

A Critical Reading Journal Analysis on Habermas' Minimal Facts Argument

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One of the most prevalent scholars in miracles and of apologetics in general is none other than Liberty University's own Dr. Gary Habermas. Due to his thorough understanding of historical and scriptural elements of Christianity, he has produced a sizable volume of work to answer common scientific arguments about Christianity and Jesus. Not only is Dr. Habermas respected within theistic circles, but he is also respected among atheists, deists, and agnostics. In his work "In Defense of Miracles" Dr. Habermas focuses on what he calls the "minimal facts" argument as the basis he uses to disarm many who may oppose the beliefs he holds dear. In this journal, one can understand his approach to this argument and see some examples of his ability to dissect some strongly held scientific standards.

Summarizing the Minimal Facts Argument

In the first chapter of Habermas' book *The Risen Jesus* and in the ninth chapter of the compendium *In Defense of Miracles*, Dr. Habermas lays out a clear explanation of facts upon which he builds most of his arguments for miracles and the resurrection. The intention of this list was for Habermas to determine the most simplistic basis for his beliefs that do not require one to accept any sort of theology or Christian-only beliefs¹. The initial list consists of twelve items, all of which are presented in such a way that they are generally accepted by historians regardless of religious leanings. Habermas even organizes these items in a timeline such that the earliest facts relate to Jesus' death and resurrection and extend historically to the most recent firsthand encounter with Jesus – Paul's conversion.

¹ Gary Habermas and R Douglas Geivett, *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 9.

Although the initial list consists of twelve items, in his lecture, Habermas states that these items can be further reduced to the three most critical items: Jesus died by crucifixion, his disciples encountered the risen Jesus and were changed, and the most unlikely convert of all – Paul – became the foremost voice of Christian faith due to encountering Jesus². By focusing on these key facts, the additional nine facts fold neatly into these “meta categories” so that they illustrate the same general fact but from a different angle.

Minimal Facts vs. Naturalistic Theory

One of the most frequent detractors from the theistic approach to miracles is the naturalistic law approach. A truly naturalistic proponent would argue that the world as we know it is a closed box and that nothing exists beyond the box³. However, Habermas would argue that although the box most certainly can exist, the belief that nothing exists beyond the box nor can anything from outside of it engage with the inside fails to carry much weight. The reason for this concern is that many of the facts are not addressed by naturalists because they do not feel that they should need to address them⁴.

Although Dr. Habermas addresses how his ‘minimal facts’ can counter most naturalistic laws, he spends a great deal of time focusing on battling the “group hallucination” theory of Jesus’ resurrection, likely because this was one of the most prevalent debates in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In this example, naturalists would posit that Jesus’ appearance post-resurrection could be explained away as simply a group hallucination caused by grief. On the

² Gary Habermas, “Recognizing Historical Data and Defining the Minimal Facts” (video lecture in APOL 815 at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, February 3, 2024).

³ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 119.

⁴ Gary Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 11.

surface, this seems plausible enough, but Habermas points out that since there is a wealth of study performed on hallucinations amongst various cohorts in small groups (say 9-12 people), so many (well over 5000) people who saw Jesus and felt changed as a result is simply implausible with modern psychological means⁵.

The remainder of the arguments against naturalistic law focus on what Habermas generally considers the “sum of its parts” approach. In this way, there may be a considerable number of arguments against his minimal facts that stand well on their own, when they are combined with each other, they can quickly contradict and cancel each other out⁶. However, even if one combines all the items in Habermas’ minimal facts list (the full 12 items list that is), they can still stand up without contradicting each other. If the naturalistic arguments were truly defensible, it should not matter if they were combined or separated.

Why God Lives Beyond the Gaps

Mankind desperately wants to squeeze the all-powerful creator of the universe into a tiny box that can be pushed aside when it is convenient to do so. Thankfully, God does not concern Himself with the disagreements of His tiny creation. As theologian Vernon McGee once stated: “This is God’s universe, and God does things His way. You may have a better way, but you don’t have a universe.”⁷ A common argument used against theistic terms is the “God of the Gaps” theory which states that anything that does not have a codified answer can be attributed to God or whatever entity one so chooses. When mankind does not understand a miracle, it would

⁵ Geviert and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷ Vernon McGee, “Vernon McGee Quotes”, Goodreads Quotable Quotes, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8284138-this-is-god-s-universe-and-god-does-things-his-way>

be easy to write it off as the “god of the gaps” doing whatever the “god” wants to do. But Habermas addresses some key truths found in theistic circles that cannot be argued without grasping at straws. These include the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, and the moral argument.

The cosmological argument supports miracles because it indicates that the universe must have a ‘first cause’ that sets things into motion⁸. No matter how deeply one plumbs the depths of the known universe, there is nothing that can truly argue that the world just ‘happened’. Certainly, scientists can argue that there is evidence that the Big Bang created the universe, but they cannot explain what caused the Big Bang – “it just happened...” does not receive support in intellectual circles. How does this relate to miracles? It could be said that God generated a ‘first cause’ – something from nothing – to bring about His means. Here go, in the cosmological argument, God could have chosen to cause the Big Bang as a miracle to bring about life as we know it and science cannot rightfully argue against this.

In the teleological argument, the universe is so complex that it is not scientifically arguable that the perfect series of reactions needed to build and sustain life could have happened completely by chance and certain things are simply irreducible⁹. There is most certainly a rhyme and symmetry in the composition of the universe that, even when reduced to the most basic components science has, such as DNA, these tiny items could not possibly have aligned so perfectly because science believes that the universe has organized itself from chaos. How can chaos be organized if something beyond chaos does not engage with it. To this argument, it

⁸ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 152.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

makes sense that an intelligent force must have swayed things in a particular way, but scientists would not dare call it ‘god.’

Lastly, the moral argument states that mankind is born with an innate sense of right and wrong that would not be possible if something did not create morality¹⁰. Much of this is drawn from C.S. Lewis’ statement in *Mere Christianity* about how people can be born in many different walks of life, different histories, different forces, but still feel the internal struggle between what is moral and what is not. Very few societies in the world and certainly no society considered remotely civil believe that murder is justified. Likewise, most people would agree that stealing something that does not belong to them would be an incorrect decision. Naturally speaking, it seems that creatures who were created by completely random happenstance (see the previous paragraph) have no need or acting force to be moral, but they are anyway. Connecting this to a miracle can prove to be challenging, but one item stands out – the need for a moral example in the world. God, the creator of all, knew that His creation had begun to question the ability for someone to be truly moral – that is to do the right thing all the time. If mankind had no ability to understand the manifestation of one without sin, how could they believe a near sinless life was possible at all? To this end, God used His miraculous power to insert His son into the world as a pinnacle for morality.

Conclusion

This material was absolutely more challenging to truly grasp in great depth without repeated review and consideration. However, human minds are far too limited to understand an all-powerful, eternal, omniscient and omnipresent God so we desire to put God in a box. A

¹⁰ Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, 160.

pastor friend of mine has dubbed this “TGS” or “Tiny God Syndrome”. We want to put God in a box and keep Him there until the time is right for us to pull Him out and ask for our wish list. But God will never fit into a tiny box for He created all boxes and put whatever He felt necessary into those boxes. It makes sense, then, that He could create a box that seems air-tight (as the naturalists believe) but easily create countless ways to interact with that box to achieve His ends. The appearance of these things is often so subtle that they are easily dismissed, and naturalists can keep feeling comfortable in their box. However, I like to think of a quote from my favorite character – the Doctor from Doctor Who. The titular character, in his Eleventh incarnation says: “The universe is big, it’s vast and complicated, and ridiculous. And sometimes, very rarely, impossible things just happen, and we call them miracles.” This is just as clear of a non-spiritual basis for miracles as anyone could argue.

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