ASSUMPTIONS

When a miracle is discussed, how important is its evidence? Some people quickly dismiss the possibility of a miracle without taking the time to confirm its facts. Others eagerly believe in the occurrence of miracles without examining any evidence. Regardless of one’s response, every person has assumptions that affect their view of miracles. This thesis contains a list of six assumptions that may prevent Westerners from believing in the occurrence of miracles.

Examining assumptions is important because miracles play a significant role throughout history. Hundreds of millions of miracle claims exist worldwide in all cultures (Keener, 2011). For example, in the late nineteenth century, a religious Russian man named Grigori Rasputin held great influence with the Russian emperor’s family due to his perceived ability to heal the emperor’s son from hemophilia. His influence led to a series of events that are thought to have undermined the government, which ultimately led to the revolution in 1917 (“Rasputin,” 2012).
When evaluating stories from history, it is easy to negate miracle accounts due to our western academia mindset; however, dismissing miracle claims also negates important parts of history.

I discussed the following assumptions with people who had a variety of worldviews in order to include their responses. People with a naturalist worldview would generally conclude that many of the assumptions listed are false, which is why refutations are mentioned. Including both arguments about the assumptions will hopefully give the reader a better, balanced understanding about assumptions that prevent Westerners from believing in the occurrence of miracles.

**Assumption #1**: The naturalist worldview often found in the Western world is more legitimate than the supernatural worldview in other cultures. The West generally has a naturalist worldview, where the natural universe is viewed as functioning on its own according to its own natural laws. In this worldview, all events are products of the total system of nature (Lewis, 1974). Supernaturalists view events as the product of supernatural forces. Because problems such as sickness and death are thought to be caused by supernatural forces, supernatural solutions are frequently sought. Examples of supernatural beliefs are previously mentioned in my stories about Cambodia, where the Khmer consult witch doctors or offer sacrifices when problems occur.

Although a tendency exists to be ethnocentric by viewing other cultures’ worldviews as less credible, it is important to remember that globally, the naturalist worldview is in the minority. Ninety percent of the world today accepts both “ordinary reality” and “non-ordinary reality,” the latter including God and spirits (Keener, 2012). By not having a category for the supernatural, naturalists can dismiss important events, particularly the effects of perceived events. For example, if a naturalist attempted a conversation with a witch doctor, he or she would likely dismiss the doctor and his perceptions as ludicrous instead of exploring the doctor’s perceptions.
A refutation to this assumption is that supernatural beliefs are often held by ignorant, barbarous people who are impoverished due to their lack of natural resources. These people frequently turn to the only alternative available, the supernatural. One of the resources they lack is education, which could provide knowledge about the natural reasons that cause events. However, people who are privileged with much education seem to hold a similar belief about miracles. According to a 2003 *Newsweek* poll, 72% of U.S. respondents believed that God may cure even a mortally ill person for whom science has surrendered hope (Keener, 2011). From this poll, it is apparent that lack of education and knowledge about science is not the main cause for belief in miracles. Nevertheless, there is a spectrum of beliefs within the supernatural worldview. Some people who believe in the supernatural may believe in miracles, but do not believe that the supernatural causes all natural problems.

**Assumption #2:** Because some false miracle claims exist, all miracle claims must be false. This is a logical fallacy called overgeneralization (Spence, 2010). Overgeneralization is when a conclusion from a small sample of cases is applied to all cases. This assumption could also be an example of using the availability heuristic. This logic is where judgments about the probability of events are based on examples that come to one’s mind. Just because false claims easily come to mind, especially due to the media, it does not mean that they are more probable than legitimate miracles. An example of a false claim involves a Brazilian named Davi Silva, who was involved in the Apostolic Network of Global Awakening (ANGA). In 2000, Silva claimed to have been healed of Down syndrome as a child due to prayer. He further elaborated his claim with statements about medical documentation. In 2011, Silva publicly confessed that his healing story included lies. He was removed from his position within ANGA (Brown, 2012). An
example of overgeneralization would be asserting that all miracles must be false because fraudulent claims such as Silva’s exist.

False miracle claims can circulate easily for several reasons in religious communities. Religious communities tend not to examine evidence associated with miracle claims. Doubting the occurrence of a miracle is sometimes viewed as doubting the character of God. Another reason that false or exaggerated claims can easily circulate is because high esteem is given to those who make the most supernatural-sounding stories (Brown, 2012). Assuming that a healing has occurred when evidence says otherwise is just as biased as assuming that a healing has not occurred when empirical evidence supports it.

**Assumption #3**: If a miracle can be explained in part by natural means, then the miracle claim must be invalid. For example, a person may claim that he or she has been instantly healed of a vision problem. However, it is illogical to dismiss this claim on the basis that people with similar vision problems have been healed through surgery. The explanation is unhelpful because a medical procedure like surgery was *not* performed to fix the vision problem; therefore, the healing is not natural. Another example would be if someone claims an instant healing of an open wound. Although 90% of ailments get better over time, healing should not be dismissed if the speed of the healing is unnaturally fast (Brown, 2012).

**Assumption #4**: A natural explanation exists for every miracle claim. By using this approach, a natural explanation becomes the only possible interpretation merely by assuming the impossibility of a non-natural interpretation (Keener, 2011). Arguing that science will explain miracles in the future illustrates how science is continually evolving, and it is possible that science could one day prove how miracles are, in fact, outside the realm of natural possibility (Keener, 2011). One reason that scientists hesitate to assert that something is outside the realm of
natural possibility is because it can hinder further investigation, which has proven to be fruitful in the past. However, scientists can be open to the idea of an event having no natural explanation without hindering scientific exploration. Science explores causation, which allows predictability. If all miracles had natural explanations, then a predictable pattern should exist. However, according to the majority of miracle accounts, miracles typically occur through prayer. The predictable factor of prayer needs to be examined in light of the argument that miracles are caused supernaturally.

The risk of presupposing only a natural interpretation to a miracle claim is similar to the risk of presupposing an interpretation that is solely supernatural. If a person makes a prior assumption that miracles never occur, then he or she is much less likely to believe that a miracle claim is reliable. With this prior assumption, potential evidence is not examined objectively but completely discarded. If only supernatural causes are considered, evidence such as medical documents that does not support a miracle claim would be dismissed and not evaluated objectively. Even worse, presupposing supernatural causes can prevent the use of modern medicine. Sometimes people die or get very sick because they refuse a natural solution to their ailment. By supposing that only one interpretation exists for an event, explanations and evidence behind the interpretation can be forced.

It is common to hold to beliefs despite the lack of supporting evidence whether one is a naturalist or supernaturalist. This logical fallacy can be called filling in the gaps. If this logic is used by a theist, it is labeled the “God-of-the-gaps” mentality where a gap in scientific knowledge is cited as evidence for the existence of God “who fills that gap.” Many people have used this logic throughout history, even well known people such as Isaac Newton (Biologos, 2013). Newton did not understand how planet orbits stayed consistent despite gravitational
occurrences between the planets and stars. He believed that an "intelligent and powerful Being" was the cause of stability in our solar system. Since the time of Newton, science has discovered that the gravitational occurrences balance out so that the planetary motions remain stable (Biologos, 2013). Because concepts did not make sense to Newton, he wrongly assumed that a divine being's intervention "filled in the gaps of knowledge." Likewise, another logical fallacy exists labeled "naturalism-of-the-gaps" where naturalism becomes the default assumed explanation for things not currently understood.

On the contrary, it is argued that "naturalism-of-the-gaps" is more logical than "God-of-the-gaps" due to the past pattern of naturalism disproving past "God-of-the-gaps" explanations. However, there is a significant difference between past "God-of-the-gaps" arguments and arguing that miracles are supernaturally caused. Although science is an evolving body of knowledge, it has advanced sufficiently in certain areas to be able to say, "That cannot happen naturally." Concluding that events cannot occur naturally, and the cause must therefore be supernatural, is no longer an argument from current ignorance in science to supernatural causation. Instead, it is an argument from current knowledge in science to supernatural causation. Under these circumstances, the old-fashioned "God-of-the-gaps" argument no longer applies. Additionally, deeming "naturalism-of-the-gaps" as more logical than "God-of-the-gaps" due to the past assumes that science disproves the supernatural when explanations for unexplained events are discovered. This assumption does not take into account that the supernatural cannot be disproven by natural explanations if the supernatural hypothetically created the natural order. Requiring the supernatural to be proven through natural means requires an impossible burden of proof and ironically highlights the first part of the word "supernatural".

Lastly, an important difference between "God-of-the-gaps" and "naturalism-of-the-gaps" is that
naturalism is not always a possible explanation for the unexplained. For example, naturalism cannot explain non-physical entities such as laws of logic (Nix, 2011).

Another refutation is that some miracle claims are indeed caused naturally. Some conditions are thought to be healed when they only went into remission. Mistaking remission for healing can be resolved through long term monitoring. The rate of remissions have been estimated at approximately 1 in 60,000-100,000 cases (Keener, 2011). Therefore, repeated remission cases within a particular group where prayer has been offered would be incredibly unusual, yet this rarity does occur. Also, some conditions are not accurately initially diagnosed, but an initial diagnosis is certain regarding blindness, deafness, and the inability to walk. Other natural causes for healing include psychosomatic elements. Some studies have shown that hypnotism can reduce inflammation and pain. However, hypnosis cannot explain most current reports of miraculous healings (Keener, 2011). Many psychosomatic conditions exist. For example, non-organic vision loss is a clinical diagnosis, which is when a physician demonstrates that a patient’s vision is better than he or she alleges, and natural causes for the visual impairment cannot be found. Non-organic vision loss accounts for approximately 1% of visual problems seen by the optometrist (Beatty, 1999). The placebo effect is another psychological factor that can contribute to healing. An example of the placebo effect is when patients get better from a treatment that is proven to be medically worthless. Just believing in the effects of a treatment can have great physical effects. The placebo effect may contribute to some miracle claims, but it does not account for claims where a person did not have faith. Nevertheless, asserting that all miracles must have a natural explanation because some “miracles” have natural explanations is a form of bias called overgeneralization.
**Assumption #5**: The rarity of a miracle makes it less credible. David Hume, a philosopher from the 18th century, is well known for his arguments against the existence of miracles. One of his arguments is that the uniformity of human experience defending natural laws is more credible than human experiences of exceptions to natural laws. Some scholars believe that this is circular logic, because Hume claims that miracles cannot exist based on experience, yet also dismisses credible eyewitness testimony based on experience. This discrepancy illustrates how Hume defines truth by the sheer number of eyewitnesses. Scholar Dr. Keener (2011) says that, “While a testimony of an unusual event should be examined carefully, it is illogical to correlate the unusualness of an event with the unreliability of a report concerning it (p.157)”. The example Dr. Keener uses to illustrate his point is the probability of being dealt a perfect bridge hand, which is 1,635,013,559,600 to 1. Although this event is unlikely, it would be illogical to assume that because someone claims a perfect bridge hand that the report has an increased unreliability. Accuracy of testimony should not be graded according to the frequency of an event, but by factors such as reliability, motive for lying, and evidence that supports the testimony. Our modern math gives us degrees of probability and statistics, which exemplify that multiple, independent, and reliable witnesses increase the probability of a testimony’s accuracy. Mathematician Charles Babbage, originator of the programmable computer, stated that, “where a significant number of witnesses agree without prior collusion, an event’s probability increases sufficiently to overturn any biases against it (Keener, 2011).” Only an event’s probability of accuracy, not its interpretation, increases in correlation with its witnesses. Countless factors affect an interpretation of an event.

The vast majority of our general knowledge depends on others’ experiences rather than our own more limited personal experience. Even in evaluating historical events, we typically
accept eyewitness testimony, although not always their interpretation. Although all eyewitness testimony is influenced by the eyewitness’ interpretation, the United States assumes that events behind testimony can be deciphered, hence our court system. Testimony in the courtroom is considered legal proof; however, a difference between courtroom and miracle testimonies is that only natural events are testified about in a courtroom setting.

**Assumption #6**: Nonreplicable events without natural explanations are less credible. Because the academic circles in the Western world view these kinds of events as less credible, they are also viewed as less scientific. Peer review within the sciences typically prevents the publication of these events; however, dismissing miracles on this basis is ironic because miracles are anomalies by definition (Keener, 2011). Doctors who have claimed to witness miracles in their practice are reluctant to risk their reputation to verify them. This problem even affects anthropologists, who fear publishing anomalous experiences from their fieldwork. If anomalous experiences, without naturalist explanations, are rarely being published, then it is very difficult for academicians to examine evidence for miracle claims or to compose compilations for review. Viewing miracle claims as less scientific encourages a cycle of academicians excluding possible evidence for beliefs that are not currently held. An additional factor that may contribute to the Western focus on traditional, medicine forms of healing could be financially related. The pharmaceutical industry financially benefits from the focus on western medicine. Another ironic feature of academia is the tendency to dismiss claims of miracles that seem drastic. It is easier for academicians to accept that someone was healed from a headache instead of deafness or blindness. However, from an evidentiary approach, being healed from deafness or blindness would be much easier to debunk as a falsified miracle than a headache.
Academicians tend to be critical of non-natural explanations because they were trained in naturalist explanations, which should be used to decipher an event behind the interpretation. Empirical research can reveal falsified miracle claims and measure the empirical effects of perceived healing and supernatural experiences. From a doctor’s point of view, a person has either recovered from an ailment or has not. Establishing that a miracle claim has occurred does not prove the supernatural.

**MIRACLE ACCOUNTS:**

I have included a small selection of miracle claims to provide readers with a point of reference for understanding this thesis. Because the purpose of my thesis is to solely unmask assumptions about miracles, I have chosen not to provide a comprehensive compilation of diverse miracle claims. Therefore, my claims have many limitations including geographical, denominational, and evidentiary diversity. I would recommend my references to readers who desire a greater diversity of miracle claims. By citing miracles, I am not claiming that they are all caused by supernatural activity. Nor am I claiming that all of the miraculous claims have an equivalent amount of evidential weight. I am only claiming that others claim that the events are miraculous. I have included testimonies from events that have happened in my friends’ lives and testimonies from other scholars’ work. I believe that the friends who told me their testimonies are sincere, intelligent individuals, with little to gain from deception. I hope you enjoy reading about these claims and possibly stretching your mind. Hopefully, my work thus far has opened your mind to assumptions about miracles that you may have not been previously considered so that you can examine the following claims in a neutral manner by weighing the evidence while maintaining a healthy amount of skepticism.
MIRACLE ACCOUNTS FROM PERSONAL CONNECTIONS:

1) Abby is a friend who I met through Catalyst Training School during the summer of 2012. This is her account of having her back and feet healed:

I currently live in Tacoma, Washington and attend Pacific Lutheran University. I am in the Bachelor of Science Nursing Program. Being a nursing major at Pacific Lutheran University, I am required to be a very science and medical minded student. Being that way affects my every day thinking, especially when it comes to bodies and health. Going into Catalyst Training School during the summer of 2012, I had heard of God performing miracles and physical healings, but I never truly thought at the bottom of my heart that it would ever happen to me or that I would witness it personally. Being a nursing student I have been trained the same way that most people in the Western population think that medicine heals and medical treatments are the only way to fix things. I did not think it was scientifically possible, and it was too hard to believe. A few experiences changed my entire mindset.

One night, a group of us from the training school met two guys that were going around the city of Tacoma proclaiming that God heals people. We were all very interested in seeing what they had to say, but many of us were skeptical as well. As the two guys were talking to us, they asked if anyone had any back pain. I was one of two of us that raised their hand. I was diagnosed with scoliosis when I was 13 years old, having a 20% curve in two places in back. I used to have to wear a lift in my right shoe due to my right leg being shorter. It left me with chronic back pain.

One of the men asked me if I wanted God to heal me, if I wanted to be free of pain. I said yes, not knowing what was going to happen, but simply answering out of
truth that I did want the pain to go away. He had me reach my hands all the way out to
the sides as far as I could reach and then quickly bring my palms together in front of me,
my arms stretched out. Sure enough, because of my scoliosis my arms were different
lengths due to the curvature of my back. My left arm was shorter than my right arm.
Without touching me, the two evangelists began to pray for me. They prayed “In the
name of Jesus, I command this woman’s arms to come into alignment with the way they
were created to be. No pain in the name of Jesus, straighten out in the name of Jesus
Christ.” I looked at my arms and a tingling sensation came over them. I watched with my
very own eyes as my left arm grew out to meet the right arm, completely against my will.
I had not moved or done anything. It was the most strange feeling I had ever had, yet
without a doubt I watched my arm grow out. Immediately my back felt better.

I also have been struggling my whole life with foot pain as I have very large
bunions on my feet. This used to cause a lot of pressure on my toes, as the bunion pushed
them towards the side and they were crammed together. The next morning after my arms
and my back were healed, I began to tell other people about what happened to me. I
expressed to some of my friends that if God could heal my arms, I wanted to see him heal
my toes as well! In the back of my head I wasn’t sure if it would happen, human
reasoning creeping into my thoughts. But I asked anyways boldly as two of my friends,
who currently attend Indiana Wesleyan University prayed for my feet. The three of us
watched as all of my toes straightened out and were not squished together anymore. I had
plenty of room for all my toes and they were not slanted to the side anymore! My feet
were free of so much pain. We were all so amazed that simple prayers such as “Jesus,
come and heal her feet, we pray in the name of Jesus that her toes would straighten out,
her feet would come into alignment with Jesus Christ” would work! We began to really believe with our own eyes that God heals!

A month later after Catalyst Training School ended, I went back to my home in Corvallis, Oregon. I had my regular Chiropractic appointment at Heresco Chiropractic Clinic in Corvallis, where I had been going for 7 years since I was first diagnosed with scoliosis when I was 13 years old. I decided to go in and not say anything to my doctor when I went in, to make sure he noticed the difference in my back with no prior knowledge of what I felt. When he went to examine my back, he told me that he could not feel the curve in my back. He checked my hips and they were not out of alignment. He was so shocked and said he was so amazed at how much improvement I had in my back! He said there was no medical reason that I could have waited 3 months in between appointments for my back to look like that. The curve in my back he expected was healed by at least 15% if not more.

2) Laura Heimann is the mother of a friend I met while attending Ball State University. This is her account of having her neck healed:

My neck issues started in 1987 due to several accidents that I had in my vehicles that caused really bad whip lash. Eventually this caused several vertebra in my neck to pretty much fuse together, which decreased mobility and strength in my neck. It also caused me to have migraine headaches, which were so bad, so bad. I had 3 young children at the time. When the migraines first started I would just take as many Ibuprofens as I could, and keep taking them as frequently as I could to just decrease the pain that I would have. Eventually it got to the point that the migraines were debilitating when I would have them. My 3 young children would just sit around me and comfort me
and take care of each other and myself. At times my husband would have to come home from work, to try and help. I would also go to the chiropractor all the time to get some relief from these migraines, but that did not help a whole lot.

Then on one Sunday morning in March of 2012, I woke up with a migraine coming on and I could tell it was probably going to be a bad one, so I crammed the Ibuprofen down my throat, because I just wanted to go to church. During the church service a man stood up and said the healing presence of the Lord was there and that somebody with mental issues was being healed, and somebody with neck issues was being healed. Due to all the inflammation in my neck I could not tell a difference. But later in the day, I was turning my neck back and forth, and it was turning much easier. There was no cracking or anything. It was amazing, and I looked at my husband and said that it was my neck that was healed at church. It was confirmed by my doctor that I do not have any neck issues anymore, that they are completely gone. I just so praise my Lord Jesus Christ because this has given me so much freedom in life.

3) Lauren Johnson is a friend I met through Catalyst Training School during the summer of 2012. This is her account of having her knee healed:

My whole life I have suffered with chronic knee pain. I spent almost 6 months in a full leg cast my first grade year due to a bone disease in my knee. A small part of my knee cap wasn't getting blood, causing the bone to deteriorate. From there the pain continued. I was highly active in multiple sports growing up - soccer, swimming, softball, tennis. All of these sports only made the pain worse. I was wearing braces and icing to try and dull the pain but nothing worked. My junior year in high school I dislocated my knee which led to the discovery that the ligaments in my knee caps did not hold my knee caps
in place, causing them to partially dislocate. Because of this, the cartilage in my knees were ragged and worn. That year, I had surgery to sand the torn cartilage down. When the doctor performed the surgery, he let me know that it would not completely correct the problem and that I would most likely have to have the surgery multiple times in my life. Because of the surgery, I had no feeling in the right side of my left knee cap. In the years following the surgery, the pain continued and I had to give up a lot of physical activity, especially tennis due to the fact that too much pivoting caused too much pain.

Nine years later I went to Cambodia the summer of 2011. I attended a Christian conference where I was called forward to receive prayer for healing. I realized one of my legs was longer than the other, which was due to a bad break in my right leg when I was 13. I had prayer for healing, and my leg that was shorter grew out! In the year since the healing, I have experienced very little pain! I was able to complete a half marathon in May 2012. I am currently training for a full marathon on June 2nd of this year, 2013. Before my healing, I never would have been able to run 13.1 miles let alone 26.2! Feeling was restored to my knee cap, and I have been able to resume playing tennis and other sports. I no longer wear the shoes I wore prior to the healing, because even the way I walk has changed!

4) Candace Williamson is a friend I met through Catalyst Training School during the summer of 2012. This is her account of experiencing healing from anxiety and back pain:

I had anxiety my whole life, but I started getting really bad anxiety attacks in college. I even got in a lot of car accidents because of my inability to focus. If anything was ever unknown, like a weekend trip away from home, I would start panicking and
hyperventilating about packing. If there was ever a lot of attention on me, such as in a
group setting, I would run out of the room and start bawling. Because of these problems,
I was on medications for anxiety, depression, and ADHD. One morning during my junior
year of college, I heard God say, "You’ve been healed stop taking your medication." I
stopped taking the medications cold turkey without any withdrawals or problems, which
is unheard of. Since I heard God speak to me, I’ve never had an anxiety attack nor have I
ever felt out of control, which was frequent before God healed me.

I also used to have really bad back problems. My chronic pain started when I got
knee surgery on my left knee during my freshman year of college. After the surgery I
started having intense pain, specifically in my lower back. It would hurt even when I
would lay down, and I would go to chiropractors for help. Three years after the surgery
during my senior year of college in the fall of 2010, I went to the Azusa healing prayer
room in California. At one point, two girls went to the front of the room and said that
they felt that some of the people present in the healing room had back problems and that
God wanted to heal them that day. They asked everyone with back problems in the room
to raise their hand. I raised my hand, almost mocking them, because I did not really
believe that God would heal. The girls came over to me and asked me to sit in a chair.
They looked at my legs and it was apparent that my left leg was shorter than my right by
about 1 inch. They prayed for me and I saw my leg grow out. Not only did I see it, but the
girls praying for me and the whole group standing around me saw it too. I even felt my
leg growing, especially in the top of my leg in my hip area. I started cussing in the prayer
room because I was so shocked. I stood up and it took me a few steps to figure out how to
walk due to the difference in my leg. For months afterwards I did not have any back pain,
and my back still feels significantly better. I have had no chronic pain since the healing room experience two and a half years ago. If my back ever hurts now it is because I have not stretched. I do not go to chiropractors or doctors anymore for my back pain.

5) Amanda is the sister of Carly, who is mentioned at the beginning of the thesis. Amanda’s story had a large impact on my view of miracles due to its medical documentation. Here is Amanda’s healing account:

When I was in 5th grade, I was tested for scoliosis in school. The results showed that one hip was higher than the other and that my spine was slightly curved. The woman examining me stated that because my body was not finished growing, it would most likely develop into scoliosis. I went home that day and sat on my couch with my mother and sister and shared with them what had happened. My mother told me to place both feet in front of me. After doing this it was evident that there was a very noticeable difference in the length of my legs. We went to a doctor on a Tuesday and had this confirmed and documented. I went up for prayer at the next church service (which was the next day) and a lady laid her hand on my side. After the prayer was over I felt a shift in my hip. I didn’t have time to say what I had felt because the lady who had laid her hands on me was already saying that she felt a twist in my hip bone. She only knew about one leg being shorter than the other, but nothing about my hip. After church I went home and noticed that my leg was still shorter than the other. I knew that this is not what God had in store for me. He heals the sick and I knew it. That Sunday I went up for prayer again and I asked the preacher to agree with me that my leg would grow out and match the other. My whole family was there and the preacher sat me down in a chair and took off my shoes and held both feet in his hands. The difference in length was obviously still
evident. So he prayed and I believed that my God could do everything He said He would do for His children. During the prayer the shorter leg jerked and grew right then and there. Immediately. There were witnesses to this and they saw everything that happened. I went back to the doctor on the Tuesday after this event took place to confirm what had happened. The report came back completely different than what it was the first time. The leg that was shorter was now the same as the longer leg.

The before and after medical reports that Amanda mentions in her testimony are shown below:
INDICATION: Right leg believed to be longer than the left from scoliosis study.

IMPRESSION:

The right femur measures 461 mm from superior tip of the femoral head to the mid articular surface of the medial femoral condyle and the left femur measures 463 mm. On the right, the tibia measures 380 mm from a point in the central portion of the lateral tibial plate to the tibial plafond and on the left 377 mm. Overall, the right lower extremity measures 841 mm while the left measures 840 mm, therefore, representing no significant difference in limb length.
6) Joy is a student who graduated in 2009 from Taylor University located in Upland, Indiana (Heth, 2009). While a student at Taylor, she took four semesters of classes taught by Dr. Heth. Dr. Heth is a mentor of mine who I initially met at a religious function at Taylor University approximately a year and a half ago. He has also advised me in writing this thesis. Joy claims to have been healed from a lifelong condition of debilitating migraines, light sensitivity, and double vision. She had been diagnosed with “vertical heterophoria,” which is a visual impairment caused by a muscular imbalance. Dr. Heth was well acquainted with Joy, and he recalls her missing about one class period every week due to her severe migraines. During Joy’s final semester at Taylor, Dr. Heth invited her to a religious function on campus. Over the next month, Dr. Heth and students prayed for Joy in three successive prayer meetings before she was healed.

I talked with Joy on the phone, and she told me that she had not had a migraine since the day of her healing, which was 4 years ago. She told me that she has no reoccurring problems, and is 100% better (J. Wahnsfried, personal communication, April 20, 2013). Joy tells her story in Dr. Brown’s (2012) book, Testing Prayer, as follows:

[One evening] we began to pray for my healing. It was a great time of prayer but nothing was really happening. Until they [the worship band] began to play [the song] “Marvelous Light...Into marvelous light I’m running, / Out of darkness, out of shame.”

Well every time the light was mentioned) which happens a lot) God said to me “You get to live in the light, You get to live in the light.” Which as you may very well know I can’t be in the light when I have a migraine, because it hurts too much. But every time darkness is mentioned God says “that is not for you any more, you don’t have to live like that anymore.”... And I am feeling half of my skull being pulled upward (that sounds really weird but that’s what happened). Which makes sense... kinda...since my problem
was that my head was slightly lopsided. But it didn’t hurt just happened...God says to me
“Why are you wearing those glasses? You don’t need them anymore. Take them off...I
ask to borrow her [the woman praying for Joy] Bible. She says yes. And I can read.
Normally without my glasses the lines skip all over the place and do weird things that are
very confusing but nothing is happening it is all steady. [The group was] now singing
“Trading my Sorrows” which goes “I’m trading my sickness / I’m trading my pain / I’m
laying it down for the joy of the Lord.” Which is SOOOO true.

Joy’s medical records that confirm her healing are shown below (Brown, 2012):

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To Whom It May Concern:

[Redacted] is a lovely young woman who has severe, debilitating migraines. They have been well controlled since she received prism glasses. She has vertical heterophoria, which is a medical condition of the eyes caused by muscular imbalance. As long as she has her glasses, she does very well. Other triggers for her migraines are: irregular sleep, irregular meals, stress, and cats.

[Redacted] will occasionally have breakthrough migraines. When she gets a headache, they often last five to seven days. Her symptoms include throbbing pain, vomiting, pallor, and difficulty concentrating. For these headaches, she uses Vicoprofen and goes to sleep. For prophylaxis, she uses Melatonin in the evenings.

[Redacted]’s migraines may occasionally interfere with her class attendance, but I know she will be a successful college student. She is very stoic and is a dedicated student. She requested that I write a quick note to let you know her migraine history.

If you care for more information, please call anytime.

Sincerely,
[Redacted] M.D.
Figure 3.7a–c. Optometry records for Joy. (a) Doctor's letter giving diagnosis of vertical heterophoria, treated by prism glasses, 2005. (b) Optometrist's prescription for prism lenses, 2006. (c) Letter from the same optometrist, who prescribed prism lenses in 2006, indicating that Joy no longer requires corrective lenses for driving, 2009. Courtesy Joy.
To Whom It May Concern:

I last evaluated [Individually Relevant Information]'s vision on [Individually Relevant Information], 2009. [Individually Relevant Information]'s unaided distance visual acuity tested at 20/20. It is my determination, upon completion of my examination, that [Individually Relevant Information] no longer requires corrective lenses for driving.

Thank You,
MIRACLE ACCOUNTS FROM OTHER SCHOLARS' WORK:

1) Dr. Brown is currently a professor at Indiana University. In 2010, she was a part of a team that published a clinical study about the effects of prayer in the *Southern Medical Journal*. The clinical study was designed to assess any possible changes that occur during direct contact prayer. By measuring auditory and visual impairments, she chose ailments that are relatively less sensitive to psychosomatic factors. Dr. Brown and the other researchers on her team used an audiometer and vision charts to measure any changes before and after direct contact prayer. Dr. Brown's team traveled to rural Mozambique to conduct this study due to the presence of a Christian mission organization called Iris Ministries that had been reporting many healings. Iris ministry members were performing the direct contact prayer aspect of the study. Dr. Brown's team tested 24 consecutive Mozambican subjects who reported auditory and/or visual impairments. The measurements showed high significant auditory improvements in the subjects after they had received prayer. Two of the subjects had the thresholds of their hearing reduced by 50 decibels (Brown, 2012). In order to give meaning to that reduction, a person with a threshold of 100 decibels has the ability to hear a motorcycle if he is standing right next to it, and a person with a threshold of 0 decibels has the ability to hear perfectly in a quiet environment.

Statistically, the probabilities of these auditory improvements were highly unlikely given the assumed hypothesis: that prayer would have no significant effect on the subjects (p < .003). With a probability this low, enough evidence is provided to reject the hypothesis.

Visual improvements were statistically significant (p < .02), which similar to the auditory improvement probabilities, means that there is enough evidence to reject the hypothesis. Three of the subjects went from 20/400 or worse to 20/80 or better (Brown, 2012). If a subject has 20/400 vision, he has the ability to read a vision chart from 20 feet away as well as a person with perfect
vision could read the same chart from 400 feet away. For a visual representation of the data discussed, please reference the graphs below. A much more detailed account of this study is discussed in Dr. Brown’s book, *Testing Prayer*. A replication study in Brazil produced similar results to those found in Mozambique.
Individual binocular vision changes

Visual acuity (6/x)

Measurement Limit

Before
After

Subject
2) Eduard Schweizer is a biblical scholar who taught at the University of Zürich in Switzerland. Schweizer witnessed a miracle that cannot be attributed to the Christian God where an Indian stabbed himself in the heart without dying. He recounts the experience in Miracles by Dr. Keener (2011):

There was an Indian in Zürich some decades ago who had a dagger driven through his heart, a feat that he had demonstrated before in other places. My colleagues in the medical faculty controlled and x-rayed everything. There was not the slightest doubt that a miracle had happened; he should have been dead, but he did not follow suit and remained alive. The experiment was even repeated afterwards. Yet we did not believe in that man and he did not want to lead us to believe in his god. (p. 243)

3) Dr. Keener (2011) accounts a miracle that was witnessed by a friend of his, Byron Klaus, who is a U.S. seminary president. Mr. Klaus prayed for a four-year-old girl in Caracas, Venezuela, with a deadly immune deficiency similar to HIV. The widowed mother took the child for another blood test where in contrast to previous tests, the child’s immune system was normal. Mr. Klaus sent Dr. Keener the improved test results. At the time that Dr. Keener published Mr. Klaus’ miracle account, the child was 16 years old.

CONCLUSION

This thesis begins with my personal journey of understanding miracles in order to challenge others’ initial perceptions. Through hearing accounts from different people, I gradually came to believe that miracles were more probable than I had previously thought. Then, after visiting Asia, my opinion on the greater likelihood of miracles was reinforced, and I also experienced a culture where it was exceptionally abnormal to believe in naturalism. Experiencing this contrast
in cultures inspired me to write a thesis that would confront six assumptions that affect Westerners’ beliefs about the occurrences of miracles.

The first assumption discusses how ethnocentrism can be a factor in evaluating the beliefs of other cultures, specifically those with a supernatural worldview. It is a known tendency to view other cultures’ views as less credible merely because they are different than one’s own views. It is important to acknowledge that a lack of education and knowledge about science is not the main cause for belief in miracles. The second assumption addresses how the existence of false miracle claims does not mean that all miracle claims must be fraudulent. This assumption is an example of overgeneralization. The third assumption is that if a miracle can be explained in part by natural means, then the miracle claim must be invalid. If an ailment was healed unnaturally and without medical technology, then the healing process should be labeled supernatural. The fourth assumption is that a natural explanation exists for every miracle claim. Asserting that science will always provide an explanation in the future contributes little to present investigation. Science must determine conclusions based on current information while being open to possible alternative explanations. The fifth assumption is that the rarity of a miracle makes it less credible. Many events have occurred that are unusual yet trustworthy. The sixth assumption is that nonreplicable events without natural explanations are less credible. This assumption addresses the need in Western, scientific circles for the acceptance of anomalous events. While science cannot prove the supernatural, the perceived effects of the supernatural can be empirically studied. Even if miraculous healing is due to a placebo effect, that placebo effect should be given due focus in research. Others could benefit from knowing more about being healed in this way, especially if there is empirical evidence for people being healed of ailments.
that our current medical technology has no cure for. Making an increased allowance for events that cannot be explained naturally to be in peer review journals is the first step to further study.

The last section of the thesis includes accounts of miracles, which give a point of reference for understanding this thesis and also the opportunity for readers to evaluate miracles without the aforementioned assumptions. Being open minded about miracles and the possibility of supernatural causation is necessary to evaluate evidence objectively and attain an unbiased conclusion. In my discussions with people who have a naturalist worldview, I discovered that many people are hesitant to consider the possibility that the miracle claims actually occurred. This is unscientific because from a doctor’s point of view, either an ailment is healed or it is not. Additionally, asserting that there is no possibility for supernatural causation poses a nearly impossible burden of proof. This burden of proof makes me ask, “If a supernatural being or force hypothetically existed and was interacting with the natural world, what could serve as proof? Could there ever be a point where the supernatural is deemed a possible cause?”

References
References


