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**Abstract:** Abstract: We argue that the use of publicly funded medical facilities for patients who are waiting for a miracle amounts to discrimination against atheists, agnostics and advocates, of faiths that do not accept miracle claims. The only exception is when this use can be justified by considerations that demonstrate that waiting makes it more likely that a miracle will occur and will aid the patient's recovery. Such justification can be grounded on considerations of faith or of reason. We consider both possibilities and suggest conditions of acceptability for both. In arguing this way, we steer a middle path between discrimination against atheists, agnostics, and advocates of faiths that do not accept miracle claims – miraculism – and a failure to respect religious belief.

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## **Waiting for a Miracle...Miracles, Miraclism and Discrimination**

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### **Key Points**

1. The use of publicly funded medical facilities for patients who are waiting for a miracle amounts to discrimination against atheists, agnostics and advocates of faiths that do not accept miracle claims, unless this use can be justified.
2. We argue that justification for the use of publicly funded medical facilities for patients who are waiting for a miracle can be grounded on considerations of faith or reason.
3. There are stringent conditions that apply to justification via either faith or reason, for the use of publicly funded medical facilities for patients who are waiting for a miracle which we specify.
4. The application of our conditions of justification steers a middle path between discrimination against atheists, agnostics and advocates of faiths that do not accept miracle claims – miraclism – and a failure to respect religious belief.

### **Key Words**

Miracle; miraclism; discrimination; faith; reason

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## Abstract

We argue that the use of publicly funded medical facilities for patients who are waiting for a miracle amounts to discrimination against atheists, agnostics and advocates of faiths that do not accept miracle claims except when this use can be justified by considerations that demonstrate that waiting makes it more likely that a miracle will occur and will aid the patient's recovery. Such justification can be grounded on considerations of faith or of reason. We consider both possibilities and suggest conditions of acceptability for both. In arguing this way we steer a middle path between discrimination against atheists, agnostics and advocates of faiths that do not accept miracle claims – miraculism – and a failure to respect religious belief.

## Waiting for a Miracle...Miracles, Miraculism and Discrimination

Consider the following sort of case. Following a brain injury a patient is rendered deeply unconscious and kept alive in a hospital with the use of life support systems. Received medical opinion is that the patient has no possibility of ever recovering consciousness and being taken off life support. After some time passes the patient's family is advised of the prognosis and it is recommended that life support is switched off and that the patient be allowed to die because the prognosis is hopeless. However, the patient's family object to life support being switched off, on the grounds that they are waiting for a miracle to happen, which will enable the patient to live a normal life, and they argue that he should be allowed to remain on life support until the occurrence of this miracle.

Acceding to the request of such a patient's family might be unobjectionable in cases where the family is willing to meet the costs of the further use of life-support. However, when the family requests the use of publicly-funded medical facilities in order to wait for a miracle, then doctors and medical administrators are faced with a difficult dilemma. The use of life support is expensive and it seems that the use of it in circumstances that are not available to atheists, agnostics and advocates of faiths that do not accept miracle claims amounts to *discrimination* against atheists, agnostics and advocates of faiths that do not accept miracle claims [1]. We call this form of discrimination, *miraculism*. All of these groups are entitled to object to the use of public monies that they have contributed to, by way of the tax system, being spent to indulge the fanciful claims of particular religious groups. On the other hand, believers may argue that the conviction that God is likely to intervene in the world makes sense if one accepts the central

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tenets of their particular faith and that they deserve exceptional care in such circumstances, on grounds of respect for religious belief.

Ordinarily a doctor would be willing to support a request for the further use of life support in situations where, despite initial appearances, he or she was persuaded to think that the patient had a not-insignificant chance of recovery. There would need to be a rational basis for such a belief, such as some prognostic factor or new diagnosis. So it seems that the family of the patient needs to provide reason to think that waiting for a miracle makes it more likely that a miracle will occur, which will increase that patient's chances of recovery. It might perhaps be argued that we should expend public resources waiting for a miracle, regardless of considerations of the benefits of waiting, simply out of respect for religious belief, even if the family in question do not believe that this will increase the patient's chances of recovery. We will return to consider this line of thought. But for now let us assume that the family in question really do believe that waiting will make it more likely that a miracle will occur. Why might they believe this? Could this be *rational*, like identifying some new relevant prognostic indicator? We think that there are basically two sorts of considerations that might motivate their belief. First, they may think that it is rational to believe that a miracle is to be expected under certain circumstances. Second, they may be motivated to believe that a miracle has a not-insignificant chance of occurring, in virtue of considerations of faith. It is common amongst non-believers to suppose that it is not possible to provide evidence that a miracle is to be rationally expected. Although both authors of this paper are non-believers, we do not share this view. We will go show that under some circumstances it is rational to believe that a miracle has occurred, or to believe that a miracle may

occur in the future. But before we do that let us consider the motivation that faith provides for belief that a miracle may occur.

### *Faith*

Sometimes people who claim that a miracle has occurred turn out not to be claiming that an event has occurred which provides evidence of supernatural intervention in the natural world. Instead they turn out to be claiming that an event has occurred which has evoked a sense of wonder in them and thereby reaffirmed their faith. When people talk about the 'miracle of birth' this is typically what they mean. They are not claiming that God had a special role in causing a particular birth. They may, however, be making the further claim that their experience of a sense of wonder, as a result of observing a particular event, such as a birth taking place, has caused them to believe in God, or has reaffirmed their faith on God's existence. This sense of the term 'miracle' is a subjective one. One person might experience a sense of wonder when a remarkable event such as a birth occurs, while another has no such experience. The event is, therefore, a miracle for the former but not the latter. The legitimacy of this subjective sense of the miraculous is recognised by a number of thinkers including R.F. Holland [2] and Peter Winch [3]. We have no objection to this kind of talk about miracles, however we do not see this as relevant to the case under discussion. People who expect that their unconscious relatives will become conscious, in defiance of medical opinion, do not merely expect that their faith will be reaffirmed, if this happens. Rather, they are claiming that they expect God to intervene and alter the natural world.

No doubt some considerations of faith do motivate people to expect God to intervene and alter the natural world. However the most significant theologians who represent most mainstream Christian faiths do not encourage belief in faith as a legitimate basis for expectation of divine intervention. Mainstream protestant theologians and liberal Catholics have long been opposed to the idea of God intervening in the natural world – ‘special divine action’ – [4, 5], which we take to be a necessary condition for a miracle, in the non-subjective sense of the term, to occur. Even the bare possibility of special divine action is a subject of dispute amongst scientifically informed theologians [6]. Traditionalist Catholic theological authorities, who do allow for the possibility of special divine action, apply very strict evidential standards before they are willing to accept that a miracle has actually occurred [7]. So it seem to us that most of those who are waiting for a miracle on the basis of faith are unlikely to receive theological encouragement to continue this wait, at least in Western countries that have Christian majorities. Furthermore, it seems to us that it would be irresponsible of religious leaders of these faith groups not to actively discourage their members from placing their faith in the expectation of miracles occurring. A miracle is an intervention in the natural world by a supernatural agent, such as God and is not subject to human prediction or human control. A person who was actually able to influence when a supernatural intervention was to take place would be a magician rather than a miracle worker [8].

It may be that some believers belong to churches and other religious organisations that do provide theological encouragement for belief in miracles and it may be that some members of more mainstream religious groups believe that they have some sort of special reason to have faith that a miracle may save their relative, even if they concede that this is not true of most other members of their faith group. However, before we would consider a faith-based motive for

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waiting for a miracle to be an acceptable ground for the expenditure of extra resources on believers, we would need to see a further piece of justification, a justification for the act of waiting. God may be capable of intervening in the natural world and may be inclined to do so, to heal some ill individuals. However, it is very hard to see why waiting for God to intervene is going to make it more likely that God will intervene in the case of any particular individual. What exactly are we supposed to be waiting for? And how long should we wait? A day, a week, a month, a year? Perhaps some think of God as indecisive and liable to change His mind on the issue of whether or not to perform a particular miracle, if given sufficient time. But this would be a very idiosyncratic conception of God. Others may suppose, somewhat more plausibly, that some activity may occur within the required time frame that may prompt God to change His mind and perform a miracle. For example, God might respond to (lots of?) devout prayer by performing a healing miracle.

Although we grant that the above line of reasoning has a certain superficial plausibility, we still do not think that it is a very good reason to justify the use of public resources. If God can in fact intervene in the natural world and is inclined to do so, then it seems to us that God can intervene in the natural world and bring a dead relative back to life, in response to prayer. Give that this is as plausible a scenario as the occurrence of a healing miracle, and given that it does not tie up public resources, we do not think that the appeal to the power of prayer is a suitable basis for the use of public resources. Perhaps, out of considerations of justice in the use of resources, such people should rather be praying for the resurrection of their dead relatives. We don't dismiss outright the possibility that there might be a faith based justification for the belief that the recovery of a patient on life support becomes more likely if we are willing to wait for a miracle.

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However, we think that the prospects for making this case are difficult. They require both a theological justification for the belief that miracles are at least somewhat likely and they require a coherent justification for the claim that keeping a person on life support alive is a way to increase the likelihood of a miracle occurring. But as we have seen, neither of these justificatory claims are easy to provide.

### *Reason*

The second way to justify the claim that a miracle is likely to occur is via reason. How might one go about providing evidence to back up the claim that a miracle can reasonably be expected to occur? The best way that we can think of is to demonstrate that relevantly similar miracles have occurred in the past. If this can be demonstrated then it may be possible to provide evidence that further miracles may occur in relevantly similar circumstances. One stumbling block here is that there is a strong tradition in philosophy of regarding the very concept of miracle as incoherent. Indeed David Hume [9] is often interpreted as arguing for just this conclusion. On this reading – influentially advocated by Antony Flew in his introduction to Hume’s *Of Miracles* – Hume defines a miracle as “a violation of a law of nature” and then shows us that laws of nature cannot be violated because this would involve them having exceptions, but laws of nature just are exceptionless regularities and evidence of an exception to a law of nature would be evidence that we were mistaken in our initial formulation of the law of nature. So it would be impossible to find evidence of the existence of miracles; indeed the very concept ‘miracle’ is understood by Flew’s Hume to be incoherent.

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We argue, following Clarke [10], that there is an important distinction to be drawn between a violation of a law of nature and a mere exception to a law of nature. A violation is the interference in an otherwise law-governed nature by a supernatural agent, such as God. Laws of nature govern the behaviour of the natural realm when it is not interfered with by supernatural agents. A natural exception to a law of nature would indeed be incoherent, but a supernatural violation of a law of nature is perfectly coherent. We do not want to insist that every miracle necessarily involves a violation of the laws of nature – perhaps there are aspects of the natural world that are ungoverned by laws of nature and God might intervene in these without violating any laws. However, we do want to insist that all of those miracle reports that it might be rational for us to accept must involve evidence of violations of laws of nature. Without a violation of a well-established law of nature, we have no good reason to believe that the event that has occurred, which is alleged to be caused by the activity of the supernatural, is not in fact an ordinary natural event of a type that we are not familiar with. The Indian Prince, discussed in Hume's *Of Miracles* [9], understood a claim that water had become solid to be a claim that a miracle has occurred (which he refused to accept), because he was unfamiliar with the natural behaviour of water at temperatures below 0 degrees Celsius. And it seems generally true that many of us are unfamiliar with the range of possible ways in which natural objects may behave. In cases where we have established laws of nature we have *prima facie* grounds for believing that an object that behaves in ways that are discordant with relevant laws of nature has behaved unnaturally. In cases where we only have a partial understanding of the range of possible ways in which natural objects behave we are in no position to rule out naturalistic explanations, so we are in no position to rule in explanatory appeals to the supernatural.

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To appeal to the occurrence of a miracle is also to explain the occurrence of an event, by appeal to supernatural intervention in the natural world. Before we accept any given instances of this form of explanation we need to consider our explanatory alternatives. One sort of alternative is provided by possible rival explanations that only appeal to natural factors. Another sort of alternative is proved by demonstrating that apparently non-natural elements appealed to in an explanation are, despite appearances, natural phenomena. A third alternative is to withhold judgment. We can concede that we don't currently know how to explain the occurrence of a particular event; appeal to the supernatural may be the best currently available explanatory alternative, but we may nevertheless decide to withhold judgment because we recognise are currently unaware of all relevant evidence and we have some reason to believe that new evidence may come in that provides a basis for a naturalistic alternative to appeal to the supernatural. A final alternative is to deny that the alleged event actually occurred. Rather than seek to explain how it is possible that an event may have taken place we look for an explanation as to why a particular person or persons is claiming that it has taken place.

It is not rational to accept that a miracle has occurred when even one of the above four explanatory alternatives to acceptance of the occurrence of a miracle is viable. This is because it is reasonable to believe that instances where it is appropriate to employ one of the four explanatory alternatives are much more common than instances where appeal to the miraculous is appropriate. Explanations that appeal only to natural factors are very common, instances when apparently non-natural phenomena turn out to be natural are not uncommon, instances where new evidence becomes available that enables us to provide a naturalistic explanation of an event that

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could hitherto only be explained by appealing to the supernatural are not uncommon and instances where people allege events to have occurred that have not in fact occurred are depressingly common.

Even when we have identified an apparent exception to a law of nature – an anomaly – we may have not done enough to establish that the prospects for naturalistic explanation have been exhausted. Some apparent exceptions to reliable law-like generalisations can be explained by appeal to the activity of other natural factors that interfere with the way in which natural phenomena would otherwise behave. It is a law that all objects on the Earth's surface are gravitationally attracted to the Earth such that they accelerate toward the Earth's surface at  $9.8\text{M/S}^2$  and indeed most objects fall to the ground when dropped. However helium balloons do not fall to the ground when dropped and nor do pigeons. These anomalies are not exceptions to our law. Rather, they are explained by appeal to what philosophers call *ceteris paribus* clauses. We are entitled to appeal to implicit *ceteris paribus* clauses in the formulation of laws such as the law of gravity precisely because we are able to provide convincing reasons to explain away apparent exceptions. We can explain why it is reasonable to believe that the force of gravity really operates on helium balloons and pigeons, but does not, nevertheless, cause them to fall to the ground. Other apparent exceptions to laws of nature can be dealt with by revising our laws of nature or by accepting that we do not, after all, have knowledge of laws of nature that are relevant to the behaviour of the object in question.

As we have already argued, epistemic humility is generally a better option than acceptance of the occurrence of supernatural intervention in the natural world. There is much that we do not know

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about the behaviour of objects in the natural world and mostly it is better to admit ignorance and accept that law-like generalisations that we thought we had established turn out not to be genuine laws. Mostly this is a more sensible option to take than the drastic alternative of holding that our law-like generalisation is a genuine law of nature but that nature has been supernaturally violated. However, this will not always be the case. Giving up very well established laws of nature involves giving up a lot of explanatory power. If we manage to establish a genuine exception to the law of gravity that we have no prospect of explaining by legitimate appeal to a *ceteris paribus* clause then we'd better seriously consider appealing to supernatural violation of the natural realm because many, many scientific explanations involve the assumption that the law of gravity holds and it seems foolhardy to give up all of these rather than retain these and accept that a miracle has occurred.

In line with the above discussion, Clarke [10] has considered the rational acceptability of miracles and considers that it is rational to accept that a miracle has occurred when the following five conditions obtain.

1. We are confronted with repeated, reliable reports of a type of event which is an anomaly to a well-established law of nature.
2. The relation between the law and the anomaly is such that we are unable to rationally justify allowing the exception as a *ceteris paribus* clause to the law, and we have no realistic expectation of being able to do so in the foreseeable future.

3. Accepting that the anomaly is a supernaturally caused violation of the well-established law of nature, a miracle, does allow us to explain its occurrence by placing it within a theological framework.
4. Explaining the anomaly as miraculous allows us to retain the well-established law as an exception-less regularity, when appropriately restricted to the description of naturally caused events.
5. The theology we commit ourselves to when postulating the occurrence of miracles does not itself raise too many further problems for the coherence of our stock of accepted beliefs to warrant its rejection.

It is possible to provide sufficient evidence to support claim that a miracle has occurred and it is possible, on the basis of such evidence, to ground the claim that it is *prima facie* plausible to think that a relevantly similar miracle may occur in the future. But as we have seen the evidential standards that we require here are demanding. We are not aware of any rationally-grounded request to wait for a miracle which has ever occurred.

### *Conclusion*

Our concern is to navigate a path between discrimination in favour of those who hold religious beliefs and unfair dismissal of religiously-based beliefs. Our approach has been to argue that the expenditure of additional resources might be justified in cases where it can be shown that

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particular believers have a faith-based theological justification for the belief that miracles are at least somewhat likely and have a coherent justification for the claim that keeping a person on life support alive is a way to increase the likelihood of a miracle occurring. It can also be justified, in cases where a *prima facie* case can be made for the rational plausibility of the claim that there is evidence that a particular miracle has a not insignificant chance of occurring is made, on the basis of a rationally based case for the occurrence of past miracles. We don't think that either of these forms of justification will support very many attempts to justify the use of public resources to keep patients on life support whilst waiting for a miracle, even if they do support a few. To grant special access to public resources to those who are waiting for a miracle would be unfair discrimination in favour of miracle-believers.

We anticipate that some will hold that we have not shown genuine respect for religious belief. Our view of what it is to show respect for others is, in the tradition of Kant, closely tied to respecting their normative reasons and their rational nature. However, reasons must be rational, not just central, and requests a reflection of rational nature. So we do think that we are showing respect to others just by asking for an articulation of their reasoning, however, flawed, biased, idiosyncratic or emotionally held. In any case, if we are to authorise the expenditure of additional resources in circumstances in which an articulated justification is not provided, we would be opening the door to many, many similar belief claims because there are few if any constraints on what may count as an unjustified religious belief. So we would be indulging in rampant discrimination in favour of the religious and against atheists and agnostics – miraculism – which we take to be unacceptable.

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