

A humanist discussion of... the paranormal, miracles and faith healing

What is the paranormal?

Paranormal events are by definition outside the normal course of events. They appear to be impossible or to defy the laws of science. Often believers and practitioners claim to have discovered different laws or some kind of parallel universe where such things can happen. For many people today, belief in para-psychology, ghosts, visits from aliens, new age mysticism, astrology, tarot cards, feng shui, have taken the place of belief in religious miracles or a powerful God. Similar objections can be made to all these beliefs.

And miracles?

Miracles are naturally impossible occurrences supposedly brought about by a deity: statues weeping blood or milk; a man walking on water; a dead person returning to life. Sometimes recoveries from serious illness are hailed as miracles or attributed to the powers of a faith healer. If there are rational explanations for these events, they are no longer miracles.

The humanist view

"A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence," wrote David Hume, the eighteenth century enlightenment philosopher. He meant that we should examine evidence, weigh up probabilities and base our beliefs on reason and experience. We should doubt things for which there is no good evidence. This way of looking at the world is called scepticism, and humanists share a sceptical worldview.

Based on reason and experience, some things are just more probable and believable than others. Hume thought the following much more likely than a genuine miracle:

- Lying or fraud, perhaps with the intention of strengthening religious faith.
- Error and credulousness, particularly when the desire to believe is so strong.
- Distortions over time and distance - miracles often seem to happen far away or long ago. They never seem to happen in experimental situations where they can be repeated and properly tested.

These objections are just as relevant today, and apply just as much to faith healing, some non-conventional or alternative medicines and

therapies, and visits from little people from outer space. In addition today there is big money in miracles and the paranormal: newspapers love them and rarely publish contradictory evidence; they make exciting and popular television; some faith healers, astrologers and psychics make a lot of money.

So what are the rational explanations?

Faith healing and non-conventional medical treatments sometimes do seem to work and probably work in much the same ways. Many sick people just get better - the body heals itself. Sometimes there has been a misdiagnosis, so that the case was not in fact as hopeless as had been thought. Sometimes the mind does affect the body, and if the patient believes in the treatment, s/he will get better. This is recognised in conventional medicine too, and is called "the placebo effect". Some unconventional treatments may work in ways which have not yet been discovered or are only just being tested, for example acupuncture. And some do not work at all, and may even be dangerous if they stop someone seriously ill seeking the medical help s/he needs.

Many so-called miracles are fakes, or coincidences, or based on wishful thinking. For example the Turin shroud has been revealed as a medieval fake, and religious statues weeping blood can be explained scientifically - water builds up in the porous clay of the statue and oozes out of tiny flaws in the glaze, sometimes coloured by pigments in the clay. "Miracles" may be fraudulent or they may just be colourful interpretations of unusual natural events.

Many supposedly paranormal events are also fakes, coincidences or delusions of some kind. Many seem to happen to people on their own, often in the middle of the night when they must be at least half asleep. Few scientists believe in them.

Isn't it all just harmless fun?

- It certainly can make good fictional entertainment. The X-Files and horoscopes are fun, as long as you don't believe them or let them influence your life. But when major banks and world leaders consult astrologers (as some do), there is cause for concern.
 - Some aspects are relatively harmless - no great harm can come to you if you re-arrange your room or house according to feng-shui principles and it may even be a lot tidier, though it could be expensive and time-consuming.
 - On the other hand, if you care about reason and truth, these beliefs are offences against both. There is no good evidence for any of them.
 - They allow the vulnerable to be exploited. Is it right for evangelical "healers" to raise people's hopes or to tell them that they are sick
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because they are sinful or haven't donated enough money? And why would a benevolent deity get involved in this kind of exploitation?

- Some alternative therapies cost people thousands of pounds and do no good at all. If they encourage ill people to delay getting proper treatment, they may in fact do harm.
- Police use of psychics must waste valuable time when they could be using more reliable methods to catch criminals.

Questions to think about and discuss

- What would be good evidence of a miracle?
- What would be good evidence of a visitor from outer space?
- Do you know your star sign? Do you read, and believe, your horoscope? Why?
- Have you ever had such a vivid dream that you thought it was real when you woke up?
- Have you ever had an illness that got better with no treatment at all?
- How are you answering these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

Further reading

David Hume *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1777), Chapter X
