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IS IT POSSIBLE TO KNOW THAT JESUS WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD?

Stephen T. Davis

Philosophical discussions of religious knowledge are often general in nature, i.e. they take place quite apart from consideration of actual items religious people claim to know or rationally believe. In this paper I propose to approach the broad epistemological topic of religious knowledge by taking a specific tenet of a specific religion and asking whether it can be known or rationally believed. The moral I hope to draw is that the vastly different conclusions religious believers and non-believers reach about religious knowledge is due to differences in the world views they accept.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is by universal consent a crucial doctrine of the Christian faith. Thus it is natural for Christian philosophers who believe the doctrine to ask what they can or ought to do as philosophers to defend it. Naturally, their first impulse is to engage in some kind of rational apologetic. Though apologetics is an enterprise that is often maligned, I believe this is an understandable and quite acceptable impulse. I will argue in this paper against a certain way of doing apologetics, but I believe all Christians engage in the enterprise.

Let me distinguish between two sorts of apologetic arguments in favor of the resurrection of Jesus. Let us call a "soft apologetic argument" one which attempts to demonstrate the rationality of belief in the resurrection of Jesus. And let us call a "hard apologetic argument" one which attempts to demonstrate the irrationality of unbelief in the resurrection of Jesus. One of my aims in this paper is to show the limits of what philosophy can achieve on this issue. I am opposing what I consider to be overblown claims that are made on both sides of the issue, i.e. by those who hold that rational argument can either verify or falsify the resurrection. I do not believe it can do either, as I will try to show. As a believer in the resurrection, I naturally hold (and will argue) that Christians are within their intellectual rights in believing that Jesus was raised from the dead.¹ But I do not believe it can be shown that religious skeptics are not within their intellectual rights in rejecting the doctrine.

There is a paradox that faces any philosopher who writes about the possibility of the resurrection of Jesus. On the one hand, some believers in the resurrection hold that the evidence in its favor is overwhelming. (I once knew a seminary professor who was known to say: "Any rational person who honestly looks at the evidence



for the resurrection of Jesus must be convinced by it and become a Christian.”) On the other hand, many non-believers in the resurrection hold that the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead is perfectly absurd. (As an undergraduate I studied under a man who liked to debunk the biblical miracles; one day in class he dismissed the resurrection with the statement: “I hope everybody here knows that dead people stay dead.”)

What is the reason for this puzzling phenomenon? Why is it that people on both sides are so convinced they are obviously correct and the others obviously wrong? Of course, we do notice that both sides can offer explanations of the strange behavior of the other—believers can claim that non-believers are blinded by sin; non-believers can claim that believers are blinded by credulity and wishful thinking. But is there anything Christian philosophers can helpfully say at this point? Perhaps not, but I will try. Let me begin with some remarks on the concept of miracle.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is typically classified as a miracle. The fountain-head of virtually all contemporary discussion of miracles among philosophers is Hume’s argument against miracles in Section X of the *Enquiry*.² I believe it is now generally recognized that Hume overstates his case. We cannot a priori rule out the possibility of miracles or of rational belief in miracles.³ But, as always, Hume is not the sort of philosopher one can dismiss with a casual wave of the hand. Much of his argument, I believe, is beyond reproach. He is mistaken that our past experience of the normal course of events by itself settles the question whether a miracle can ever occur; but he is surely correct that rational expectation of what will happen is based on our best available knowledge of what *has* happened. He is mistaken that it can never constitute what he calls the “greater miracle” that the testifiers to a miracle are wrong; but he is surely correct that rational people accept the epistemological principle of always rejecting the greater miracle. He is mistaken that it can never be rational to believe that a miracle has occurred; but he is surely correct that rational people will require very strong evidence indeed before they will believe that a miracle has occurred.

Suppose a person, Jones, claims that some extraordinary event E occurred, viz. that last night between 1:00 and 2:00 a.m. Bauer Hall levitated six feet above the ground. Naturally we would be extremely suspicious of such a claim—for the very Humean reason that E is contrary to all our previous experience of the behavior of large objects like buildings and thus contrary to our expectations about how Bauer Hall will have behaved last night. And our bias in this case seems eminently reasonable. We would be quite right to be extremely suspicious of any evidence Jones produced or testimony Jones or others gave, even if we could not explain their evidence or the reason for their strange belief.

It is true that the twentieth century revolution in physics has made most scientists far more open to the possibility of highly unusual events occurring than religious

skeptics or even some rationalistic theologians would make us believe. The physicists I know, at any rate, are seldom prepared to rule out miraculous events—what Hume would have called transgressions of natural laws—on a priori grounds. But, as noted above, it still seems a sound epistemological principle that rational expectation about what is likely to occur must be based on what we know *has* occurred. And since we know of no past cases in which buildings have levitated, while we cannot rule out on a priori grounds the possibility that E occurred, we have very strong reason to doubt that E occurred.

Accordingly, Hume is correct that we have and rightly should have a strong bias against accepting claims that extraordinary events have occurred. We can imagine cases—and E is certainly one such—where it would be exceedingly difficult for this bias to be overcome. I confess *I* could not easily be convinced that Bauer Hall levitated last night. But surely a point would come, if massive evidence in favor of E continued to pile up, where the rational thing would be to lay aside or amend our bias against events like E and accept the claim that E has occurred. At what point would such a change of mind rationally come about? Surely we can give no general rule. All we can say is that it would depend on the strength of our bias against events like E, the weight of evidence in favor of E, and the possibility and plausibility of alternative explanations. Critics of Hume are certainly correct in pointing out that there have been countless cases where such biases and the expectations they create have been rationally overcome. Rational people would once have scoffed at the idea of airplanes, vaccines, and trips to the moon.

However, Humean arguments are still being presented by philosophers. For example, Antony Flew offers three arguments, much in the spirit of Hume, against those who believe in miracles.⁴ (1) People who offer historical or probabilistic arguments in favor of the occurrence of a given purported miracle, Flew says, themselves presuppose the very regularity of nature and reliability of nature's laws that they argue against. Their position is accordingly inconsistent.

(2) Once violations of natural law are in principle allowed, what control have we over the explanations of events that are offered? For instance (these are my examples, not Flew's), why not say that in some physically inexplicable way Jesus' body simply disappeared after the tomb was closed? Or why not say that the Jewish leaders removed the body from the tomb but later were quite unable to produce it and thus falsify the disciples' claims because for some psychologically inexplicable reason they forgot they had removed it?

(3) Even if a violation of a natural law be granted, Flew says, how could we ever be sure it was *God* who is responsible for it? Since God is said to be an incorporeal being who cannot be seen or touched, the problem seems insurmountable. Notice also, Flew adds, that when theists talk about certain theological problems, notably the problem of evil, they stress our inability to comprehend God or fathom his ways. How then could we ever have rational expectations about what God will do

iii given circumstances?

Much of what Flew says here is correct. First, theists do indeed presuppose regular workings of nature in order to argue that certain irregularities, i.e. miracles, occur. But this hardly shows that their position is inconsistent. Why cannot nature, so to speak, almost but not quite always act regularly and (if we knew enough) predictably? If it does, then those who wish to argue for certain irregularities will naturally do so on the basis of regularities seen elsewhere. If there do turn out to be unique events, not analogous to any others (and some scientists argue that there are such events, e.g. the “big bang”), we will have no choice but to try to argue for them on the basis of regular and repeatable events.

Second, the only control we either have or need have over proposed explanations of events, once miracles are allowed, is the same control we have, quite apart from miracles, over proposed explanations in science and history in general. We simply accept the most plausible explanations we can find and reject the others. In my view at least, it is far more plausible to hold that God raised Jesus from the dead than to say, for example, that his body inexplicably disappeared or that the Jewish leaders forgot they had removed it.

Third, Flew is correct that it seems impossible ever to prove for sure that a given event was caused by God. But if a certain event that occurs is scientifically inexplicable and fits well with a given view of God and his aims, it surely is rational for people who hold that view of God and his aims to believe that the event was brought about by God. If there is good reason ahead of time to believe that a miracle-working God exists who is likely in certain circumstances (say after prayers or as aspects of epiphanies or incarnations) to cause events like this one, it seems reasonable to hold (though we cannot prove) that this event was caused by God.⁵

It looks, then, as if Hume’s argument against miracles, even as expanded by Flew, fails. So in theory at least perhaps our strong commitment to such generalizations as “dead people stay dead” could be overcome. Just as we came rationally to believe in airplanes, vaccines, and trips to the moon, and just as we could come rationally to believe that Bauer Hall levitated, so in theory at least we could come rationally to believe in the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. But in practice could such ever be the case? One difficulty that needs to be cleared up concerns the term “miracle.” For quite understandable reasons, the word is usually defined in terms of transgressions or violations of natural laws. Critics have been quick to point out a complication, however. Since laws of nature are human inventions, i.e. descriptions of observed regularities, if we really became aware of a violation of (what we understood to be) a law of nature, they say, we should not proclaim a miracle but rather simply amend our understanding of the law of nature in question—even reject it altogether, if necessary. The issue here is complex, and I do not wish to explore it in detail. But fortunately it need not be explored, even in a paper on the resurrection of Jesus, an event often considered the paradigmatic

miracle.

For Christians won't mind one bit if it turns out, through some sound process of reasoning, that no miracles occur, i.e. that no true natural laws are ever violated but rather that some weak ones are just occasionally discovered to be inadequate. As long as it is still true, for example, that Jesus was born of a virgin, was raised from the dead, healed people, turned water into wine, etc., it will be a matter of profound indifference to them whether natural laws are ever violated.

However, since the issue *is* unclear, I will continue in this paper to speak of the resurrection as a miracle. For it must be admitted that with the resurrection we are talking not just about a highly unusual event but an event which, given our best knowledge of the workings of the world, seems causally impossible. Almost any event that occurs can be described in such a way as to have been or at least rationally seemed to have been highly improbable before it occurred. One hundred years ago or even five years ago what would have been the odds that in 1981 a Claremont philosopher who coaches soccer and whose father was a Nebraska cattle rancher would write a paper entitled "Is It Possible to Know That Jesus Was Raised From the Dead?" that you would read? The odds would have been low indeed, but the point is that there is nothing in this description (as there *is* in a description of the resurrection) that seems causally impossible given our best knowledge. The resurrection is not just a unique and improbable event but an intellectual scandal. Accordingly, an event should probably only be considered a miracle if no purported explanation of it that crucially omits God is a good explanation. It just might be possible to offer a good explanation of my writing and your reading this paper that fails to mention God. And so our doing so, however improbable it may be, is not a miracle. But the resurrection of Jesus, if it occurred, in all probability could not be explained without God, and so (if it occurred) is probably a miracle.

It is sometimes said that every miracle is ambiguous in that it can be interpreted either as an act of God or as a surprising and perhaps inexplicable natural event. But surely this can be said not just about miracles but about almost any event, as John Hick has often argued.⁶ Name virtually any event, and the religious believer and the religious skeptic can disagree on how to interpret it. The one may well see it as an act of God and the other will not. They do not differ, so to speak, on the facts (both experience the event and acknowledge that it has occurred) but on how to interpret or account for the facts.

However, there is a difference between miracles and natural events in this regard. With natural events (e.g. someone's recovering from a serious illness) the believer and the skeptic do not differ on the question whether the event occurred; both will agree it did. Their difference concerns the cause and meaning of the event. With miracles, however (or at least with certain of them, e.g. the resurrection of Jesus), the believer and the skeptic will typically differ on the fundamental question of what precisely occurred. They differ here on the facts.

Accordingly, influenced by our earlier distinction between hard and soft apologetics, let us make a distinction between hard and soft miracles. A *soft miracle*, let us say, is a miracle which religious skeptics can consistently agree has occurred; it is just that they will disagree with religious believers on its cause and meaning. If Jones, apparently doomed with cancer, is after prayer and fasting found to be well and free of cancer, this may well constitute a soft miracle. Skeptics can consistently agree that Jones was gravely ill but now is well—they will simply deny that Jones' recovery was due to God. A *hard miracle*, on the other hand, is one which is very difficult for religious skeptics to explain naturalistically⁷ and so skeptics will not want to allow that it has occurred. The resurrection of Jesus appears to be a hard miracle—skeptics apparently cannot agree that it has occurred (not as the event is recorded in the Gospels, at any rate) without abandoning religious skepticism. The strategy of consistent skeptics must accordingly be to argue that the event has not in fact occurred.

Hard miracles are obviously going to be appealing to rational apologists for religious faith. It is tempting to think of them as good devices for evangelism, i.e. for converting people from religious skepticism to religious faith. But have any hard miracles occurred? Religious believers hold that the answer is yes, and religious skeptics will say no. As a Christian, I hold that certain hard miracles have occurred, and I believe that the resurrection of Jesus is one of them. But have any events occurred that can be *shown* to be hard miracles? Here I am doubtful. It certainly seems *possible* to me that an event occur which it would be irrational for anyone to deny is a hard miracle, but to my knowledge no such events have occurred—even the resurrection. Soft miracles, then, are religiously ambiguous because they can be interpreted as natural events; hard miracles are religiously ambiguous because the ones that have purportedly occurred can apparently be rationally denied. How the resurrection can rationally be denied I will consider presently.

In order to make the problem we face more concrete, let us look at the way believers and non-believers in the resurrection of Jesus can most persuasively present their case.

Believers in the resurrection first stress the unity of the New Testament witness to the resurrection. Despite differences in some details—believers will argue—the biblical writers, who give us our earliest testimony to the events after the crucifixion, unanimously agree that Jesus rose from the dead.

Second, believers in the resurrection will point out that there are certain facts surrounding the resurrection that have virtually been demonstrated by historical scholarship and that no competent biblical, theological, or historical scholar denies them. They are, preeminently, that Jesus died on a cross, that certain people later came to believe that God had raised him from the dead, and that the firm belief in the resurrection that these people had was the heart of the message they proclaimed and the reason they so radically changed. Disheartened, confused, and

fearful immediately after the crucifixion, they quickly became determined, bold, and courageous. The most plausible explanation of these facts—so believers in the resurrection will argue—is that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead and show himself to the disciples. It does not seem sensible to claim that the Christian Church, a spiritual movement whose vitality changed the world, was started by charlatans or dupes. If the disciples knew that Jesus was not really risen they were charlatans. If they believed he was risen when in fact he was not they were dupes.

Third, something of an embarrassment in the position of non-believers in the resurrection can be pointed out—their inability to offer an acceptable alternative explanation of the known facts surrounding the resurrection of Jesus. The old 19th century rationalistic explanations (swoon theory, stolen body, wrong tomb, etc.) all seem to collapse of their own weight once spelled out, and no strong new theory has emerged as the consensus of scholars who deny that the resurrection occurred. One recent full-blooded attempt to offer such an explanation is Hugh Schonfield's *The Passover Plot*,⁸ a bold and entertaining book. But with its highly fanciful hypotheses and selective use of evidence it has drawn much criticism and precious little support from scholars.

The plain fact is that most contemporary Christian theologians who do not believe that Jesus was dead for three days and then actually lived again offer no explanation. Many suggest only vague poetic metaphors like “spiritual resurrection,” the “Easter vision of the disciples,” or “dramatic imagery seen through the eyes of faith.” Some hint that parapsychological phenomena were at work. But does all this vague talk mean anything?, the believer in the resurrection will bluntly ask. Isn't it just theological jargon amounting to this: “I can't bring myself to believe that a real resurrection happened, but *something* (I don't know what) must have happened to account for the disciples' faith”? And surely all this is odd, the believer continues: if the resurrection did not occur it is at least *prima facie* puzzling that no consensus alternative explanation of the known facts has emerged. All in all, the believer will say, the most rational position is to believe that Jesus really did, as claimed, rise from the dead.

But non-believers in the resurrection can make an impressive case too. They will first argue that the biblical testimony is unreliable. It was written years after the event by unsophisticated, myth-prone people who were more interested in formulating statements of faith and in furthering Christian ends than writing accurate history. Furthermore, the evidence they present is contradictory: How many women visited the tomb? Had the sun risen or was it still dark? Was there one angel (or young man) or two? Were they inside the tomb or outside? Did the women keep silent or run to tell the disciples? Were the disciples told to stay in Jerusalem or to go to Galilee? Was the resurrected Jesus in physical or spiritual form? Did the ascension occur immediately after the resurrection, or forty days later?

But the non-believer's strongest argument will run as follows: “Granted I have

no plausible alternative explanation of the known facts; and granted that on the basis of the known facts and available possible explanations of them the chances are (let's be as generous as possible) 99 out of 100 that the resurrection really happened; still we must ask the following fatal question: *What are the chances that a man dead for three days would live again?*" In short, the non-believer will claim that even if the believer's arguments are strong and even if non-believers can't say for sure what *did* happen, by far the most sensible position is to deny that the resurrection occurred. For the probability we should assign to the statement "People dead for three days stay dead" is very, very high. Thus the position of the non-believer amounts to this: "I don't know exactly what happened after the crucifixion—it was, after all, nearly 2000 years ago and by now it's very hard to tell—but whatever happened, it certainly wasn't a resurrection."

But a truly vital factor in the debate would be omitted if we stopped here. For we must consider the very different metaphysical world views typically held by believers and non-believers in the resurrection. The non-believer's position is probably convincing to the non-believer not primarily because of evidence or arguments in its favor but because it is entailed by the world view he or she accepts. Let's call that world view *naturalism*. It is the view, we will say, which holds that the following four statements are true: (1) Nature alone exists. The word "nature" is difficult to define precisely, but let us say that it is the sum total of what could in principle be observed by human beings or be studied by methods analogous to those used in the natural sciences. Accordingly, naturalism excludes God, or at least the theistic God. (2) Nature is eternal. Nature is an uncreated thing; there is no moment in time when it does not exist; it is not contingent. (3) Nature is uniform. There are no non-natural events (e.g. miracles); rather, nature is regular, continuous. (4) Every event is explicable. In principle at least, any event can be explained in terms of nature or natural processes, i.e. by explanatory methods similar to those used in the natural sciences.

Similarly, the believer's position is probably convincing to the believer not primarily because of evidence or arguments in its favor but because it dovetails with the world view he or she accepts. Let's call that world view *supernaturalism*. It is the view, we will say, which holds (1) that something beside nature exists, viz. God; (2) that nature depends for its existence on God; (3) that the regularity of nature can be and occasionally is interrupted by miraculous acts of God; and (4) that such events are humanly quite unpredictable and inexplicable.⁹

All people interpret their experience within a certain philosophical framework. For many people, their philosophical assumptions exclude God's existence and the possibility of miracles. Such people presumably reject the resurrection not because the evidence for it is weak. Surely if the resurrection were not essentially miraculous (if it were like, say, the crucifixion) few rational persons would doubt it. They reject the resurrection because it does not fit with their naturalistic world view. The

essentially miraculous nature of the resurrection impels them to discount the evidence for it despite their inability to explain what *did* happen or how the disciples came to believe in the resurrection.

Well then—you will want to ask at this point—did the resurrection of Jesus occur? Which is more likely—that the resurrection occurred, or not? To put it in Hume's terms, which is the lesser miracle? My own view will come as no surprise. As a supernaturalist and as a Christian it seems to me that the evidence in favor of the resurrection is strong. Perhaps it can even be said to be compelling for those Christians who admit the possibility of miracles.¹⁰ But the problem is that for those who don't, the available evidence is not likely to be compelling.

For as we have seen, the odd thing is that a decision a person makes whether to believe in the resurrection is usually made on some basis other than the evidence pro and con. (Is this why miracles seem to bring so few people to faith, why Jesus was reluctant to perform spectacular public miracles?) Those who believe in Christ believe in the resurrection; those who accept naturalism do not.

There is a curious circularity here. As I noted earlier, I believe philosophers have shown over against Hume that miracles *can* occur; the real question is whether any *have* occurred. But when we turn to historical evidence for a purported miracle, e.g. the resurrection, it turns out that a decision whether or not it occurred normally turns on whether or not one believes that miracles can occur. Perhaps this circularity explains the puzzle with which we began, viz. why Christians find the evidence for the resurrection so utterly compelling while non-believers think it sheer foolishness to believe in the resurrection. From the perspective of naturalism, the resurrection does seem like a prescientific myth. From the perspective of supernaturalism, or at least Christian supernaturalism, the resurrection seems the best explanation of the evidence.

The upshot of what I have been arguing is that both belief and disbelief in the resurrection of Jesus can be rational. It is a mistake to argue either (1) that it is *never* rational to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, or (2) that belief in the resurrection of Jesus is the *only* rational position. Both arguments have been presented; let me comment briefly on each.

(1) Some Christian theologians in recent years have argued against belief in a real resurrection of Jesus from what clearly amounts to a perspective very near naturalism. Rather than rejecting talk of the resurrection entirely, as a religious skeptic might do, they typically offer what might be called reductive theories of the resurrection. "What 'Jesus rose from the dead' really means," they say, "is _____," where the blank is filled in with a way of understanding the resurrection that does not actually involve a dead man coming back to life. Thus Rudolf Bultmann:

Indeed, *faith in the resurrection is really the same as faith in the saving ef-*

*ficacy of the cross, faith in the cross as the cross of Christ.*¹¹

And Willi Marxsen:

Talk of the resurrection of Jesus is an interpretation designed to express the fact that my faith has a source and that source is Jesus...Jesus is risen in that his offer meets us today and in that, if we accept it, he gives us this new life.¹²

Bultmann does not try to hide the fact that his understanding of the resurrection of Jesus rests on a basically naturalist position (I say *basically* naturalist because he does believe in God). Modern people can no longer believe in mythological stories, he says. The idea of dead people rising is utterly inconceivable and incredible to us. In a famous passage, Bultmann says:

It is impossible to use the electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles. We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world.¹³

Although much could be said in response to this point of view, let me limit myself to two comments. First, the rather condescending air theologians such as Bultmann and Marxsen typically take toward pre-modern people, e.g. people in New Testament times, seems to me altogether unwarranted. "Such people could believe in myths, spirits, and miracles," it is said, "but we moderns cannot." The implication is that the poor devils just didn't have the benefit of our modern scientific knowledge and reasoning power—that is why they believed such silly things. But surely this is grossly exaggerated. If miracles and resurrections were supposed to be so commonplace in ignorant times like the first century, why was the resurrection of Jesus taken to be so significant? I would have thought that the idea of a man dead for three days living again was no less intellectually scandalous to first century people than it is to us. (Notice the reaction of the apostle Thomas in John 20 and of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers in Acts 17 to talk of the resurrection.) On the whole, I would have thought that first century people were no more superstitious, credulous, or just plain stupid than we are.

Second, naturalism is not the only rational position a person can take. Bultmann's statement about the wireless is admirably picturesque and pointed, but I see no reason to believe it. Precisely why (or in what sense) is it impossible for a person who uses the wireless and the electric light to believe that miracles occur? I am unable to find any plausible construal of Bultmann's remarks, especially when there are today so many apparently quite rational people who both use the wireless

and believe in miracles.

Interpreting Bultmann's remark, Van Harvey says:

He meant that the act of turning a switch, speaking over a microphone, visiting a doctor or a psychiatrist is a practical commitment to a host of beliefs foreign to those of the New Testament. It is to say that the world of modern theory—be it electrical, atomic, biological, even psychological—is a part of the furniture of our minds and that we assume this in our reading of the newspapers, in our debates over foreign policy, in our law courts, and, it needs to be added, in our writing of history. In other words, our daily intercourse reveals that we, in fact, do not believe in a three-story universe or in the possession of the mind by either angelic or demonic beings.¹⁴

I do not wish to comment here on demon-possession or on the famed three-story universe Bultmann and others think the New Testament writers believed in. The real question is: Do our modern beliefs and practices somehow commit us to naturalism or near naturalism? Again, I am unable to see why. It is quite correct that we are committed to giving naturalistic explanations (i.e. explanations that do not involve appeals to miracles) of the vast majority of the events we see occurring. But so were first century people. I fail to see any good reason, either from Bultmann or Harvey, why a contemporary person cannot consistently be a supernaturalist.

(2) Other Christian thinkers, especially theologically conservative ones, try to show that belief in the resurrection of Jesus is the *only* rational position.¹⁵ But one lesson Christian philosophers and apologists can draw from this paper is that if God's existence and the possibility of miracles are not first allowed, i.e. if naturalism is not first abandoned, it is difficult for evidence for, or arguments for, the resurrection to produce a conversion. The seminary professor who thought that any rational person who fairly examines the evidence must convert was wrong. A naturalist can say— and unless we can refute naturalism such a position seems to me rational—“Yes, the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is strong; I can't produce a good alternative explanation of what happened, but a resurrection just couldn't have happened.”

Apologists for the resurrection are quick to criticize this position, and if we are careful only to look at it from a certain rather acute angle it does look weak. “True”—the apologist says—“secular historians will not accept the resurrection because they insist on a priori grounds that it could not have happened. But why so insist? Why not be open-minded rather than dogmatic about what we might find in history or in our experience? Let history speak for itself; don't interpret it only from the perspective of pre-conceived assumptions.”

Although I am ultimately in sympathy with this criticism of naturalism, I believe

it is often presented in far too facile a manner. It ignores the rationality of our bias against extraordinary events. I ask: How would you respond if somebody in all apparent sincerity told you that Bauer Hall levitated for an hour last night? Or: How would you respond if someone in all sincerity told you John Lennon came back to life three days after his death?

What follows from this, I believe, is that the aim of Christian philosophers who want to defend the resurrection ought not be hard apologetics. Unless naturalism can first be refuted, it is pointless to try to produce rational arguments which by their logical power will coerce conversions, so to speak. Disbelief in the resurrection does seem to be a rational position. The aim of Christian philosophers ought to be soft apologetics. They ought to try to defend belief in the resurrection against the objections of critics; demonstrate the rationality of supernaturalism; and show that given supernaturalist assumptions, belief in the resurrection makes good sense.

What, then, about the question that forms this paper's title? Is it possible to know that Jesus was raised from the dead? Naturally, the answer will depend on what is meant by the word "know." If we accept a Cartesian notion of knowledge, whereby I know *p* if and only if I believe *p* and *p* is immune to all conceivable doubt, the answer is no. The same negative answer holds even if we accept the much weakened but far more plausible notion that I know *p* if and only if I believe *p* and *p* is immune to all *rational* doubt. As I have argued, the resurrection can rationally be doubted.

We did note, however, that the crucial difference in how one is likely to evaluate the claim that Jesus was raised is made by the world view one accepts. The deepest question we can ask in this area accordingly emerges: which world view is more plausible, naturalism or supernaturalism? Unfortunately, answering that question is far beyond the scope of this paper and, perhaps, of my ability.

But if we ask the question with which we began in this way: Can it be rationally believed that Jesus was raised from the dead?, the answer is yes.

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NOTES

1. And indeed that he was *bodily* raised from the dead, which in my opinion is the most acceptable interpretation of the doctrine for Christians.
2. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (La Salle, Illinois: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1946).
3. See C. D. Broad, "Humes's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles," *Human Understanding*, ed. by A. Sesonske and N. Fleming (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1965).

4. *God and Philosophy* (New York: Delta Books, 1966), pp. 148-152.

5. Of course even if such a God exists, each miracle he brings about will still be from our viewpoint uncontrollable and unpredictable—otherwise it won't be a miracle.

6. See John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1957), pp. 182-191.

7. But perhaps not impossible. A skeptic who is present at the resurrection of a person dead for three days may well try to offer a naturalistic explanation (“psychosomatic cure of death”), but the point is that based on our present knowledge such an explanation would undoubtedly be highly improbable.

8. New York: Bantam Books, 1966.

9. Furthermore, while perhaps not a world view per se, there is another difference between most believers and non-believers regarding the resurrection that is crucial to their different attitudes toward it. The believer accepts the view that the Bible is in some sense revelatory and reliable and the non-believer does not. See, for example, Flew, p. 158: “We must never forget that it is only if we take for granted that these events were part of a unique divine revelation that we have any reason to be sure that the available evidence must be sufficient.”

10. And who accept the reliability of the Bible. On this point, it should be added that there are, of course, many supernaturalists who allow for miracles but not the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Typically, adherents of other religions than Christianity would take such a position. It is not part of my purpose to argue that belief in the resurrection of Jesus is compelling for all supernaturalists, but rather that belief in the resurrection of Jesus is rational from the perspective of supernaturalism. It may indeed be compelling for those supernaturalists (Christian ones, of course) who hold that the Bible is revelatory and reliable, but that is not my main claim.

11. Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. by H. W. Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 41.

12. Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 143, 184.

13. *Op. cit.*, p. 5; cf, p. 39.

14. Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966). pp. 114-115.

15. This seems, for example, the aim of some books of conservative apologetics, e.g. Josh McDowell's *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1981) and Gary Habermas' *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980).