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The Solipsist's Guide To Miracles

by Dr Alan Branford (© 16 June 2021)

Abstract

Modern medical research by cognitive neuroscientists suggests that for cognition the brain gathers information from all available sensory sources and builds a model of the world around us from those inputs, using experience and a certain amount of guessing in order to deal with missing or conflicting information. Philosophers would regard this model of cognition as "solipsistic". Considering the action of the Holy Spirit as another form of sensory input provides a different lens through which to view Christian miracles.

Short Talk

There is no such thing as reality, only perception

I find this aphorism useful to remind me that our understanding of the existence in which we find ourselves is mediated by the senses that feed into our brains and are then processed by our minds. Philosophers term this view "solipsistic", from the Latin words "solus" (alone) and "ipse" (self).

The first widespread study of solipsism was in the seventeenth century, led by the writings of René Descartes (born March 31st, 1596, La Haye, Touraine, France—died February 11th, 1650, Stockholm, Sweden), a French-born mathematician, scientist, and philosopher, who spent most of his career in the Netherlands. He is considered the "father of modern philosophy" and he famously wrote "*cogito, ergo sum*", meaning "I think, therefore I am". Descartes also contributed greatly to Mathematics and from the Latinised form of his last name we get the adjective "cartesian".

Philosophers view that solipsism denies that the human mind has any valid ground for believing in the existence of anything but itself. Presented as a solution of the problem of explaining human knowledge of the external world, they conclude that it is a *reductio ad absurdum*, and have therefore discarded solipsism as a school of thought.

Modern medical research by cognitive neuroscientists however consider solipsism as the basis of cognition. The brain gathers information from all available sensory sources and builds a model of the world around us from those inputs, using experience and a certain amount of guessing in order to deal with missing or conflicting information.

Remarkably, Descartes himself offered of the order of four "proofs" of the existence of God. Unsurprisingly, later philosophers deemed them all circular arguments. They were inevitably so.

The existence of God can neither be proved nor disproved. Some antitheists might regard this as a convenient cop-out. They might be surprised then to learn that such conundrums also haunt academic disciplines such as Mathematics (e.g. the "Continuum Hypothesis")!

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Mathematics underwent a revolution of sorts, in which there was considerable abstraction of concepts that ultimately formed the foundations of modern Mathematics. In the thick of this was Georg Cantor (1845–1918) and in 1878 he advanced what we now call the Continuum Hypothesis¹: there is no set whose cardinality is strictly between that of the integers and that of the real numbers. Cantor, though, was unable to prove his hypothesis (or find a counter-example), and so the problem remained unsolved.

The continuum hypothesis was considered so important an unsolved problem at the end of that century that the German mathematician David Hilbert (1862–1943) listed it first in his now famous consolidation of 23 major unsolved problems presented in 1900 at the International Congress of Mathematicians in Paris.

So, has the continuum hypothesis been solved? In a sense, it has; but in many ways it remains not so much *unsolved* as *unresolved*. The work of Kurt Gödel² (1906–1978) and Paul Cohen³ (1934–2007) established that the continuum hypothesis could neither be proved nor disproved!

In my world-view, or should I say cosmos-view, I have the following three axioms.

The Ontological Axiom: God is the essence of being. (In other words, the fact that I am able to utter the Cartesian “*cogito, ergo sum*” is because God exists.)

The Ineffability Axiom: God is ineffable. (That is, I am incapable of fully understanding the nature of God.)

The Holy Dove Axiom: God interacts with people through the Holy Spirit acting on their consciousness. (This axiom was invoked earlier when I added the Holy Spirit to the list of senses through which the human mind interacts with its surroundings.)

I. The Holy Dove Identifies Jesus to John the Baptist

(Read Mark 1:1-8; John 1:23; Isaiah 40:3; John 1:29-34)

A man known to history as John the Baptist had gathered a deal of fame, and a number of followers, by baptizing people with water in the River Jordan at a place called Bethany, on the eastern side of the river just north of where it enters the Dead Sea.

John the Baptist had long been in communion with the Holy Spirit, and he knew that he was the man whom the prophet Isaiah had identified in Isaiah 40:3. John the Baptist steadfastly claimed that he was “not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet” when he was interrogated as to who he was by the priests and the Levites who had been sent by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (John 1:19-28). In particular, John the Baptist’s response was as follows.

John 1:23

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

(John 1:23, *New International Version*)

¹ Koellner, Peter, “The Continuum Hypothesis”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/continuum-hypothesis/>>

² Gödel, K. *The Consistency of the Continuum-Hypothesis*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940

³ Cohen, P. J. “The Independence of the Continuum Hypothesis”, *Proc. Nat. Acad. Sci. U. S. A.* **50**, 1143-1148, 1963

There was a day whose eternal significance cannot be overstated, and I think that the description of what happened that day is best left to the Evangelist:

John 1:32-34

³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

(John 1:32-34, New International Version)

Note that John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the latter approached, as the dove descended and settled on Jesus. This happened *before* John baptized Jesus with water. The Holy Spirit pointed out the Christ to John the Baptist by this vision of a dove descending and settling on Jesus. John the Baptist then baptized Jesus the Christ with water.

Here, clearly, there was a miracle. John could **see** the dove, yet no-one else could. I feel sure that had there been an ability then to map John's brain function, the regions associated with vision would have been buzzing, just as John himself was buzzing with the Holy Spirit. In the solipsistic view I described above, the Holy Spirit had provided John with an extra sense, one that no-one else possessed. John alone saw the dove and thereby knew his mission was about to be fulfilled.

II. Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene and Also to the Twelve After the Resurrection

(Read John 20)

Chapter 20 of the Gospel of John is filled with miracles a-plenty, which is why I put the entire chapter into the Scripture Reading List. The empty tomb, which was later confirmed not to have been tampered with but to have been the result of a supernatural miracle, was quite an opening. But I'll address miracles of this kind shortly.

There are four further miracles, each of which is of the solipsistic nature I have discussed. First, Mary sees two angels in the tomb, and then from behind her she sees the risen Christ. As with our discussion earlier of the nature of John the Baptist's vision of the Holy Dove to point out the Messiah to him, again we have the Holy Spirit acting in Mary as an extra sense and permitting her to see things that others who were not receptive to the Holy Spirit would not.

Likewise, the appearance of the risen Christ to the Eleven minus Thomas and then, at a later date, to the whole Eleven, can be seen in this solipsistic way. Let us try to picture the scene.

Now, have you ever seen those illustrative drawings in which, as an example, we see an elegant lady in a long flowing dress. We are told to try to see the lion. The lion! And yet, if one looks carefully, one can see in the folds of the dress, the outline of a drawing of a lion. Someone who has spotted it, can assist someone still looking. But all will eventually see the lion, and, once seen, none can ever look at that drawing again without immediately seeing the drawing of the lion.

In like manner, first maybe one or two of the Apostles sees the vision of the risen Christ. They would have pointed him out to the others until eventually all of the Apostles would have seen the vision of Christ and heard him speak. The Holy Spirit again has provided sensory

input to these receptive minds that some passing stranger peering in through the window would not have seen or heard.

III. Jesus Walks on the Water

(Read Mark 6:45-56; Matthew 14:22-36; John 6:16-24)

The miracle of Jesus walking on the water is one of the most famous. It is described in three of the Gospels, Mark, Matthew and John. The Twelve have been instructed by Jesus to depart via their boat while he retires to pray. But the sea is rough and there is a headwind that makes the water crossing perilous. The Twelve then see Jesus walking on the water near to the boat. Jesus climbs into the boat, the seas calm and they reach their destination.

At first, you could be excused for thinking that this is a visionary miracle like the ones just discussed. But two things don't stack up. The first is the calming of the seas and the swift conclusion to the sea journey once Jesus is onboard. The second is that, in the morning, Jesus is with the Twelve, and just one boat has made the crossing. How do you explain this other than the miracle being supernatural?

Antitheists have suggested things like Jesus walked around the Sea of Galilee from where they set off to their destination. Some have suggested that Jesus had walked out on a sandbar – most of these men had spent their entire lives sailing these waters! Stories of submerged piers and even surfboards are absurd.

God is capable of supernatural miracles, but he uses them sparingly in his form as the man Jesus; each has a purpose in the Ministry of the Christ and in the inevitable pathway of events that lead to the Passion and the Resurrection. Recall the response of Jesus to requests for miracles merely as a sign.

Matthew 12:38-41

The Sign of Jonah

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here."

Luke 11:29-30

The Sign of Jonah

²⁹ As the crowds increased, Jesus said, "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. ³⁰ For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation."

IV. Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead

(Read John 11:17-27 & 11:38-44)

The miracle of Jesus restoring life to Lazarus is another famous miracle. Lazarus had been dead for four days and in his tomb from which the stench of decay was already coming, when Jesus arrived. This miracle also has no credible explanation than it being a supernatural miracle, and, as with the miracle of *Walking on the Water*, one for which God, in his form as the man Jesus, had a purpose.

Redacted Accounts

The sharp among my listeners will have noticed that, in the miracle of Jesus walking on the water, I skipped over the bit about Simon Peter also walking on the water until he wavered in his faith, whereupon he was rescued by Jesus. Depictions of the overall events, such as paintings and drawings, almost always include this. Yet, this element of the story appears only in the account in the Gospel of Matthew and neither of the other two. The account in Matthew is almost a word for word steal from Mark up until the insertion of this element of the story. What is going on here?

It was once common practice, when taking oral accounts from many sources about the one incident, for an editor to work the story into a coherent, single narrative. This process is the original meaning of *redacting* the story – a type of ‘redrafting’. It was necessarily subjective, but in general it was considered a legitimate exercise, and not one intended to deceive. It is likely that Matthew’s account, while drawing heavily on Mark’s, is in fact a *redacted* version of the incident. (Our modern understanding of redaction as being the excision of certain parts of a sensitive document is a very narrow use of the original meaning of the term.)

Redaction as I have described it here I believe can be thought of in the same way as illustrious master artists doing the main work on a painting and leaving the apprentices to finish the work, once a common practice. There was no intent to deceive, it was simply the way that these schools operated.

A very famous, more contemporary miracle that is of the solipsistic kind is the appearance in a grotto at Lourdes, in south-western France, of Mary, Mother of Jesus, to a young peasant girl, Bernadette. There was a total of 18 appearances in early 1858. Bernadette did not know the identity of the woman who appeared to her, but as news of the apparitions leaked out, more and more people were in attendance each time, but only Bernadette ever saw Mary. On the sixteenth appearance, on March 25th 1858, it was recorded that, after Bernadette repeatedly questioned the lady as to her identity, Mary eventually said, in Gascon Occitan, “I am the Immaculate Conception”. This is one of the Catholic Church’s Dogmas regarding Mary, Mother of Jesus, formally defined by Pope Pius IX in the encyclical *‘Ineffabilis Deus’*, on December 8th 1854, less than four years earlier. While I find it easy to believe that Bernadette did receive these miraculous visitations from Mary, Mother of Jesus, I find it rather ... shall we say, “convenient” ... that Mary refers to herself by a Church Dogma declared less than four years previously! I suspect a redacted story here – one with perhaps a questionable motive.

Take-home Messages

There are three take-home messages from my presentation.

1. If Grand-aunt Martha in the back seat of the car claims that there is an angel sitting next to her, there might just be a miracle happening. Likewise, if Uncle Sid reports that he has had an enlightening discussion with the Prophet Elijah, he may well just have done. The Holy Spirit could indeed be communing with Martha and Sid through their cognitive processes to produce realities for them that are different from yours – solipsism in action.
2. God exists and is ineffable. He is thus omnipotent in any of his tripartite forms and supernatural miracles, manifest to believers and non-believers alike, do occur. God uses these sparingly and each with a reason, as explained to us through the teachings of Jesus.
3. There are some stories of miracles that are redacted accounts. These should not just be discounted as fiction. They should be read cautiously in the spirit in which they were written.

So, when you next find yourself waking and dreading the day ahead, say a prayer to the Lord. And if you should find a kindly stranger sitting at the end of your bed, chat with them as if they were your dearest friend. When the other occupants of the house hear this one-sided conversation coming from your room, and you hear a cry, “Are you alright? What’s happening in there?” you and the angel can exchange cheeky smiles and whisper, **“It’s a miracle!”**

AMEN