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God Doesn't Do Miracles

I. Miracles as Evidence for God

In many matters, people have a strong tendency to find evidence for conclusions they already favor. We leave off before seriously considering evidence that would disconfirm a cherished view. And 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 supports the conclusions we favor. We have a powerful disposition towards confirmation of conclusions that we arrived at before we considered the evidence. And one of the ways we blur and sift the evidence in our favor is by confusing the difference between reasons that support our conclusion and claims that are merely consistent with our conclusion.

The discussion of miracles and their relationship to an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good God has been plagued by this sort of tilted 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 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. Similarly, the presumption is often that if we had good reasons to think that the universe had a cause, then that would be tantamount to an argument for the existence of God.

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 was no intelligent designer of life on Earth. 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 there were a non-natural cause of life on Earth, then we would be forced to accept that we have compelling evidence that Christian theism is true.

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 articulated Christian version of God is even wider.

The debate about miracles since Hume has, for the most part, focused on whether or not such events ever occur or whether or not it is ever reasonable to believe that they have. I do not wish to address these issues. Despite Hume's argument, I am open to the possibility that a person equipped with the very best tools, concepts, and

means of investigation could be in an epistemic position, albeit rarely, where believing miracle testimony is reasonable. For the purpose of this discussion, I will assume that it is possible. I am also open to the possibility that miracles cannot, in principle occur. But here I will assume that it is possible for miracles, conceived as violations of the law of nature, to occur. So suppose that a real miracle occurs and you have overwhelmingly positive evidence that it did. Now what?

The central question in this paper will be to what extent can the occurrence of miracles, conceived of as violations of the laws of nature, be construed as evidence for the existence of an omni-God. Would it be reasonable to construe a miracle as an indicator that a supernatural 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 strong theistic conclusion is vastly underdetermined. Even worse, I will argue that if a miracle occurred, we could be sure that an omni-being did not do it.¹

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 (at least for many of its sects) rest 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 appealed to in order to demonstrate that someone claiming to be a messenger from God really is who he says he is. Or we are told that someone who claims to be divine himself proves himself by performing some impossible feat. The view that miraculous events give us evidence for the existence of God in some form or another is among the most global 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 of an omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely good being was necessary to perform a miracle 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, however, is that while these properties appear to be sufficient to perform miracles, they not necessary.²

Is omnipotence required to violate the laws of nature? Consider these two events, both violations of the laws of nature: First, someone walks on water. Second, all of the nuclear fusion reactions that drive the burning of the sun are stopped and the sun is instantly rendered cold and inert. It is reasonable to think that walking on water

¹ 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.

² To be fair, there are some better arguments here that 1) it is reasonable under some circumstances to think that a miracle has occurred, and 2) the best explanation of that miracle is that an omni-God or the Christian God exists. Craig, Moreland, and others? If can successfully argue that an omni being wouldn't do miracles, then these arguments will be undermined too.

would take less power than it would take to stop the sun's fusion reactions. My grounds for thinking that the former would take less power are that were we to try to perform these feats by acting within the framework of natural law, using physical means to try to bring the event about, it would, I think, be less difficult to bring the first about than the second.

Admittedly, it could be a poor analogy to infer the extent of supernatural power from the challenges created by problems within the context of natural law and natural power. Nevertheless, I see no obvious problem with the possibility that a being could have the power to perform one violation of the laws of nature and not another, or that one sort of violation might be easier than another, even within the supernatural realm. We could imagine that some force is able to make a human walk on water or stop the sun's burning only once and only for a moment, but never again. That would be a case where the laws of nature are violated, but omnipotence was not required to do so because presumably omnipotence would include the power to do either of those acts at any time, as well as many others at any time. A being could have just enough power to violate those laws of nature at that moment but no more than that. That source could have just enough power to enable someone to walk on water, but not enough to reverse time, or to stop the nuclear reaction of the sun, or perform more than one miracle. Having that much power would be remarkable, but it is much less than omnipotence by any reasonable definition of omnipotence.³ Since an omnipotent being could perform acts like parting the Red Sea, or stopping the rotation of the Earth, but he could also do much more than that, then being omnipotent is merely consistent with the occurrence of 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.⁴

Second, would it be necessary for a being to have omniscience in order to violate the laws of nature? No. You could have a dumb, but very powerful being who actually violates the laws of nature to burn a face on a fish stick because he thought that would make people believe in him.⁵ There have been a few times when something on my car wasn't working, and foolishly, I started tinkering around with the components that I figured were responsible without really knowing what they do or very much about 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. There's no reason in principle to deny that this same sort of thing could be going on with a being who intervenes in nature to bring about miracles. Perhaps he sort of faked it, tinkered blindly a bit, and

³ Notably, there are several other modern accounts of omnipotence and omniscience that differ from my "being able to do or know anything that is logically possible." I think that what I have to say about the relationship between miracles as evidence and omnipotence and omniscience will apply to those accounts equally well. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the "logically possible" accounts.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Recently an Ontario man found a miraculous burn pattern on a fishstick he had cooked that resembles Jesus.

the results seem to have come out the way he wanted. In fact, this sort of God hypothesis might make much more sense of the examples of miracles that are so frequently held up: statues bleeding from the eyes, statues drinking milk, and fish sticks bearing the image of Jesus. So omniscience appears to be consistent with miraculous events, but those events aren't sufficient for the existence of an omniscient cause for the event.

Third, would it be necessary to be omnibenevolent in order to violate the laws of nature? Again, the answer is no. Typically, we think that miracles are always fortuitous events. But Satan's torments of Job at God's behest were clearly violations 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, got boils all over his body, and so on. Left to the normal course of nature, Job's life would have been much less unpleasant. It seems that a being could violate the laws of nature, for example, to inflict more suffering than a person's nervous system would be capable of sustaining otherwise, or a being could just strike everyone dead with no natural, lawful cause. So miraculous events need not arise from good sources.

Furthermore, miracles that appear to accomplish good ends are, are consistent with infinite goodness, but omnibenevolence is not necessary. 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 necessarily 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 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.

Consider a fourth question about miracles and God: is it necessary that a force that can violate the laws of nature is a single, personal being or 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? I see no reason why being capable of violating natural laws also requires being sentient, aware, or having any of the personal traits that we typically attribute to God. Or to put it another way, reading particular intentions, consciousness, purpose, or personhood from an anomalous event that violates the laws of nature is very hard because none of those appear to even be necessary for that interruption to occur. Even if the source has conscious intent, it may be more than one being. The occurrence of a violation of the laws of nature, if it makes sense to say arises from a supernatural source at all, 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 a blind, unconscious one was responsible. The occurrence of a miracle

might be consistent with God's being the cause and God's being a person, but it's not positive evidence in favor of the conclusion that he is.

The critic may 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 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 we must be careful here and not simply grant what needs to be proven. The mere fact that someone who appears to be a conscious agent with purposes claims that an anomalous event in nature arises from the exercise of his or her will doesn't imply that it did. It doesn't follow that he is the cause, that he has control over the cause, or that the event should be understood in only the manner that he instructs. That agent's claims about what the event means are just 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 it is these cold-reading techniques that are giving them information instead of their alleged paranormal abilities. 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.

So if I have compelling evidence of a miracle before me, and my goal is to draw some reasonable inferences about what sort of cause may have brought it about, I cannot leap to the conclusion that it is omnipotent. Nor should I infer that the cause is all knowing or all good. I shouldn't draw the conclusion that the cause is a single, personal, conscious being hastily either.

What the preceding paragraphs have shown is that while the occurrence of a miracle might be consistent with the existence of an omni-God, or a Christian God, by themselves they don't support those stronger conclusions any more than my lifting a bag full of groceries, balancing my checkbook, and giving a homeless person five dollars proves that I'm God. It would seem that God could pick up the groceries, do the math, and spare five dollars. But since so many other variations of lesser beings could do those things too, the stronger conclusion for the existence of an omni-God is grossly underdetermined by miracle evidence.

These limitations of miracle evidence raise another more fundamental question: Is it even 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 Doesn't Underachieve

Consider the sorts of acts that an omni-being might engage in.

If that agent is all-powerful and all-knowing, then it is reasonable to think that its actions will perfectly and completely achieve that agent's purposes. That act will achieve its end as fully as it 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. There won't be any knowable solution or knowable fact or knowable outcome that such a being wouldn't be aware of.

So generally, we should assume that if some anomalous event occurs, and that event is the result of the exercise of an omni-being's will, then the state of affairs produced through that event will be completely and exactly what that being sought to achieve. The results will be as perfect a fulfillment of that being's will as can possibly be achieved by that being or any other. There are cases where finite beings like ourselves seek to accomplish some goal that is beyond our power, or out of ignorance, we employ the wrong means to accomplish our ends. So the results may or may not reflect good intentions, competence, knowledge, and ability. But an omni-being will not fail to achieve its desired ends for lack of ability, incompetence, or ignorance.

God would conceive of the perfect, optimal solution to every challenge, and could bring that solution about instantaneously and unequivocally. Consider 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 set of unnecessarily complicated program modules 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 their disposal. She finds a simple, elegant, efficient solution that achieves the same output with a few dozen lines of code with no wasted time, and no unnecessary features. The instructor would rightly give Jones the better grade. By extension, an omniscient, omnipotent being would achieve the most elegant and effective means to achieve its ends. Omniscience would grasp that solution perfectly, and omnipotence would enact it without any restraint.

We'd also expect, if that being is infinitely good, morally perfect, or omnibenevolent, then it would have only have the highest, most noble, most appropriate goals as targets for the exercise of its will, whatever those might be.

As a result, we shouldn't expect lesser, insufficient acts from such a being. A priori, we wouldn't expect to see minor gestures, insignificant events, trivial results unless those results were what it sought after. Whatever results are achieved through the acts of such a being, those results would be exactly what that being sought to achieve. When agents exercise their will and the results are less than satisfactory to them, some lack of foresight, ability, judgment, or some external interference are often to blame. But those imperfections will not plague the acts of an omni-being. God will get what he wants as far as it can be had.

We've seen that miracles can be caused by less than omni-beings. So in performing a miracle, an omni-God would be acting far below capacity. Since miracles are merely consistent with and don't require any or all of the divine properties, then they would amount to trivial acts for God. A mere violation of the laws of nature is vastly less than what such a being could accomplish if it chose.

There are several reasons to think that God would not underperform by means of miracles. Miracles turn out to be a more superficial, ineffective, and indirect means for achieving ends than an omni-God would ever employ. Consider some of the purposes that have been connected to miracles. 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.⁶

Walking on water, turning water into wine, and splitting the moon appear to be underpowered, inelegant, clumsy solutions to the various goals that are typically attributed to God when we reflect on what he would be capable of. The miracles that have been presented in the histories of the world's religions have been ambiguous, under-documented, obscure, contentious, and divisive. If God's intention was to foster confusion and strife, then that end was accomplished admirably.

Consider the problem this way. For all of the alleged miracles in history, facsimiles that are undetectable to all but experts 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. Imagine the social and religious impact these illusionists with their ingenuity could have had amongst the superstitious, poor, and uneducated masses of New Testament Palestine. Religious leaders such as Billy Graham, Peter Popoff, Robert Tilton, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Ted Haggard have netted millions from much more educated modern people with cruder and more transparent trickery and deception. Surely an omni-God, were he to opt to manifest himself through miracles could do much better. The question becomes why would he not do better? What we have seen is that we have a number of very powerful reasons for expecting that he would.

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. Couldn't an omni-being do better than that? Would he allow himself to be so grossly mistaken, maligned, and misunderstood?

If some anomalous event occurs, features of it might at first appear to be consistent with omnipotence and omniscience, but then if we consider the larger picture, that event appears to be less impressive. "Whatever God was trying to accomplish,

⁶ Drange, Ted. "The Argument from Nonbelief to Atheism," *Religious Studies* 29 (1993): 417-32.

aren't there more effective ways to do it?" Couldn't this act have been bigger? Smarter? And if so, then the fact that it isn't bigger, smarter, or more good gives me evidence that it isn't God who did it.

Suppose I am confronted with a miracle and I wonder about what it could demonstrate. I have figured this much out: if God were attempting to demonstrate his existence to me I can't see any obstacle to his doing so. But this miracle is insufficient to that task. So this miracle can't demonstrate God's existence, nor could any other for the same reason. He would do much better than this if he was trying to demonstrate his existence.

Similarly, 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. But these miracles do not accomplish nearly as much as God, if he exists, could. So this miracle is cannot be God's trying to achieve good in the world. He would do much better than this if that was his goal.

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 them not to. The view that Hurricane Katrina was sent by God to punish sinners in New Orleans has been popular among American evangelical preachers. If God were attempting to exact some punishment or retribution through a miracle, then it 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 achieve vast, effective, balanced punishment. So this miracle cannot be God's attempting to punish. He'd do a much better job of punishing if that's what's going on here.

If God were attempting to accomplish something unambiguous in the world, then he could. But this miracle is ambiguous. So this miracle cannot be God's attempt to achieve any clear goal. He'd do a much better job of accomplishing a clear objective, if that's what's going on here.

If a reasonable person has thought through the implications of what it would be for an omni-being to act, the reaction should be something like, "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 could do *that*." These considerations will plague any interpretation that we devise for the state of affairs that results from a violation of the laws of nature. We won't be able to conceive of any way in which this outcome could be an omni-being's project. And if there does not appear to be any way that this could be God's act, then we should conclude that God did not do it.

So we should conclude that at the very most, if a real violation of the laws of nature occurs and we have good reasons to believe it, the strongest conclusion that we could get from that evidence some force greater than us but lesser than God could perform a miracle. And we shouldn't even read too much into the term "being," since personhood and consciousness do not follow. Nor does a singular cause follow. We cannot infer from a miracle alone that the cause is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, or even a personal agent.

The critic might respond that there could be some mysterious purpose behind God's acting in this fashion, so it would be premature for us to conclude that God did not do it on the grounds that we can't conceive of any why or how he might.

But notice that the primary argument we are evaluating is whether or not we can infer the existence of God from the occurrence of miracles. And the greater challenge was to prove the existence of the Christian God with the associated corollaries about sin, redemption, Jesus' sacrifice, and so on from this foundation.

If a miracle serves some mysterious purpose of God's and we cannot understand how or why or if an omni-being would act in this way, then the miracle cannot serve as evidence that God does in fact exist. The critic's objection has tacitly conceded that the miracle is insufficient to prove God.

If we are really going to take the miracle argument seriously, then its advocate needs to argue first that a real miracle or miracles have occurred, second, that the occurrence of miracles give us sufficient evidence for concluding that an omni-being and not some less-than-omni being was responsible, and third, that it was the Christian God and not some other conjugation of the omni-being who was responsible.

What we have seen is that even if we have compelling evidence for the occurrence of a miracle—for the parting of the Red Sea, or Mohammed's splitting the moon, or for the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—there is an infinitely long list of scenarios that could have produced these results. The evidence is consistent with the responsible force or forces having less than divine properties. It could have been aliens with more power, knowledge, and goodness than us, but less than God. It could have been a mistake, a blind tinkering, or a deception. It could have been the Tooth Fairy, or Santa, or the Great Ju Ju in the Limpopo river, to use an example from Richard Dawkins. What's the status of the God hypothesis in the midst of all these possibilities when we consider our miracle? It has nothing special to recommend it from the miracle alone. Were there some way in principle to rule out all of those other possibilities, then we might have some grounds to boost the God explanation above. But we can't assume that it is the front runner on the basis that that is the we hear most often, or because that is the one we were raised believing. If miracles are going to prove God, then the gap from non-natural event to Christian omni-God needs to be closed by the evidence and argument.

Furthermore, the appeal to mysterious means and purposes to defend miracles as acts of God stretches credibility in the light of our considerations about acts of an omni-being. Suppose I notice that I haven't seen my neighbor for a few weeks, and I knock on his door several times with no answer. Then I call him repeatedly and get no answer. I check with the other neighbors, and I check at his workplace and no one knows where he is. I call his parents and family. Then I check with the police. Then I break into his house and search for him, still with no results. At that point, if someone still insists, "Well, he could possibly be in there, hiding, and he could possibly have some good reasons for making it look like he's not there. So you should hold off concluding that he's not home," a reasonable person would not agree. If a miracle occurs, it is possible that Flying Spaghetti Monster, or invisible elves, or the Big Nothing, or Sobek, the Egyptian crocodile god, is the supernatural force it responsible, and it has mysterious purposes and reasons for performing miracles that evade our detection. But

a reasonable person does not maintain agnosticism about these possibilities and the endless list of others.

The omni-properties are not necessary to accomplish the miraculous. We may have thought that the omni-properties were sufficient but not necessary for miracles. But now we have several considerations that suggest that possessing the omni-properties precludes employing miracles as a means to an end. Miracles are under achievements. God wouldn't underachieve. The general considerations above about the goals of an omni-being and the means that it would employ to achieve them should lead us to conclude that are not the sort of inefficient, ineffective, ambiguous, confounding acts that God would engage in for any reasons that we can think of. So they are not the sort of acts that God would engage in at all. God wouldn't do miracles.

IV. The Miracle Problem of Evil

The divine property of omnibenevolence warrants separate consideration. The prospect that the source of a miracle is infinitely good, or omnibenevolent deserves some separate discussion. The occurrence of a miracle would be *counter evidence* to God's omnibenevolence. If God exercises his good will with a violation of the laws of nature, we should then be concerned about this question: Why not more?

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. Out of the millions of people who have gone to Lourdes, the Catholic Church has officially recognized a handful of miracles as authentic. Mohammed is said to have multiplied food supernaturally on several occasions in order to feed hungry masses. God is reported to have parted the Red Sea to save the Israelites.

At any given moment on the planet, now and when these miracles are alleged to have happened, there are millions or even billions of other people who are not being cured, healed, or benefitted by a miracle. Any miracle that we attribute to God generates a problem because it then be taken to indicate that God is out there, and under some circumstances, God will intervene in the course of nature to achieve some end. But there are all of these others cases where he does nothing to help. The occurrence of a miracle, particularly one that is alleged to arise from God's good will or intention to alleviate suffering in the midst of so many instances of unabated suffering counts heavily against attributing omnibenevolence to the source.

The argument under consideration seeks to invoke features of some miraculous occurrence as evidence for the possession of the divine properties in the cause of the miracle. Were some supernatural force to alleviate some cases of suffering and not others, then at the very least it will take some careful argument just to show that that evidence is consistent with the attribution of omnibenevolence. Suppose there were two people walking out in an intersection about to be hit by a bus and you could save them both without much effort, but you restrain yourself arbitrarily and only pulled one of them back. That failure to help does not seem significantly different than if only one person was about to be hit by the bus and you arbitrarily refused to help even though you could have with no harm to yourself and very little effort. If a doctor travels to an African 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 then watches the remaining 990 die or be crippled, we would conclude that doctor was a monster, not a saint.

Theodicians will 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. But the argument that is being criticized are cases where one would try to *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 good 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.

Even if some supernatural force were to reach out and instantaneously eliminate all of what appears to be pointless suffering in the world today, the question remains. An omnibenevolent being would have done it sooner. What about yesterday? And what about Auschwitz in 1945, or the bubonic plague ravaging and killing millions in Europe during the 1300s?

Again, the point is not about whether or not God may have had good reasons for allowing those evils. The question is about whether or not we can infer God's 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. Quite the contrary, we would expect that infinite goodness, knowledge, and power in a being would preclude its doing only part of the job. If some being saw fit to fix one evil in the world, then there are evils worth fixing from its perspective. In the inductive problem of evil discussion, William Rowe has called these, "instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse."⁷ 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. It is reasonable to think that if there is one instance that warrants a miraculous intervention, then there are more. There are many others that look just like it, and there are many cases that appear to be worse.

So a person confronted with a miracle is in this situation: Here's a case of the laws of nature being violated, possibly in order to rectify a case of what appears to be pointless evil. There are many other cases of what appear to be pointless evils now and in the past that were not rectified. Lots of them resemble this one in all the relevant respects that I can think of. And many of them are far worse and even more worthy of being repaired. What is reasonable to conclude about the possible goodness of the source behind this miracle? If it is omnibenevolent, then it would have fixed those too. So if this event arose from some supernatural source or sources, it is reasonable to conclude that it or they are is not omnibenevolent.

Ironically, the problem of evil is *made worse* by cases where God is alleged to have performed a miracle. Every case where someone claims that their prayers led to

⁷ Rowe, William. "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism, and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (2006) 59:79–92

their rapid recovery from terminal cancer, or that their piety helped bring back a loved one safe from the fighting in a war zone shines a light on all the other cases of suffering that went unabated despite heartfelt prayers, decent lives, and fervent piety.

It would have been more plausible, perhaps, to argue that God is all good and loving had that particular beneficial miracle *not* happened. That is, the theist in these cases would have less explaining to do, and could possibly make more sense of the compatibility of a world that does not have these local, arbitrary miracles, than a world where a tiny bit of suffering is alleviated in a neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio, or in Amsterdam, while wars, famine, plagues, and drought kill millions elsewhere. If an omni-God performed no miracles, one might hope to offer up some generalized account of gratuitous suffering like Hick's soul-making theodicy.

Hick argues that God sustains the inflexible regularity of natural laws in order to build moral and intellectual virtue in us. A good God wouldn't alter the course of nature that gives us the opportunities to help others, show generosity and love, and to acquire knowledge of the world:

Suppose, contrary to fact, that this world were a paradise from which all possibility of pain and suffering were excluded. The consequences would be very far-reaching. . . No one would ever be injured by accident: the mountain-climber, steeplejack, or playing child falling from a great height would float unharmed to the ground; the reckless driver would never meet with disaster. . . There would be no call to be concerned for others in time of need or danger, for in such a world there could be no real needs or dangers.

To make possible this continual series of individual adjustments, nature would have to work by "special providences" instead of running according to general laws which men must learn to respect on penalty of pain or death. The laws of nature would have to be extremely flexible: sometimes gravity would operate, sometimes not; sometimes an object would be hard and solid, sometimes soft. There could be no sciences, for there would be no enduring world structure to investigate.⁸

So, if through his goodness God performs a miracle, then that would seem to contradict the claim that God's goodness led him to create an inflexible natural world as an arena for the growth of moral virtue and human knowledge. What's to lead me to take responsibility for my actions, or to correct some perceived evils in the world if I know that God's monitoring those situations and intervening when necessary? If he only appears to be intervening in some arbitrarily chosen occasions, I should doubt his infinite goodness, and I would have even less motivation to develop a level of moral virtue that not even God appears to have.

Furthermore, miracles would thwart out attempt to understand the world. Christine Overall argues,

⁸ Hick, John. *Philosophy of Religion*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963. 44-45.

Such an event is misleading to human beings who, as knowledge-seekers, attempt to understand the world by discerning regularities and patterns in it. The extreme rarity of miracles and the difficulties and controversies in identifying them are an impediment to the growth of scientific and philosophical comprehension. A benevolent God would not mislead his people.⁹ (151)

Other popular views about the compatibility of God's existence with evil are at odds with attributing miracles to God. On Leibniz's view, an omni-creator with a variety of complex priorities and goals would create a rich and diverse world that might appear to be less than optimal from the local view, but is in fact, the "best of all possible worlds."¹⁰

Plantinga's freewill defense theodicy is widely cited to justify the existence of moral evil. God's existence is compatible with moral evil because,

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all."¹¹

But the introduction of miracles thoroughly complicates matters. An omniscient being would not have a perfect plan for the best of all possible worlds from the start would then see fit to tinker, interrupt, or meddle with the unfolding of natural law with miracles. And miracles as direct and overpowering manifestations of God's will in the world would erode our capacity to freely exercise our wills.

Attributing miracles to God will also undermine teleological arguments for God's existence. It's not acceptable to infer God's existence both from the irregularities and the regularities in nature. Overall says,

In the past, some philosophers and theologians have urged us to consider the supposed order, regularity, and harmony of the universe as evidence of the existence of the a benign and omnipotent god. But if order, regularity, and harmony constitute evidence for God, then miracles cannot *also* be accepted as evidence for his existence, for they are, to follow the metaphor, dissonances in the harmony, holes in the patterned fabric of the universe. Hence, a Christian believer cannot have it both ways.¹²

So if we try to derive God's omnibenevolence from miracles we have several challenges. First, there's the wider problem of reconciling God's goodness with all the staggering amounts of suffering in history that went on without intervention. An omnibenevolent being wouldn't do a partial job. So a miracle actually shows that the source is not omnibenevolent. Second, attributing miracles to God undermines the

⁹ Overall, Christine. "Miracles as Evidence Against the Existence of God," *The Impossibility of God*, eds. Martin and Monnier. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003. p. 151.

¹⁰ Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *The Theodicy, Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*. trans. E.M. Huggard, 1710.

¹¹ Plantinga, Alvin. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. get page

¹² 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.

soul-building theodicy to reconcile suffering with God's existence. Third, a miracle suggests an alteration in the unfolding of events in a world that should have been the best of all possible worlds to start with. Fourth, a miracle would deliver a blow to the free exercise of human will. An omni-being is only going to perform "big" miracles, so to speak, and the bigger the miracle, the more likely human autonomy and self-determination will be compromised. And fifth, attributing chaotic and inexplicable disruptions in the natural order to God is directly at odds with design arguments that would derive God's existence from the vast lawful behavior of nature.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to accomplish two things. First, I have argued that neither omnipotence, nor omniscience, nor omnibenevolence are necessary in order to perform a miracle. Nor should we assume that the cause of a miracle is a single, conscious, personal being. Furthermore, an omni-being would not employ miracles to achieve its ends. Therefore, the occurrence of a miracle should not be construed as evidence for the existence of God. On the contrary, I have argued that God would not do miracles.

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 a miracle, the Christian God would not perform miracles because they would violate the natural order. They would 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."

On the basis of these considerations, 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."¹³

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 I 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. 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 doesn't do miracles. If there is a God, then such acts would be

¹³ 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.

beneath him. 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 will have been caused by some non-God, supernatural force(s) or entity(ies). 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? I don't see any plausible answers to these hypothetical questions. The parsimonious and abductive suggestion behind the conclusion that God doesn't do miracles, is that there isn't one. But it is difficult to see how the latter could directly follow from the former without arguments that would range far off this topic.

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