CREDIBILITY AND CREDULITY IN PLUTARCH’S LIFE OF NUMA POMPILIUS

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When I joined the faculty of the Divinity School in 1978, Robert Grant gave me a copy of his book *Miracle and Natural Law in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Thought*.1 His inscription reads: “Dieter from Bob. Welcome to Chicago.” The laconic words combine brevity with duration. The inscription suggests hope of continuity in interest and method, and so it was and still is today. The book was not new to me because my teachers in Mainz and Cambridge had recommended it as an outstanding piece of scholarship, and I had cited it in my doctoral dissertation of 1957. Grant’s work was a rarity at that time, so that owning a copy myself felt more like a miracle than law of nature.

1. Some Reflections on Grant’s Miracle and Natural Law

As I read the book again recently, I found even the title to be intriguing. “Miracle and Natural Law” suggests a connection where the common view sees a contradiction. Miracle comes first because humanity at first had a worldview that was totally given to the miraculous, until the philosophers came along and destroyed that worldview by demonstrating that what may seem to be miraculous is in fact the result of nature and its laws. Philosophical skepticism prevailed and separated what belongs to nature from what belongs to superstition. Since miracles were παρὰ φύσιν, contra naturam, believing in them constituted δεισιδαιμονία, superstition. Moderate skeptics who attempted compromises between these extremes were denounced as eclectics and weak thinkers.

Without delving into Grant’s book too deeply, it must be said that it exploded the conventional picture just sketched, in Part I, entitled “Science.” The basic issues are shown not to be verified facts but concepts of thought, beginning with “Nature” (including “laws of nature” and

1 Amsterdam: North Holland, 1952.
“matter and motion”), and followed by “Credibility” and “Credulity,” all of them results of “Education.”

In antiquity, the notion of “nature” (φύσις/natura) was widely debated among philosophers, and as a result there existed many different concepts as well as traditions of them in the different philosophical schools. What was thought to be “nature” depended on school traditions, within which also experiments and research were conducted. Hence, “nature” was not simply the world out there, but an abstraction derived from what was perceived as reality. Even a common understanding of nature as constituted by four elements (fire/spirit, air, water, and earth) plus Chance (Tyche) was a problematic compromise. Further explanations were needed to clarify the relationships among the elements, their composition and motion. Whatever “laws of nature” were detected depended on a force driving or disturbing them. Is this force intrinsically a material or a divine power? If it is divine, it claims the religious name of Chance/Tyche. And if that claim is granted, the question is, Why not grant a divine status to the four elements as well? Why not grant that same status to Nature itself?

Whatever the answer to these questions may be, the door to religion and the world of the miraculous was not closed. Indeed, the answer does not depend on indisputable factual evidence concerning “nature.” There is no item called “nature” one can lay one’s hands or eyes on; what the senses perceive and can examine are intellectual conceptualities.

If so, this brings up the question of “credibility.” As conventional wisdom has it, phenomena are credible, if they conform to nature and its forces and if a majority of reasonable people agree on this assessment. Conversely, if a majority of reasonable people disagree, the phenomena are to be judged as “incredible” or “impossible.” There are, however, at least three problems that undermine such a simplistic view of “credibility.”

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2 Ibid., pp. 3–40.
3 Ibid., pp. 41–60.
4 Ibid., pp. 61–77.
5 Ibid., pp. 78–86.
6 For the major arguments concerning violation of law, and the order of nature, related to the theodicy problem, see Plato, Leg. 10, 884ff.
7 Presented by Plato as the common view of “universal nature” (Leg. 10, 889b): πῦρ καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ γῆν καὶ ἀέρα φύσει πάντα εἶναι καὶ τύχη, φασί, τέχνη, δὲ οὐδὲν τούτων. (“Fire and water and earth and air, they say, exist by nature and chance, and none of them by craft.” (my trans.)