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God Would Not Perform Miracles¹

Abstract. The occurrence of miracles is often taken to be evidence for the existence of God. Even if we allow that violations of the laws of nature occur and there can be good evidence for believing it, miracles do not provide us with sufficient evidence to conclude that its cause was a single, omnipotent, omniscient, infinitely good, personal being. Then I argue that an omni-God would not employ miracles to accomplish its aims. Its power, knowledge, and moral virtue would preclude it from performing miracles. Miracles would be ineffective, irrational, and immoral acts for God.

I. Miracles as Evidence for God

In many matters, we tend to find evidence for conclusions we favor. We leave off before seriously considering evidence that would disconfirm a cherished view. When we do encounter negative evidence, we scrutinize it with abnormal levels of skepticism and hold it to inconsistently high levels of proof. We take a liberal and forgiving view of the sources of evidence that support the conclusions we favor. We have a powerful disposition towards confirmation of conclusions that we arrived at before we considered the evidence. We blur and sift the evidence in our favor by confusing the difference between propositions that support a favored conclusion with ones that are merely consistent with it.

The discussion of miracles and their relationship to an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good God has been plagued by this sort of treatment. It seems to have been taken for granted that if miracles really do occur, then proof for the existence of God is in hand. We take it that if there really were a Jesus, for example, who did and said all the things he is purported to, then we'd have compelling reasons to think that the God of Christianity is real. We assume that if prayers are answered, then God must be listening.

Many atheists and non-believers have been just as guilty of buying into these assumptions when they have expended energy arguing that there really was no Jesus, or that the virgin birth motif was common among various first century religious sects, that the Bible contains internal inconsistencies, or that there are other explanations for the disappearance of Jesus' body in the tomb. The background presumption often seems to be that if there was a Jesus, or if his mother was a virgin, or if the Bible is consistent, or if he did miraculously arise from the dead, then we would be forced to accept that we have compelling evidence that theism is true. Evan Fales, an avowed

¹ I must thank Ricki Monnier, David Corner, John Peloquin, Russell Disilvestro, Scott Merlino and many others for helpful ideas and comments on earlier versions of this paper.

skeptic, has said that were an undeniable miracle to occur such as the stars in the sky suddenly realigning to spell “Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin” thus making headlines all over the world and sending astronomers into a frenzy, then “that would convince me of theism (or polytheism); no other explanation is remotely plausible.”²

What has been missed in many of these analyses of theistic arguments is that even in their strongest forms, they do not show the existence of an omni-God, and the gap of proof for the more specific and articulated Christian God is even wider.

The debate about miracles since Hume has largely focused on whether or not such events ever occur or whether or not it is ever reasonable to believe that they have.³ I do not wish to address either of those questions. Despite Hume’s argument, I am open to the possibility that a person could reasonably believe that a miracle has occurred. Surely if she were equipped with the very best tools, concepts, and means of investigation and if she had thoroughly explored all the possibilities, she could be in an epistemic position, albeit rarely, where believing a miracle is reasonable. For the purpose of this discussion, I will assume that it is possible. I will also assume that it is possible for miracles, conceived as violations of the law of nature,⁴ to occur. So

² Fales, Evan. “Success Defense? A Review of *In Defense of Miracles*” *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 3, no. 1. Series 2. 2001. 13.

³ See, for instance, Mackie, Clarke, Mavrodes, “David Hume and the Probability of Miracles,” and Salmon.

⁴ There have been a number of arguments contesting the “violation of the laws of nature” definition. Collier says, for example, “The impossibility of a complete explanation in terms of natural laws is not itself sufficient for an event to be a miracle, as the fundamental indeterminacy postulated by the standard interpretation of quantum theory shows.” Collier, John. “Against Miracles,” *Dialogue*, vol. 25, (1986), pgs. 349-352. See also:

Holland, R.F. “The Miraculous,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2(1965), 43-51. Reprinted and revised in *Logical Analysis and Contemporary Theism*, ed. J. Donnelly. New York: Fordham University Press, 1972. 218-235.

Hughes, C. ‘Miracles, laws of nature and causation’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 66 (1992), 179–205.

Larmer, Robert, “Miracles, Evidence, and God,” *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 107-122, Winter 2003.

Mawson, T. J. “Miracles and Laws of Nature,” *Religious Studies: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 33-58, March 2001.

Mavrodes, George, “Miracles and the Laws of Nature,” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 2, No. 4, Oct. 1985. pgs. 333-346.

Where miracles are defined more broadly to include events that are within natural law (such as a bus driver falling asleep at the wheel and coming to a stop before hitting a child), the argument from miracles to the existence of God will be more difficult since an obvious natural explanation is readily available. Where miracles are defined to be acts of God, then the debate over inferring the existence of God from some event becomes a debate about whether or not an event is a miracle. I am framing my discussion in terms of whether interruptions in the laws of nature provide evidence for the existence of God.

On accounts where the laws of nature are conceived of as statistical, like Swinburne’s (and indeed, according to modern physics textbooks) a miracle may be defined of as an exceedingly unlikely event given the laws of nature, rather than a violation of them. I take it that as the likelihood of an event increases according to the laws of nature, the difficulty of proving the existence of God increases. It will be possible to adapt the arguments I am making to accommodate many of these different definitions.

suppose that a real miracle occurs and you have overwhelmingly positive evidence that it did. Now what?

There are two central questions in this paper: the first is the *evidential problem of miracles*. To what extent can the occurrence of miracles be construed as evidence for the existence of an omni-God? Would it be reasonable to conclude that a single, supernatural and personal being of infinite power, knowledge, and goodness is responsible? I will argue that the answer is no. Even in the best case scenario, the argument to the theistic conclusion is vastly underdetermined. The second is the *compatibility problem of miracles*. Would an omni-God employ miracles to achieve his ends? I will argue that the answer is no. If a miracle occurs, we could be sure that an omni-being did not do it.⁵ Performing miracles would be irrational and immoral for God.

There are several reasons it is important to address the question of miracles as evidence for the existence of God. Arguably, belief in God for millions of people and the weight of the Christian religion rests upon the miracles of Jesus. Possibly, were it not for the miracles of Jesus, Christians would not believe, and Christianity as we know it would not exist. Countless other world religions are built upon reports by their founders about miraculous occurrences. Miracles are often appealed to in order to corroborate someone's claim that he or she has a special relationship with God. The view that miraculous events give us evidence for the existence of God in some form or another is among the most common of all religious beliefs.

II. What Would a Miracle Show?

What seems to have infused much of our thinking about miracles is some slipping between necessary and sufficient conditions. If omnipotence, omniscience, and infinite goodness were necessary to perform miracles, and one had compelling grounds to believe that a miracle had occurred, then one would have compelling evidence that an omni-being exists. The problem is that while these properties appear to be sufficient to perform miracles, they are not necessary.

Is omnipotence required to violate the laws of nature? Consider these two events, both miracles: First, someone walks on water. Second, all of the nuclear fusion reactions that drive the burning of every star in the universe are stopped and all of those stars are instantly rendered cold and inert. It is reasonable to think that walking on water could take less power than it would take to stop all of the fusion reactions in all the stars. In part, it seems that the former would take less power if we were to try to accomplish it by acting within the framework of natural law. Using physical means to try to bring the former event about would, I think, be less difficult to bring the first about than the second.

Admittedly, it could be a poor analogy to draw conclusions about how much supernatural power is required for different acts from how much natural power would be required. But another argument is convincing: a being could have the power to perform

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, I will use "God," and "omni-being," interchangeably and to mean a being that is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. There is a significant literature concerning the best way to understand those terms and there are several rival definitions for each. As far as I can see, the points I will make can be applied with equal effect to the different definitions, so I will just use "omnipotent," "omniscient," and "omni-benevolent," without elaboration.

one violation of the laws of nature and not another. Imagine two supernatural entities, one who could do all and only those miraculous feats that Jesus is said to have performed, and another who could do all of the Jesus miracles and infinitely many others as well. Surely the latter would be more powerful on any reasonable account of power. We could imagine that some force is able to make a human walk on water or stop all of the stars from burning only once and only for a moment, but never again. The laws of nature would be violated in these cases with less power than omnipotence because, presumably, omnipotence would include the power to perform such acts as well as many others at any time. A source that could enable someone to walk on water, but not reverse time, stop the nuclear reaction of the sun, or perform any other miracles would not be omnipotent. This argument indicates that omnipotence is merely consistent with miracles. But were we to come across compelling evidence that a miracle occurred, at most, that would suggest that there *could* be an omnipotent force that was responsible, although the evidence alone doesn't support that conclusion.⁶

Is omniscience necessary in order to violate the laws of nature? No. It is possible that an unintelligent, but very powerful being violates the laws of nature by burning a face on a fish stick because it thought that would make people believe in him.⁷ There have been a few times when something on my car wasn't working, and foolishly, I tinkered around with the components that I thought were responsible without really knowing what they do or how they work. And then, after messing around with the settings on the carburetor, or taking some fuses out of the fuse box and putting them back in, or checking the oil, inexplicably and much to my surprise, the car started working properly again. So there are times when I have managed to fix my car, but I was largely in the dark about how I did it, what I did, or what was wrong in the first place. Perhaps a being who intervenes in nature sort of fakes it, tinkers blindly a bit, and the results seem to have come out the way he wanted. In fact, this sort of hypothesis might make sense of the examples of miracles that are frequently given: statues bleeding from the eyes, statues drinking milk, and fish sticks bearing the image of Jesus. Omniscience appears to be consistent with miracles, but it is not necessary.

Is omnibenevolence necessary to bring about a miracle? Again, the answer is no.⁸ Typically, we think that miracles are fortuitous events. But Satan's torments of Job at God's behest were clearly disruptions of the ordinary course of nature. Presumably, if Satan hadn't engaged in his challenge with God, then Job would not have miraculously lost all of his livestock, had his wife and children die, developed boils all

⁶ In section III, I will argue against this possibility as well. That is, I will argue that omnipotent beings would not exercise their power by means of miracles, so any miracle we encounter would not be an omnipotent being's act.

⁷ Recently an Ontario man found a miraculous burn pattern on a fishstick he had cooked that resembles Jesus.

⁸ By some accounts, see Mawson, Larmer, for example, a miracle is, by definition, a good thing. Mawson says, "there would be something odd about calling an event a miracle if one did not think it was for the good." (37) Perhaps so, although for our argument what is relevant is that supernatural interventions in the course of nature perpetrated by good agents and by evil agents are alike in this central respect: they both produce a violation of the laws of nature. So were we to encounter one of those, the question is, what could we infer about its source? That the cause is good cannot be assumed a priori in an argument that seeks to show that an infinitely good supernatural being exists.

over his body, and so on. Left to the normal course of nature, Job's life would have been much less unpleasant. So miraculous events need not arise from good sources.

Miracles that appear to accomplish good ends seem to be consistent with infinite goodness but omnibenevolence is not necessary.⁹ Many of the miracles that we have been told about seem to reflect good will—Jesus heals the sick, cures blindness, or feeds the hungry. But are they indicative of infinite goodness? Infinite justice? Moral perfection? Again, not by themselves. Would any single, finitely measurable miracle indicate infinite goodness in the author? No. I have some degree of good will, and sometimes I act on that basis and do kind or loving things for others. But for the rest of the time, apathy, distraction, selfishness, or indifference set in and my actions don't reflect much goodness at all. So singular, or even multiple miracles that seem to have good results may be consistent with infinite goodness, but they are not sufficient to indicate it. Like the omnipotence examples above, a good miracle could be the result of a momentary lapse into goodness by a being who is otherwise indifferent or even malevolent.

But couldn't God have some morally justifying reasons for performing some miracles and not others? In discussions of the problem of evil, theodicies are often offered that might reconcile God's existence with the existence of suffering. God may value our freewill over miraculously preventing the harms we freely inflict. Or God could place a value on building moral and intellectual virtue that is greater than the cases of suffering that are not miraculously repaired. Furthermore, theodacists may object that since we lack omniscience, we cannot know what larger purpose may be served by God's performing some goods and not others, so we shouldn't infer that God doesn't exist or that God is not omnibenevolent from such cases.

Theodicy justifications of evil will not help solve the evidential problem, however. The question is not whether God may have had good reasons for allowing some instance of suffering, it is whether or not we can attribute infinite goodness from a good miracle, even if it is global in scale. A positive argument for omnibenevolence will not arise from any finite good act. The argument under consideration would *infer* God's infinite goodness from a miraculous event. Pointing out that God's existence and omnibenevolence *could be* consistent with miracles that do selective and minor goods doesn't defend using a miracle as evidence for God's goodness. Mere possibility is not probability. It's a *non sequitur* to make the positive inference to God's infinite goodness from the possibility that God is infinitely good and some finite, good miracle.

Should we assume that a force that can violate the laws of nature is a single, personal being that possesses a consciousness with goals? In order to cause a miracle, must the cause have the capacity to love, hate, forgive, become angry? Again, the answers are no. Couldn't there be a blind, unthinking, unconscious force that is powerful enough to interrupt the course of nature? Violating natural laws does not require being sentient, aware, or having any of the personal traits that are typically attributed to God any more than felling a tree does: lumberjacks and lightning are both capable.

Even if the source is conscious, personal, and has intentions, the event may arise from more than one being. The occurrence of a violation of the laws of nature,

⁹ In the next section we will consider an argument that a being's performing miracles is incompatible with that being possessing omnibenevolence.

could have come from 10, 100, or 10,000 sources working together or even in conflict. At the very least, one would need to give an argument based on some considerations beyond the miracle itself that the best explanation is that some single, personal force was responsible rather than one or many sources and rather than one that is blind and unconscious. The occurrence of a miracle might be consistent with a single supernatural force and that force's being a person, but it will not be positive evidence by itself.

A critic may invoke Occam's razor here. We are justified to infer a single cause over many in an instance of a genuine miracle because we should not multiply entities unnecessarily when choosing between multiple explanatory hypotheses.

A great deal of work has been done on Occam's Razor that we cannot address here. But this will suffice. While Occam's Razor may have much to recommend it when choosing among competing physical or natural hypotheses to explain some observations, it is not at all clear that it is equally salient among different metaphysical entities about the existence of supernatural beings. At the very least, we will not assume what needs to be argued, that there are compelling *a priori* or *a posteriori* reasons for concluding that Occam's razor is truth functional when considering competing theses about supernatural entities that interrupt the normal course of nature.

The critic may also object at this point that if it is a person, in the form of a human, as Jesus was alleged to be, and if that person performs a miracle and then claims to be a supernatural agent, then we would have evidence that the source of the miracle is a single person. What else could be needed beyond a person performing a miracle to show that the miracle's cause is a person? And who else but an omni-being could be responsible?

But again we cannot simply grant what needs to be proven. When someone who appears to be human and who is conscious claims that a miraculous event is the result of his or some other supernatural source, that isn't sufficient to show that it did. More will be required to establish that he is the cause, that he has control over the cause, or that the event should be understood in the way he describes. That agent's claims about what the event means are more pieces of evidence that a reasonable observer would have to take under consideration and evaluate. Humans are fallible. There are cases where alleged psychics or paranormalists seem to genuinely believe that they have extraordinary powers but even they don't realize that what is occurring has a natural explanation and source. Sometimes palm readers and fortune tellers are able to pick up on subtle body language cues, facial expressions, and other discrete indicators without being aware that these cold-reading techniques are responsible. It is possible that some human, like Jesus, or even a voice from the heavens, is not the source of the miraculous event, but just claims to be. He may know no more than we do about the real origins of the events that he thinks he is able to command with his will.

What we have now established is miracles appear to be consistent with the existence of an omni-God. But they do not support the stronger inferences any more than my lifting a bag full of groceries, balancing my checkbook, and giving a homeless person five dollars proves that I am omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. It would seem that God could pick up the groceries, do the math, and spare five dollars. A miracle could also have been caused by the Tooth Fairy, Santa, Sobek, the Egyptian

crocodile god, or Gefjun, the Norwegian goddess of agriculture.¹⁰ The answer to the *evidential problem of miracles* is that the inference to a single, personal, conscious an omni-God is underdetermined by miracle evidence.

What about the *compatibility problem of miracles*? Is it consistent to attribute miracles to an omni-being? That is, our presumption has been that the divine attributes are sufficient for performing miracles—God could do miracles if he so chose. But there are compelling reasons to think that an omni-being would not perform miracles. So if we believe one has occurred, we should conclude that God *did not* do it.

III. The Miracle Problem of Power and Knowledge: God Would Not Underachieve

Consider the question from the other side. If there were an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, singular, and personal divine being, what sort of acts would it engage in? We can form a number of expectations that preclude such a being's acting through miracles.

1. *God Gets What He Wants*

There are cases where finite beings like ourselves seek to accomplish some goal that is beyond our power, or we fail to achieve our goal because out of ignorance, we employ the wrong means to accomplish the end. So the results may or may not reflect ability, competence, knowledge, or good intentions. And the results may or may not be what we wanted. I'd like to be a best-selling author with influential philosophical books translated into 15 languages—but so far, that project is not working out so well. But an omni-being will not fail to achieve its desired ends for lack of ability, incompetence, or ignorance. Its actions will perfectly and completely achieve that agent's purposes. Its acts will achieve its ends as fully as they can be fulfilled. The resulting state of affairs will be the perfect manifestation of that agent's will. There won't be any restraint from some external force with more power. There won't be any knowable solution, fact, or outcome that escapes the attention of such a being. The results will not dissatisfy that being because it still desires something that cannot be had, or because it lacks the power to achieve what it wants.¹¹ So we should expect that an omni-being's miracle will achieve exactly what that being seeks.

2. *God Would Do a Good Job*

It will also accomplish his ends in the most expeditious manner possible. Imagine two computer programming students working on a homework project to produce some output Y from an input X using a programming language. Smith creates a circuitous, inefficient, clumsy, and unnecessarily complicated program that fulfill the required task with hundreds of lines of code. Smith's program produces the Y output from input X, but it takes lots of time, and the program contains lots of unused and unhelpful features. Jones is smarter than Smith and has a more powerful command of the means at her disposal. She finds a simple, elegant, efficient solution that achieves the same output with a few dozen lines of code with no wasted processing or wasted

¹⁰ For a list of 500 other forgotten gods see my atheism blog: <http://atheismblog.blogspot.com/2008/02/dead-gods.html>

¹¹ I have worked out many of the details of this argument in "The Paradox of Divine Agency," in *The Impossibility of God*, eds. Martin and Monnier. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003. 313-322.

time. The instructor would rightly give Jones the better grade; she has achieved a better solution to the problem. By extension, an omniscient, omnipotent being would achieve the most elegant and effective means to achieve its ends.

3. *But God Could and Would Do Better*

Since miracles could be brought about with less than omnipotence and omniscience, God would be acting far below capacity in creating one. They would amount to trivial acts for God since a mere violation of the laws of nature is vastly less than what such a being could accomplish if it chose.

First, let's consider the purposes that are often attributed to miracles and how they cohere with the concept of God. If God has the goal of instilling belief, inspiring faith, fortifying resolve, discouraging misbehavior, or enforcing commandments, it takes very little imagination to conceive of more direct, effective, and sustained means of achieving those ends. As Ted Drange has argued, if these were God's goals, then it would have been a simple matter to directly implant belief into all people's minds, or perform more spectacular miracles that would convince more people. Jesus could have reappeared to everyone not just a handful of easily discredited zealots. Millions of angels, disguised as humans, could have spread out and preach the word behind the scenes. Or God could have protected the Bible from defects in writing, copying, and translation.¹²

Walking on water, turning water into wine, and raising the dead are underpowered, inelegant, clumsy solutions to the goals that are attributed to God. Jesus could have given a more conclusive demonstration of his divinity to more people, for example, than raising a single dead man, or destroying a fig tree that had no fruit in front of a handful of already converted witnesses. The miracles that have been presented in the histories of the world's religions have been microscopic in scale from the perspective of a divine being. Making matters worse, they have been ambiguous, under-documented, obscure, contentious, and divisive. We can readily imagine events that would have been more appropriate and effective for an omni-being. An infinitely powerful being could have just *saved* the Israelites instead of the prolonged conflicts with the Pharaoh of Egypt involving plagues, murdering children, parting the Red Sea, and so on. An omni-being could have achieved whatever ends for humanity he desired in the entire Jesus saga simply, directly, effectively, and universally. The theist may respond that in order to preserve human freewill, God could not act in more direct, coercive ways to achieve his ends. Even allowing this point, it is clear that an omnipotent being would have an endless list of non-freewill violating ways in which to achieve the outcome more effectively.

The problem of the compatibility of miracles with the concept of God is compounded by how easily they can be faked. Illusions that are undetectable to anyone but an expert can be performed readily by even mediocre magicians and illusionists. David Copperfield makes the Statue of Liberty disappear on television. Penn and Teller catch bullets in their teeth. Chris Angel walks on water in a swimming pool and floats in the air over the Luxor hotel in Las Vegas. In fact, many of these faked, natural events are much more impressive than the alleged real things.

¹² Drange, Ted. "The Argument from Nonbelief to Atheism," *Religious Studies* 29 (1993): 417-32.

Imagine the social and religious impact these ingenious illusionists would have had amongst the superstitious, poor, and uneducated masses of New Testament Palestine or other ancient cultures where modern religions originated. Modern religious leaders such as Billy Graham, Peter Popoff, Robert Tilton, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Ted Haggard use cruder and more transparent deceptions to win the hearts of millions of people and acquired vast wealth from more educated, modern people. I am not arguing that Jesus was in fact performing sleight-of-hand tricks, although that is certainly a possibility. The culture of miracles and paranormal phenomena is so mired in fabrications, frauds, and confusions that were God to perform a real one it would stand the same chance of exoneration as the one innocent man who is mistakenly jailed. He cries out for justice in a prison full of guilty criminals who all passionately insist that they are innocent too. An omni-being could and would do much better than that. Would he allow himself to be so grossly mistaken, maligned, and misunderstood?¹³

My point is that surely an omni-God, were he to manifest himself through miracles could and would do much better than such superficial and easily imitated acts. It is more reasonable to conclude that an infinitely powerful, knowledgeable, and good being would not perform miracles than to attribute acts to him than an ordinary illusionist could effectively fake and then try to reconcile the manifest imperfections of miracles with his nature. Miracles are more superficial, ineffective, and indirect means for achieving ends than an omni-God would enact.

If a reasonable person has reflected on what it would be for an omni-being to act, he could not be blamed for reacting to a miracle by asking: "That's it? That's the best you've got? How am I supposed to believe in an omni-being on the basis of *that*? Any old demigod (or gods) could do *that*. Whatever God was trying to accomplish, aren't there more effective ways to do it? God would have done something bigger, smarter, and more appropriate." If there are bigger, smarter, and more appropriately divine ways to achieve the end, then the witness should conclude that God was not responsible.

Do we have an argument here that it is not possible that God could have any purpose for which a miracle would be the appropriate exercise of divine power? No, I don't think so. Clearly there would be much we would not know about the purposes and plans of a divine being. But the list of goals that have been rejected here make it increasingly implausible to continue to defend miracles as acts of God on the basis of some unknown, mysterious possibilities. No miracle is not a God-worthy expression of power or knowledge since omnipotence and omniscience are not necessary to perform them. Furthermore, God would not employ them to foster belief, strengthen faith, demonstrate his existence, prove his divinity, distinguish himself from sleight-of-hand magicians and illusionists, distinguish himself from false prophets, save someone's life, save the lives of a whole group of people, prevent a tyrant from oppressing a group of people, raise the dead, protect the Bible, or separate himself from other lesser gods. It is reasonable to infer that these sorts of problems will plague other accounts.

Also note that the first argument we have considered is whether or not we can infer the existence of God from the occurrence of miracles. If a miracle serves some mysterious purpose of God's and we cannot understand how, why, or if an omni-being would act in this way, then the miracle cannot serve as evidence that God does in fact

¹³ Christine Overall has an argument that God would not thwart our ability to understand the world by performing miracles. We will consider this argument in more detail in Section IV.

exist or has those mysterious plans. The critic's objection, at the very least, has conceded that the miracle is insufficient to prove God.

The argument so far can be understood as indicating that miracles are contrary to God's nature in terms of a rational being exercising its abilities to achieve its ends. To act in order to achieve some goal that you have deemed worthy and yet fail to achieve it as a result of not exercising power and knowledge that are sufficient to the task would be irrational. But God would not fail to exercise the full extent of his abilities in any action. To do so would be irrational, imperfect, self-defeating, and less than divine. If God performs miracles, then those miracles will be consistent with the rational exercise of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. But miracles are not consistent with the rational exercise of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Therefore, it is not the case that God performs miracles.

IV. The Miracle Problem of Evil

There is a special set of problems in the relationship between God's goodness and miracles. We would expect, if a being is infinitely good, or morally perfect, then it would have only have the best, most morally laudable goals. We would not expect inferior, insufficient, or morally suboptimal acts from such a being. If being infinitely good would motivate such a being to not perform evil, harmful acts, then being infinitely good would also motivate it against acting in ways that are evil by omission, or that are partially good, or that only reflect some of its moral virtue. If I give a homeless man \$5 on the way into my office where I am embezzling millions from the pension plans of thousands of employees, we would not conclude that I am virtuous or generous on the whole.

Many miracles are presented as good: Jesus is alleged to have healed a crippled man so that he could walk again, he also cured a group of lepers, and miraculously fed thousands of hungry people. Many people are alleged to have been miraculously healed at Lourdes, France. Mohammed is said to have multiplied food and drink supernaturally on several occasions in order to feed hungry masses. God is alleged to have sent the Israelites manna from heaven to feed them when they would have starved.

In many examples, God punishes with miracles. Lot's wife gets turned to pillar of salt for watching the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah when God commanded her not to. The view that Hurricane Katrina was sent by God to punish sinners in New Orleans has been popular among American evangelical preachers.

1. The "Why Not More?" Problem

If God were to exercise his good will through miracles, it would generate a problem of omission. The salient and troubling question becomes: Why not more? I will argue that we cannot reconcile God's performing good through miracles with all of the cases where he does not.

At any given moment on the planet when miracles are alleged to have occurred, there are billions of other people who are not being miraculously cured, healed, or benefitted. As we saw in the discussion of omnipotence and omniscience above, we would expect possessing the omni-traits would preclude a being's only doing part of the

job. If some being saw fit to fix one evil in the world, then it would appear that there are evils worth fixing from its perspective. In a good miracle, then, it would appear that the being responsible has found the case to be one where it could prevent suffering without losing a greater good, or allowing an equal or worse evil. Presumably, an infinitely good being would never act in any way that would lose a greater good or allow an equal or worse evil.

It is reasonable to think that if there is one instance that warrants a miraculous intervention, then there are more. Certainly for all of the historical miracles performed by God, Jehovah, Allah, Jesus, and Muhammed where they fed the hungry, raised the dead, or healed the sick there were and are countless other cases of need that resemble them, indeed there are countless other cases of people being *much needier* than they were in these instances. But they were and continue to be ignored.

It cannot be that an omnipotent and omniscient being does not know about or have the power to do more. If God were attempting to accomplish good in the world, then there would be no obstacle to his achieving much more of it than this miracle does. Suppose that thousands of the sick get healed, or the hungry get fed, or the Red Sea parts to save the Israelites. None of these miracles accomplishes nearly as much as God could. If God were attempting to exact some punishment or retribution through a miracle, then he would not arbitrarily single out some individual for lesser misdeeds while ignoring so many others, particularly when the misdeeds of others are so grievous. An omni-being could and would achieve vast, effective, balanced punishment.

The omission problem of miracles is a special instance of the problem of evil, and the theist may invoke some of the standard responses. The case is somewhat different because by hypothesis, a miraculous has occurred and our question is whether or not that event can be attributed to an infinitely good being. The difference is that the question is not, as it has been in many theodicy discussions of evil, whether or not God would act to prevent evil or increase good. We wish to determine whether God's infinite goodness is compatible with miraculous acts. If a miracle arises from an infinitely good being, what are the circumstances that led to an intervention in the course of nature towards that end? how are they different, if at all, from many other circumstances where there was no intervention?

I am making a couple of assumptions that some theists will deny. I take it that if an omnibenevolent agent were to act miraculously, those actions would be indicative to us of moral goodness, or at least they would not be indicative of gross immorality on the part of the source. A miracle brought about by an infinitely good being would not be consistent with cases we know where agents who are not morally virtuous act capriciously. The miraculous acts of a morally perfect being would not accomplish some good for some people while neglecting countless other cases that resemble it in every morally salient detail that we can discern.

We can anticipate a response from the general debate over the problem of evil. Skeptical theism is the view that we suffer from epistemic and cognitive limitations that prevent us from being about to determine whether instances of suffering that appear to

be pointless from our perspective really are. Skeptical theists like William Alston,¹⁴ Stephen Wykstra,¹⁵ and Peter Van Inwagen¹⁶ have argued that we must remain agnostic about the claim that there exist instances of pointless evil in the world. These considerations could be applied to the case of miracles. The skeptical theist could respond that we cannot infer that the source of a miracle is not infinitely good on the grounds that there is so much suffering that has not been miraculously alleviated for the same reasons. To paraphrase Wykstra, we shouldn't conclude that an instance of suffering is pointless unless, given our faculties and the use we made of them, the contrary would have been clear to us, had it been true. If there was a point to an instance of suffering God's perspective, would that point be clear to us? The skeptical theist's answer is no; God's plans, and God's abilities are too far beyond the scope of our limited cognitive capacities for us to draw a reliable conclusion. So the skeptical theist might press for agnosticism about the *apparent* arbitrariness, and hence injustice of miracles.

We should not be agnostic about the capriciousness of miracles for several reasons. Suppose a miracle occurs and it achieves what appears to be some good in the lives of those it affects. First, skeptical theism implies that we cannot infer that the healing, the resurrection, or the protection afforded by the miracle, for example, actually are morally good outcomes. If we are not in an epistemic position to evaluate the pointlessness of some instance of suffering, we must be similarly skeptical about instances of apparent goodness. Second, the implication of skeptical theism is that the miraculous acts of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect being will be indistinguishable from the petty, unjust, capricious, immoral actions of finite human agents. The acts of God will not be morally distinguishable from the faked miracles of a cheap, fraudulent televangelist. God's acts will be just as small and arbitrary, but the fact that it doesn't appear to be the sort of thing an infinitely good being would engage cannot implicate God's goodness. When Peter Popoff or Pat Robertson does it, we can legitimately ask, "If he has the power to cure that woman's cancer and he's a good person, then why wouldn't he do it for more people?" But if God does it, the moral inference is not permitted because we can't know God's plans.

Third, agnosticism is problematic because it requires that we adopt an ambivalence and complacency about what are clear cases of moral negligence and harm. Imagine a serial killer or a pedophile, who at his sentencing, says, "It's hasty, unjustified, and negligent of you to condemn me for my actions. Whether or not what I did was really a bad thing cannot be determined from what appears to be the case. For all we know, a hundred years from now, what I did will actually prove to be the best way or only way to produce a much greater good." Should we be agnostic? The possibility of distant benefits do not lead us to adopt agnosticism in ordinary cases of moral judgment; we acknowledge their possibility but they do not mitigate real, clear harms.

Fourth, skeptical theism would force us to adopt an untenable double standard. If a doctor travels to a village with enough polio vaccine to inoculate 1,000 children, but only gives 10 of them the shot and throws the rest of the vaccine away arbitrarily, and

¹⁴ Allston, William. "The Inductive Problem of Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition."

¹⁵ Wykstra, Stephen. "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of "Appearance," Int J Phil Re116: 73-93 (1984) Get more recent one.

¹⁶ Van Inwagen, Peter "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence."

then watches the remaining 990 die or be crippled, we would conclude that doctor was a monster, not a saint. But we cannot draw the same conclusion about the supernatural force that ignores the Holocaust and the bubonic plague but raises Lazarus from the dead. The appearances are alleged to be entirely consistent with that being's infinite goodness. But that being's performing one miracle and not others makes the problem of appearances much worse.

Also recall the *evidential problem of miracles* we began with. By adopting agnosticism about miracle negligence, the skeptical theist has implicitly granted that we will not be able to infer God's goodness from miracles. Our cognitive capacities are not equal to the task. Were some supernatural force to alleviate some cases of suffering and not others, we don't have the candle power to conclude that the source is infinitely good. The larger background problem for the skeptical theist will be whether any epistemic grounds that are within the scope of our cognitive capacities will be adequate to justify theism.

Even if some supernatural force were to reach out and instantaneously eliminate all of what appears to be pointless suffering in the world today, an omnibenevolent being would have done it sooner. Auschwitz in 1945 remains. The bubonic plague still ravaged and killed millions in Europe during the 1300s¹⁷

Christine Overall makes a step towards the same conclusion, "If Jesus was the Son of God, I want to know why he was hanging out at a party, making it go better [turning water into wine], when he could have been healing lepers, for example."¹⁸ But even healing all the lepers in the world leaves us with the same problem. There are vast amounts of suffering in history that were not and are not being alleviated by miracles, and in all the morally relevant ways that we can distinguish, they are equal or more deserving of repair. It's implausible to think that an infinite goodness, love, or kindness in some supernatural source that has shown the ability and the willingness to fix a select few would ignore the rest. Overall has the correct answer, "a being that engages in events that are trivial, capricious, and biased cannot be a morally perfect God."¹⁹

The first moral challenge to miracles is the problem of omission that we have been considering. If a miracle occurs, it is evident that the responsible party could do

¹⁷ Overall and I are essentially in agreement on this point. She says, "As those who would defend the argument from evil point out, there is a huge amount of evil in the world—psychological and physical suffering, malnutrition, starvation, pandemics, cruelty, torture, poverty, racism, lynching, sexism, child abuse, assault, war, sudden deaths from natural disasters—the list is appalling. . . . Instead of using miracles to feed a small number, to transform water into wine, or to convert a few people, God could very well be performing miracles that have a much larger effect, especially on the lives of the millions of children whose suffering is particularly incomprehensible to anyone with a sense of justice. The question is why a good God would be concerned with details like the need for wine at a wedding, and yet apparently not be concerned with huge tragedies like the holocaust of six million Jews." *Ibid*, pg. 360. My claim is that even were some force were to enact some vast reparation like miraculously preventing the holocaust, we still would still not have sufficient evidence for omnibenevolence as long as any other events remain. An omnibenevolent being would not have allowed any such horrors to occur at all if they had been worthy of repair, so a miracle, *in principle*, would neither be consistent with, nor evidence for omnibenevolence.

¹⁸ Overall, Christine, "Miracles, Evidence, Evil, and God: A Twenty-Year Debate," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 358.

¹⁹ *Ibid*. pg. 359.

something about other cases but does not. We can also draw out a problem of *fairness* as James Keller has done, "The claim that God has worked a miracle implies that God has singled out certain persons for some benefit which many others do not receive implies that God is unfair." He continues, "there may be two cases which are similar in all ways that seem relevant, yet in one case there will be a recovery (which some deem a miracle) and in the other case no recovery."²⁰ The charge is that for one person to receive miraculous assistance while someone else whose situation resembles the first case in every important respect doesn't would be unjust; but an infinitely good being would not be responsible for such injustices. So a miraculous event would not be brought about by God.

It is plausible to argue that miracles, when performed by a being that has the power and the knowledge to do vastly more good *are evil*. The doctor who arbitrarily withholds a perfect vaccine from countless needy people and gives it to only a few would be morally reprehensible. In the bathroom of a Las Vegas casino in 1997, Jeremy Strohmeyer brutally killed a little girl in a Las Vegas casino bathroom and his best friend, David Cash Jr. watched and did nothing about it. Strohmeyer was tried and convicted for the murder, but even though he confessed to Cash, the law had no provision for prosecuting Cash for his gross failure of moral duty to report the crime. The California state legislature quickly passed a law obliging witnesses of felonies against minors to report them. The murder of Kitty Genovese in New York while dozens of neighbors listened and did nothing catalyzed the New York legislature to do the same. Most would agree that the doctor, David Cash, and the witnesses to the Genovese murder *should* have done something, particularly since so much good could have been accomplished with so little effort. But that moral judgment cannot be reconciled with a supernatural being who performs a miracle while idly standing by in the presence of so much suffering in the course of history. Such a being would be guilty of gross negligence, and unfairness. Furthermore, these final examples of the capricious doctor, David Cash, and Kitty Genovese suggest that if there are real moral obligations of stewardship towards those beings who are weaker than you, and a duty to rescue, then a supernatural being who performs miracles is in violation of those moral duties too. It would be reasonable to conclude that such a being is evil.

VI. Conclusion

The focus in miracle discussions on whether or not they occur and whether it is ever reasonable to believe that they have occurred has neglected a more fundamental point. Even if miracles are real, neither omnipotence, nor omniscience, nor omnibenevolence are necessary in order to perform them. Nor should we assume that the cause of a miracle is a single, conscious, personal being. Miracles do not provide sufficient evidence for theism. Furthermore, miracles are not compatible with having the divine properties. Miracles are unjust underachievements for a being with God's properties. God would not do miracles, to do so would be irrational and immoral.

Can we go further and argue that the occurrence of miracles would prove there is no God? Perhaps. Christine Overall thinks so. She argues that the Christian God would not perform miracles because they would violate the natural order. They would

²⁰ Keller, James. "A Moral Argument against Miracles," *Faith and Philosophy*. vol. 12, no 1. Jan 1995. 54-78

mislead us and confound our abilities to understand the world. As a divine means of communication, they would exploit , “human weaknesses—for example, fear, suggestibility, ignorance, and awe of the unknown.” Furthermore, “If accomplishing good, communicating divine teaching, or reviving religious awareness are divine purposes, miracles seem scarcely adequate to their accomplishment, for few people have been helped, and many remain skeptical.” So she concludes that, “if a miracle were to occur we would have very good reason for denying that the Christian God exists.” And miracles, “would constitute evidence against the existence of the Christian God.”²¹ Later Overall argues that miracles are incompatible with the existence of God because, “if they occur, miracles increase the amount of evil in the world. A miracle would be an ontic evil, a cognitive evil, and a moral evil.”²²

The problem with Overall’s argument, however, is that what follows is that the Christian God wouldn’t perform miracles, not that the Christian God doesn’t exist. Nor does it follow that no god exists at all. If there are good reasons to think that McCormick wouldn’t commit murder, it does not follow that no murderers exist. Another argument is needed to show that if a miracle occurs, then there is no God that exists at all. Overall has assumed that the Christian God is the only game in town, and that miracles amount to all or nothing evidence for him.

Perhaps she could argue that God, if he exists, would value an orderly nature, expanded human knowledge, and goodness to such an extent that he would not tolerate the occurrence of any anomalies in the natural order whatsoever performed by any supernatural entity. So if a miracle occurs, we can be sure that God doesn’t exist.

The argument I have presented could be developed along these lines. I have shown that God would not perform miracles. If there is a God, then such acts would be irrational and immoral. But would the occurrence of miracles be incompatible with the existence of God altogether? Consider the case where God does exist, and a miracle has occurred. The miracle may have been caused by some supernatural force or forces that are not God. We’d be faced with accounting for the coexistence of God and the other supernatural source or sources. Why would an omni-being tolerate the existence of these other supernatural sources that meddle with the natural order in ways that he has seen fit not to? What is God’s goal in allowing the disruptions that send all of the lesser, natural beings (us) into such a theological, scientific, and moral tailspin? If God really would create an orderly, soul-building world, that is the best of all possible worlds, and that contains free, moral creatures, then how can those goals of God’s be reconciled with the existence of these supernatural sources that violate or thwart the achievement of those goals? The parsimonious and abductive suggestion behind the conclusion that God doesn’t do miracles is that God does not exist. But it is difficult to see how the latter could directly follow from the former without more argument.

²¹ Overall, Christine. “Miracles as Evidence Against the Existence of God,” *The Impossibility of God*, eds. Martin and Monnier. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003. p. 150-152.

²² Overall, Christine. “Miracles, Evidence, Evil, and God: A Twenty-Year Debate,” *Dialogue*, vol. 45, no. 2. Spring 2006. pg. 356.

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