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The 'Argument From Miracle': An Example of Ramified Natural Theology

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Abstract: In this paper I argue that the 'argument from miracle' can best be understood as a powerful instance of what is coming to be known as ramified natural theology. Traditionally, it has been assumed that natural theology must eschew consideration of special revelation from God and consider only data that is available to unaided reason. This, however, is to ignore the fact that a purported revelation may include content that is empirically verifiable and thus within the purview of natural theology. Miracles are publicly observable events that cry out for an explanation. One need not come to such events already accepting the interpretation placed on them by religious believers - the Bible can be read as historical evidence rather than authoritative Scripture - but neither is one prohibited from considering whether that interpretation does indeed provide the best understanding of the events. This opens up the possibility that someone who initially does not accept theism might at once accept both the claim of God's existence and the claim of God's self-disclosure.

The evidential value of miracle tends to be dismissed in much contemporary Christian thinking. Prominent authors such as Alister McGrath (*Science and Religion: An Introduction*)¹ and John Haught (*Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation*)² make no mention of miracle in arguing for the rationality of Christian faith. To do so, however, is to ignore the witness of the early Church. That Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of a coming Messiah, and that his miracles were confirmation that in Him the Messiah had arrived, was regarded by first- and second-century apologists as the strongest argument for Christianity.³ This suggests that 'the argument from

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

² John F. Haught, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995).

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Apostolic Defence of the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity

miracle' deserves more attention and respect than it currently receives.

Miracles as Logically Incapable of Providing Evidence for Theism

Before proceeding further, it is important to head off an objection routinely raised, namely that there are logical and epistemological considerations that preclude the possibility of any 'argument from miracle.' To call an event a miracle is not only to make a claim about the occurrence of an unusual event; it is also to make a claim about the cause of the event's occurrence. Belief in the Resurrection is understood by Christians not simply as involving the claim that Jesus returned from death, but also as involving the claim that this event was supernaturally caused by God. To call an event a miracle one must be committed to the existence of God. This being the case, it is objected, miraculous events cannot function as evidence for God, since this would involve a vicious circularity of presupposing that God exists in order to call events miracles, but then arguing that God's existence can be confirmed on the basis of the occurrence of miracles.

The superficial plausibility of this objection is belied by the fact that if

Press, 1967), 12. To cite only a few examples, Paul appeals to prophecy and the historical evidence for the resurrection as the basis for belief (1 Cor. 15:3-8), Ignatius writes, "If any one makes light of the law or the prophets, which Christ fulfilled at His coming, let him be to thee as antichrist." In *Epistle of Ignatius to Hero* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989). Justin Martyr, writes: "There existed, long before this time, certain men more ancient than all those who are esteemed philosophers, both righteous and beloved by God, who spoke by the Divine Spirit, and foretold events which would take place, and which are now taking place. They are called prophets. These alone both saw and announced the truth to men, neither reverencing nor fearing any man, not influenced by a desire for glory, but speaking those things alone which they saw and which they heard, being filled with the Holy Spirit. Their writings are still extant, and he who has read them is very much helped in his knowledge of the beginning and end of things, and of those matters which the philosopher ought to know, provided he has believed them. For they did not use demonstration in their treatises, seeing that they were witnesses to the truth above all demonstration, and worthy of belief; and those events which have happened, and those which are happening, compel you to assent to the utterances made by them, although, indeed, they were entitled to credit on account of the miracles which they performed, since they both glorified the Creator, the God and Father of all things, and proclaimed His Son, the Christ [sent] by Him." In *The Second Apology of Justin* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989). Origen is prepared to say that, without miracles, the early church could never have been established. In *Against Celsus* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Vol. 4. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989).

one asks convinced skeptics what it would take to convince them of God's existence the frequent answer is the occurrence of a miracle. It seems strange to suggest that such an answer must be dismissed as irrational, with the assumption being that its utterer would fail Critical Thinking 101. Perhaps a more charitable interpretation of the answer deserves a hearing. Such an interpretation is not far from hand. What the skeptic is to be construed as requesting is good reason to believe in the occurrence of an event, the best explanation of which is that it was supernaturally caused by God, or perhaps a supernatural agent understood as acting in accordance with God's purposes. It is the event, not the subsequent description of it as a miracle, which functions as evidence for God. All that the skeptic need do is to entertain the hypothesis that God exists and ask whether that hypothesis provides the best explanation of the occurrence of the event, as compared to other hypotheses.⁴ There is, therefore, no logical reason why events best understood as acts of supernatural intervention by God cannot be taken as providing evidence for God. A related, but somewhat more subtle, form of the objection we have just been examining is the claim that, unless one is already a theist, one will never find it plausible to describe an event as a miracle. The assumption seems to be that, unless one is already a committed theist, it is always more rational to view such an event as having a natural though unknown cause. John Stuart Mill provides an early and typical example of this objection when he writes,

if we do not already believe in supernatural agencies, no miracle can prove to us their existence. The miracle itself, considered merely as an extraordinary fact may be satisfactorily certified by our senses or by testimony; but nothing can ever prove that it is a miracle: there is still another possible hypothesis, that of its being the result of some unknown natural cause; and this possibility cannot be so completely shut out as to leave no alternative but that of admitting the existence and intervention of a being superior to nature.⁵

Much can be said concerning this routinely raised cavil, but in the context of our present discussion, it suffices to make two points. First, Mill, as is characteristic of those making this type of objection, ignores the possibility that

⁵ John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, Bk. 3, Ch. 25, Section 2. In *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume VII - A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

theism may be entertained as a hypothesis. As has already been noted, all that is required in deciding whether an event deserves to be characterized as a miracle is that a person is open to the possible truth of theism. Of course, if a person is not open to the possible truth of theism it will be impossible that they ever come to believe that an event is a miracle, but that is hardly surprising, since their position is essentially that evidence has no bearing on the question of the truth of theism. Second, in claiming that the possibility of the event being the result of some unknown cause “cannot be so completely shut out as to leave no alternative but that of admitting the existence and intervention of a being superior to nature,” Mill conflates logical possibility with probability. No sane person coming across a structure such as the Eiffel Tower would refuse to view it as the result of intelligent agency, on the basis that the logical possibility that it occurred by chance cannot be so completely shut out as to leave no alternative to intelligent agency.⁶ Grace Jantzen is thus correct in her observation that “just as there could come a point where it would be irrational to deny that the event occurred, so there could at least in principle come a point beyond which it would be foolish to deny that it was genuinely miraculous.”⁷

Indeed, this point seems implicitly granted by naturalists. Faced with a report of an event such as the resurrection, their inclination by far is to attempt to reject the historicity of the event, rather than to argue that it could be explained in terms of natural causes. As Doug Geivett notes,

the tendency to treat reports about the resurrection as fictitious, as fabrications, is evidence that such an event would be considered eminently recalcitrant for naturalism by naturalists themselves. They would sooner describe the alleged ‘event’ as a non-event than be forced to come up with a plausible explanation that is compatible with naturalism.⁸

⁶ Alvin Plantinga, raises the issue that the recognition of design may be understood as more like perception than inference in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 245. I am sympathetic to this possibility. If it is in fact the case that recognition of design is more akin to perception than inference, this would make it even harder to deny that certain events are properly designated miracles, since possible defeaters are even fewer than if an inference is involved.

⁷ Grace M. Jantzen, “Hume on Miracles, History, and Apologetics,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 8 (1979): 325.

⁸ Doug Geivett, “The Evidential Value of Miracles,” in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God’s Action in History*, eds. R. Doug Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 182.

It appears, therefore, that Mill and others who make the objection that one could never reasonably come to view an event as a miracle unless one already believes in God are mistaken.

Miracles and the Teleological Argument

Given that events most plausibly viewed as miracles can function as evidence for God, the question arises of the relation of the ‘argument from miracle’ to other arguments for God’s existence. I suggest that it is best understood as a form of the teleological argument. A generic version of the teleological argument might be the following:

- 1) Certain events or features of the physical universe (and perhaps the physical universe itself) exhibit design.
- 2) Design cannot be produced by unguided natural means.
- 3) Therefore there exists a non-natural intelligent designer or designers.

As a form of the teleological argument, the argument from miracle has both strengths and weaknesses, not found in other versions of the argument.

In most forms of the teleological argument what is at issue is the status of the claim that certain entities or events within the universe, for example living things, actually exhibit design. No one doubts that there are living things; rather, the debate turns on the question of whether in fact they exhibit design. The tack of many critics is to argue that, although the appearance of living things may initially suggest design, closer inspection of the facts reveals they are not in fact designed. Whilst acknowledging the appearance of design, these critics argue that the theory of evolution provides an explanation of the characteristics of living things entirely in terms of natural causes, and that there is, therefore, no need to appeal to design in explaining living things.⁹

A strength of the argument from miracles is that, in contrast to more usual forms of the teleological argument, what is at issue is not whether the occurrence of certain events, or patterns of events, would be evidence of

⁹ Francis Crick, for example, writes that “biologists must constantly keep in mind that what they see was not designed, but rather evolved” in *What Mad Pursuit* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 138. Furthermore, Richard Dawkins opines that “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist” in *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1987), 4. Inconsistently, later in the book Dawkins is prepared to say “that, even if there were no actual evidence in favour of the Darwinian theory . . . we should still be justified in preferring it over all rival theories (287).

supernatural agency, but rather whether they in fact occur. Few people, becoming convinced that Jesus did in fact return from the dead, and that he predicted his return (Mk 8:31-33), are liable to try and make the argument that this is not evidence of supernatural agency.

A weakness of the argument is that, in contrast to more usual forms of the teleological argument, it is harder to establish the existence of the evidence to which one appeals. No one doubts the existence of biological entities that at least give the appearance of design, whereas many doubt the occurrence of events they would be willing to view as miracles.

It cannot be denied that the evidence for biological entities is more readily available than is the evidence for miracles; all of us have observed living things, not all of us have observed events best understood as miracles. The contrast in the strength of these respective bodies of evidence should not be overstated, however. Western academics have been far too ready to dismiss reports of miracles as the result of credulity, ignorance, and superstition without ever seriously examining the evidence.¹⁰ This is to ignore the fact that hundreds of millions of people in the world claim to have either experienced or witnessed first hand what they consider to be instances of miraculous healing.¹¹ Keener is correct in his observation that “regardless of how fashionable the view may remain in many circles that genuine supernatural activity by a deity, deities, or spirits may be dismissed a priori, in today’s multicultural world it is uncritically naive for otherwise critical scholars to simply accept and propagate that consensus without analysis of the empirical data.”¹² There exists in fact a massive amount of evidence that events plausibly understood to be miracles occur. There is no reason, therefore, why the argument from miracle should not be taken as seriously as other forms of the teleological argument.

There are a number of criticisms routinely raised against more standard

¹⁰ Philosopher Michael Levine, for example, finds it possible to assert that only fundamentalist biblical scholars and historians take the occurrence of miracles and the historical accuracy of the New Testament seriously, providing no references in support of this clearly false claim. “Philosophers on Miracles” In *Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, ed. Graham Twelftree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 299. To name only three examples that easily come to mind out of many, A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), and Dale Allison *Resurrecting Jesus: The earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005) are all prominent non-fundamentalist scholars who take miracles and the accuracy of the New Testament very seriously.

¹¹ Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2011), 238.

¹² *Ibid.* 206.

forms of the teleological argument. Some of these have a degree of force against the argument from miracles others much less so. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider some general criticisms of the teleological argument, with an eye to assessing their force against the argument from miracles.

An objection routinely raised is that there may exist a plausible alternative explanation of the evidence that does not find it necessary to recognize design. Thus, although living entities certainly have the appearance of being designed, it is argued that, given enough time, enough mutations that provide incremental advantages, and the filter effect of natural selection, it is possible to explain how such entities are entirely the product of undirected natural causes, requiring no appeal to design to account for their existence.

Obviously, such an explanation will not do in the case of paradigm examples of events traditionally viewed as miracles by religious believers. The return of Lazarus after being dead four days (Jn. 11:1-44) or the multiplication of loaves and fishes (Jn. 6:1-13) upon the spoken word of Jesus are not candidates for this type of explanation. The inclination of critics, of course, is to suggest that there is little evidence that such events did in actuality occur; the thought being that if one can deny their occurrence, the awkward task of providing a naturalistic explanation can be avoided. The problem that critics face is that there is compelling evidence that similar events take place in contemporary times.¹³ As Keener observes, in speaking of reports of dramatic unusual healings,

regardless of how we interpret miracle reports and other supernatural claims, their frequency in various sectors of today's world indicates that large numbers of intelligent, sincere people believe that such cures are occurring today, . . . This is true even in the modern West; how much more likely would this be the case in a generally less skeptical culture like the world of the first Christians? There is no intrinsically *historical* reason to think that the Gospel writers had to invent such miraculous claims.¹⁴

The prospects of providing naturalistic explanation of such events are exceedingly dim. Indeed, the fact that evolutionary explanations of living entities require long periods of time, the accumulation of incremental changes, and the mechanism of natural selection, speaks against the possibility of explaining in naturalist terms the return to life of a corpse dead four days or the multiplication of loaves and fishes. If living fish cannot be thought to have

¹³ Keener, *Miracles*, 508-599.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 219.

spontaneously appeared on earth through natural causes, it hard to see how the multiplication of dead fish (Mk 6:35-44) can be thought to spontaneously appear through natural causes. Similarly, it beggars credulity to think that the decay that a four day dead corpse (Jn 11:17-44) would have undergone, would spontaneously reverse itself through natural causes. Paradoxically, it is our knowledge of what is required if a naturalistic explanation of living entities is to be at all plausible, that provides assurance that the occurrence of certain events such as the resurrection of Lazarus cannot be explained in naturalist terms.

Another objection frequently raised against the teleological argument is that, even if successful, it is compatible with the existence of more than one supernatural agent. Considered as events pointing to supernatural agency, in what sense do 'miracles' confirm the existence of the one supreme Creator God of theism? Does not the concern of circular reasoning again arise? If miracles can be brought about by more than one supernatural agent, how do they provide evidence for the existence of one supreme deity, the creator of all other supernatural agents? Might 'miracles' be evidence for polytheism, rather than theism?

Several comments are appropriate in response to this objection. First, it is very dubious that polytheism can be defended as a comprehensive, consistent metaphysical position. Inevitably, questions of the relations between various gods and the origins of the gods arise. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the rise of systematic philosophical thinking meant that polytheism ceased to be a live option in the West. Similarly, in Eastern thought developed philosophies and theologies are not polytheistic. Any attempted development of polytheism into a comprehensive world-view seems to require a shift towards theism, with lesser 'gods' and spirits being considered creations of one God, or a shift towards pantheism, with gods and spirits being considered appearances or aspects of a more fundamental One.

Second, there is no reason to insist that the teleological argument must be considered in isolation from the cosmological argument. The cosmological argument, if successful, confirms the existence of one necessary being, upon which all other beings depend for their existence. A standard criticism is that, even if successful, the cosmological argument only confirms the existence of a necessary being upon which all others depend, but that it provides no information concerning the character of that being. Teleological arguments can be understood as providing insight into the nature of the necessary being, inasmuch as they confirm it to be an intelligent agent.

Third, even leaving aside any appeal to the cosmological argument, there may be reason within the pattern of miracles to think that, although they could

be caused by more than one supernatural agent, they are nevertheless under the control of a supreme being. There are, for example, accounts in Christian Scripture of supernatural agents, that is to say angels, who witness to the fact that they are operating under the directions of a supreme being (Lk 1:11-38). Similarly, there are accounts of supernatural agents, that is to say demons, who act in opposition to a supreme being, yet acknowledge the existence of a supreme being (Mk.5:1-20). Further, there are accounts in which the hypothesis of one God having power over other presumed supernatural entities is put to the test (1 Kings 18:1-40). The point is that if the reality of supernatural interventions in the course of nature is granted, we must acknowledge not simply the bare implications of such an event occurring, but also whether the event is accompanied by a purported self-revelation of the agent producing the event. With respect to miracles, a ramified natural theology will quite properly consider not simply the bare occurrence of the event, but the context in which it takes place.

A standard criticism raised against the teleological argument is the existence of evil. In regard to the argument from miracles, this objection takes two forms; the first being the claim that a perfect all powerful God should not find it necessary to intervene in the course of nature, the second being the claim that God is unjust if He does not perform miracles for everyone in a similar situation.

In the context of our present discussion, three points are in order; the first is a general point concerning theism and the problem of evil, the other two are specific to the argument from miracle. First, there is a general consensus that attempts to demonstrate a logical inconsistency between asserting the existence of God and acknowledging the existence of evil have failed. Critics of theism argue not that the existence of evil disproves God in any absolute sense, but rather that it provides strong evidence against theism. The question which must be asked, however, is whether alternative views of reality can better account for evil than theism. If they cannot, if theism provides the most adequate understanding of the nature and existence of evil that we possess, then the existence of evil cannot be taken as evidence against the existence of God. To put it paradoxically, if evil is a feature of the world that cannot be simply explained away, to use C.E.M. Joad's words, as "a by-product of circumstance, the result of imperfect development or inadequate training,"¹⁷ but is rather best accounted for by theism, then this is a reason to accept, rather than reject, theism over other world-views. If world-views other than theism do not allow us to view events such as the Jewish Holocaust or the Rwandan

¹⁷ C.E.M. Joad, *God and Evil* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), 175.

Genocide as fundamental instances of evil, then this is reason to think that, despite whatever difficulties theists have in explaining the existence of evil, their world-view is superior to world-views which ultimately explain away the existence of evil in terms of some presumably more basic concept.

Theism's main rivals in providing a comprehensive understanding of reality are naturalism and pantheism. Arguably, neither provides as adequate an understanding of the nature and existence of evil as does theism. Much can be said in support of this claim. In the present context it is sufficient to note that, to the degree that naturalism is unable to acknowledge the reality of agent causation and libertarian free will,¹⁸ it cannot provide an adequate account of moral evil, and that, to the degree that pantheism negates any ultimate distinction between good and evil, it cannot be said to provide an adequate account of evil.¹⁹

It thus seems plausible that if one is to avoid reducing the concept of evil to some presumably more basic concept one will find oneself having to embrace a theistic world-view. To claim, as naturalism seems to imply, that the concept of moral responsibility is a chimera, and thus that we could never attribute moral responsibility to the Nazis for the atrocities they committed,

¹⁸ As regards naturalism, it is generally agreed that libertarian free will and the theory of agency it implies are incompatible with naturalism. Libertarian free will is possible on the assumption of an agent with the capacity to act or refrain from acting, but naturalism which only recognizes 'event-event causation' has no place in its ontology for such agents. John Bishop notes that: "...agent causal-relations do not belong to the ontology of the natural perspective. Naturalism does not essentially employ the concept of a causal relation whose first member is in the category of person or agent . . . All natural causal relations have first members in the category of event or state of affairs. . . . the problem is that the natural perspective *positively rejects the possibility that any natural event should be agent-caused*. From the natural perspective, all events have the status of *happenings*, and the problem is that the ethical perspective requires some events that are *doings* and for which, other things being equal, an agent may be held morally responsible." In *Natural Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 40.

¹⁹ The insistence of pantheists that reality is constituted by an all-embracing unity leads them to deny any ultimate distinction between good and evil. Thus we find Spinoza writing that "if the human mind had only adequate ideas, it could not form any notion of evil" *Ethics*, Part 4, Corollary of Proposition 64 *Spinoza Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.). Insofar as pantheists conceive of evil as a problem, they think of it as a logical problem of how unity can exist within an impersonal all-embracing divine reality that exists outside of any moral categories, and thus cannot be described as being good or evil. Thus pantheist Michael Levine suggests that "the very idea of evil may be something the pantheist wishes to eschew" in "Pantheism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2011 Edition), accessed June 30, 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/pantheism/>

violates our deepest intuitions. To claim, as pantheism seems to imply, that drawing any distinction between good and evil is to engage in confused inadequate thinking, and thus be unable to view the slaughter of almost 800,000 Tutsi by Hutu extremists as genuinely evil, is again to violate our deepest intuitions. If evil *qua* evil, is a concept that only theists in the final analysis are entitled to employ then the critic cannot maintain that the existence of evil provides a valid objection to the teleological argument.

As regards the assertion that the perfection of God implies that He create a universe which requires no intervention, such a claim seems question begging in its assumption that the universe, like a well-made clock, is most perfect if it does not require service calls to adjust its operation. Why think the perfection of God implies that if He creates a universe it must be along the lines of a maintenance free machine. Is it not question begging to insist that any adequate idea of nature implies an absolutely settled order that can never be interfered with? Theists typically hold that human agents possess free will, and consequently the capacity to influence history. They also maintain that God has purposes that He wishes to see fulfilled. Given these two beliefs, the idea that God might at times intervene in the usual course of events, so as to bring about certain of His purposes which might otherwise be thwarted can scarcely be viewed as implausible.²⁰

Somewhat ironically, one also meets the polar opposite of the objection we have just been considering. God's existence, it is urged, is not incompatible with miracles occurring, but rather with the fact that there are not more of them. Thus, for example Jordan Sobel asserts that "a fair God would presumably want miracles not to be 'sporadic' and distributed arbitrarily to only some of otherwise similar potential beneficiaries."²¹

Why a miracle is granted in one instance but not in another is no easy question. This should come as no surprise, since it is essentially an aspect of the problem of evil. It could just as easily be asked why certain other goods such as

²⁰ Thus Keith Ward comments, "...might God . . . be a personal agent who specifically intends to bring about some state of affairs in order that creatures may come to know him more clearly and enter into a more personal way of relating to his mind and will? If so, a miracle could be more than a part of the natural process . . . It could be a special act of a personal and transcendent God, . . . Some such revelation would be needed in any universe in which creatures do not clearly discern the nature of the personal reality by relation to which alone their true fulfilment will be found. A personal God will wish to show his nature and purpose sufficiently clearly for those who so desire to be able to relate to him appropriately" (*Divine Action*, London: Flame Press, 1990), 178.

²¹ Sobel, *Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Belief in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 309.

intelligence or beauty are not more evenly distributed throughout creation. This is not to minimize the force of the objection but only to point out that it is a form of the general question of why, if God exists, there is not more good and less evil in the world. This suggests that standard theistic responses to the general problem of evil will also be relevant to objections made by critics such as Sobel.

More specifically, several points may be made in response to the charge that in performing miracles in one instance, but not in another apparently similar instance, God would be unjust. First, although miracles confer a good, for example the restoration of health, the good conferred is not on a theistic view the highest good. The highest good is to come into a proper relationship with God, that is to say, spiritual health. There are times when receiving a lesser good might distract one from pursuing or receiving a higher good. Second, on a theistic understanding of reality, our individual goods are to be used in the service of others; the implication being that miracles have a purpose beyond the simple benefit to the individual recipient.²² Third, miracles are generally reported as involving the instrumentality of a human agent.²³ This raises the possibility that there are occasions when God wishes to perform a miracle but is frustrated by the fact that the person through whom He wishes to work is not willing to cooperate.

Another objection that is sometimes raised against the teleological argument is that, in our experience, to act as an agent requires bodily movement of some sort. We must, it is claimed, either agree that God has a body, or that, having no body, cannot act and therefore cannot be considered an agent.

In the present context of discussing the argument from miracle, two points suffice by way of reply. First, even in the case of human agency, it is far from evident that agential concepts are logically tied to bodily movement.

²² As David McKenzie notes, “Within the various denominational contexts in which belief in miracles has been prominent . . . there is a tradition of expectation that miracles will occur, accompanied by full realization that in many, perhaps most cases in which prayers are offered the desired result will not occur. Recoveries are often reported in these contexts, but rarely with a sense of pride on the part of the recipient or on the part of those who prayed. Rather, the entire experience is typically one of humility in which those who recover confess their unworthiness and commit themselves to the task which God, they believe must have for them based on their miraculous recovery.” In “Miracles Are Not Immoral: A Response to James Keller’s Moral Argument against Miracles,” *Religious Studies* 35, no. 1 (1999): 81.

²³ For example, God does not directly heal Paul of his blindness, but rather instructs Ananias to go to Paul as the instrument through whom God will heal Paul. This required a considerable step of faith on Ananias’s part, since Paul was known as someone who ‘breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord’ (Acts 9:1-2).

William Alston makes this clear, writing,

is it any part of the meaning of these terms ['making' and 'commanding'], in the sense in which they are applied to human beings, that the external effects in question are produced by movements of the agent's body? . . . it is completely obvious to all of us that human beings cannot bring about such consequences except by moving their bodies. But . . . it does not follow that this fact is built into human A[action]-concepts. Perhaps our *concept* of making a soufflé is simply that of *bringing a soufflé into existence*, the concept being neutral as to how this is done.²⁴

Second, even if it were to be granted that human agency is logically linked to bodily movement, it does not follow that this means that our concept of divine agency requires us to think of God as performing bodily actions. Alston is again helpful when he writes that

we should not suppose that the question of the applicability of A-predicates to an incorporeal being is prejudged by the fact that all cases of overt action with which we are most familiar involve bodily movements of the agent. A feature that is common to the familiar *denotata* of a term may not be reflected in the meaning of that term, even if this class of *denotata* is the one from which we learn the meaning of the term, and even if it contains the only *denotata* with which we are acquainted. . . . Even though our concept of *animal* was formed solely from experience of land creatures that concept might still be such that it contains only features that are equally applicable to fish. And even if that were not the case—even if the capacity to walk on legs is part of our concept of an animal—it may be that it can be easily extended to fish, merely by dropping out the feature just mentioned. The moral of the story is obvious. We cannot assume in advance that our concept of making, commanding, or forgiving includes the concept of bodily movements of the maker, commander, or forgiver. And even if it does, this may be a relatively peripheral component which can be sheared off, leaving intact a distinct conceptual core.²⁵

²⁴ William Alston, "Can We Speak Literally of God?" Chap. 2 in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 57.

²⁵ Ibid. 54.

One is not, therefore, in holding miracles to be acts of supernatural agency in some sense analogous to the ordinary acts of human agents, in any danger of committing oneself to the proposition that God must have a body in order to act as an agent.

A somewhat similar objection to the one we have just examined is the claim that God as uncreated Creator is so fundamentally different than any created contingent being that it is impossible to apply any human concepts to Him. Thus theologians, such as Paul Tillich, are not prepared to accept the idea of God as a personal agent, insisting that we must instead talk of 'Being-itself' or the 'Ground of Being.'²⁶ Indeed, Tillich was prepared to go further and insist that 'God', in the traditional sense in which theists have understood the term, does not exist. According to Tillich, a mature religious consciousness must acknowledge 'The God above God', a reality which is neither object nor subject, a reality which is apprehended when the personal God of theism disappears in the anxiety of doubt.²⁷ Philip Clayton is thus correct in his judgment that, for Tillich, "'God' is the symbol for God."²⁸

Tillich's approach is an extreme example of the *via negativa*, that is to say, the way of negation. Given the ontological distinction between God and creation, there must be a sense in which God is radically other than any created contingent being. This means that it is possible to describe God by pointing out what He is not. Thus, when theists describe God as infinite, they are describing Him by pointing out what He is not, that is to say, finite. If God's transcendence and distinctness from creation is to be maintained, use will have to be made of the *via negativa*. If concepts drawn from finite limited human experience are applied without qualification to an infinite God then it becomes very possible to fall victim to anthropomorphism.

It bears emphasis, however, that a totally negative approach to describing God cannot work. Logically, every negation implies some kind of prior affirmation. If we can have no positive knowledge of God prior to what we negate of Him, there is no meaningful way to know what to negate. Essential though the *via negativa* may be, it must be realized that complete negation without any affirmation leads to complete skepticism about the nature of God.²⁹ It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that theologians who emphasize

²⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 195), 186.

²⁷ Ibid. 185-190. Tillich, as is not uncommon for thinkers who take the *via negativa* as the only means of describing God, embraces panentheism as a metaphysic.

²⁸ Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 467-68.

²⁹ Norman Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1974),

the *via negativa* to the point where they hold that God cannot be described as a personal agent find themselves defending an impoverished rather than enriched conception of God. As C.S. Lewis observes,

if a man watches his own mind, . . . he will find that what profess to be specially advanced or philosophic conceptions of God are, in his thinking, always accompanied by vague images which, if inspected, would turn out to be even more absurd than the man-like images aroused by Christian theology. For man, after all, is the highest of the things we meet in sensuous experience. . . .If God exists at all it is not unreasonable to suppose that we are less unlike Him than anything else we know. No doubt we are unspeakably different from Him; to that extent all man-like images are false. But those images of shapeless mists and irrational forces which, unacknowledged, haunt the mind when we think we are rising to the conception of impersonal and absolute Being, must be very much more so. For images, of the one kind or of the other, will come; we cannot jump off our own shadow.³⁰

The *via negativa*, the way of negation, must, therefore, be balanced by the *via affirmativa*, the way of affirmation.³¹ An example of this balancing is found in the claim that God is omnipotent, that is to say, all powerful. From our human experience we derive the concept of agency, that is to say, what it is like to exercise power on the basis of conscious decisions. In order to apply that concept to God, we negate all the factors that limit the exercise of power in humans. God's exercise of power is thus in some respects similar to human agents, in other respects, radically different. The *via negativa*, on such a conception, functions not as the negation of all positive attributes of God, but

266.

³⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 78-79.

³¹ Regarding the use of metaphor in Christian Scripture, Clark Pinnock writes, "...we need to avoid both literalism [anthropomorphism] and agnosticism. The way forward is to work with the diversity of metaphors and follow the grain of them. . . . One avoids literalism by denying a one-to-one correspondence between metaphors and God's being and agnosticism by affirming a real correspondence between them. One looks for the implications of the metaphors and appropriates the insights they offer into divine reality. All language is anthropomorphic and metaphorical, it is all we have to work with. God reveals himself in the medium of such language, albeit partially. If we lose the metaphors, we lose the self-disclosure. We would end up saying nothing at all. An 'infinite' God beyond metaphor is not a God we can know anything about." In *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2001), 63.

rather the denial of any imperfections or external limitations.³²

This balancing of the *via negativa* and the *via affirmativa* allows theists to hold that there is univocity in the concepts we apply to God and humans, yet also hold that the way in which these concepts are predicated of creature and Creator are radically different.³³ Concepts can be univocal when abstracted but analogical when predicated of different things.³⁴ As Alston notes,

what it is for God to *make something* is radically different from what it is for a human being to make something; but that does not rule out an abstract feature in common, e.g., that *by the exercise of agency something comes into existence* . . . Many theistic thinkers have moved too quickly from radical otherness to the impossibility of any univocity, neglecting this possibility that the otherness may come from the way in which common features are realized.³⁵

There is, therefore, no reason to hold that the radical otherness of God implies that it is somehow inaccurate to speak of God as an agent whose action is the result of His knowledge, intentions and purposes. Admitting univocity in the concepts we apply to humans and God does not mean that the way in which these concepts are realized by humans and God cannot be radically different. The way in which God has an intention may be very different from the way in which a human agent has an intention, but it is nevertheless the case that this is consistent with holding that it is literally true that God is indeed an agent who acts on His intentions. The radical otherness of God that the theist must insist on is not to be construed as God having no features in common with human agents, but rather in the way in which such features are realized in the divine being.³⁶ Talk of divine action has, to use Alston's phrase, "a hard literal core"³⁷

Miracles as Evidence for Christianity

So far, it has been argued that events most plausibly understood as miracles

³² Farrer, *Finite and Infinite*, 2nd ed. (Naperville, Illinois: Alec R. Allenson, 1959), 60.

³³ Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion*, 280-281.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ William Alston, "Functionalism and Theological Language," Chap. 3 in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 67. Alston notes in a footnote that his point is similar to St. Thomas' distinction between the property signified by a term and the mode of signifying.

³⁶ Ibid. 66-67.

³⁷ William Alston, "Divine and Human Action," *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, 102.

function as evidence for the truth of theism. But what kind of theism? The question which must be asked, if we are to take ramified natural theology seriously, is whether the events in question serve as evidence for Christianity over and against other competing forms of theism.³⁸

The issue, in arguing that miracles provide confirmation for theism generally, and more specifically Christianity, is to explain how such events, considered as physical occurrences, are best explained on the basis of Christian theism, since the question of whether an event occurred must be distinguished from the question of whether it is properly viewed as a miracle. In the case of confirming theism at a general level, the recalcitrance of such events to naturalistic explanation, that they are analogous to acts of human agents, and that they can be seen to further what can plausibly be understood at a very general level as divine purposes, allows them to function as evidence for theism over and against other world-views. It is one thing, however, to argue for a general theism, quite another to argue for a specific form of theism such as Christianity, over and against other theistic religions. Thus John Earman, while allowing that “the evidentiary function of miracles . . . which . . . was envisioned by Hume’s more able eighteenth-century opponents is more sophisticated than is allowed by many modern commentators”³⁹ nevertheless feels it necessary to assert that “the weak point in the envisioned evidentiary function lies in the fact that even after the miraculous event has been probabilified, there is still work to be done in assessing the support it gives to some religious doctrine.”⁴⁰ He is careful to point out, however, that this difficulty is paralleled in science in deciding how empirical events bear on competing hypotheses, and “that there are no in principle obstacles to a positive outcome in either science or religion.”⁴¹

Earman’s comment concerning the analogy with science is helpful, though also somewhat limited, as we shall see. Various forms of theism can be thought of as competing versions of a large scale hypothesis. Just as within the

³⁸ I take as granted that there is strong evidence that New Testament accounts, as well as many contemporary reports, of events best understood to be miracles are accurate, that is to say that the events they describe actually took place. Lest it be objected that I am being too bold, that I write as a philosopher and not as a historian, it bears emphasis that the rejection of such events as actually occurring is typically based on philosophical, rather than historical, grounds. When one sets aside unjustified philosophical prejudice, a strong case can be made for the occurrence both of contemporary miracles and the miracles described in the New Testament.

³⁹ John Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

larger theory of evolution one might ask whether a certain body of data better confirms neo-darwinian, punctuated equilibrium, or evo-devo versions of evolution, so one can ask whether well-evidenced reports of miracles tend to confirm Christianity rather than other theistic religions or world-views. Do miracles generally better fit within Christianity, than other developed versions of theism? More particularly, can certain miracles that play a central role in Christianity be accommodated by its rivals? It is to these two issues that we turn our attention.

Abrahamic Religions and Miracles

In terms of comprehensive, theologically and philosophically articulated, theistic religions, Judaism and Islam are Christianity's major competitors. All three appeal to the idea of a theistic God revealing himself in history. Specifically, they all appeal to a common revelation given to Abraham, and thus are commonly described as Abrahamic religions. Although all three have conceptual room for miracles, and in their traditions acknowledge miracles, they have significant differences in their views concerning miracles.

Insofar as Judaism is committed to viewing Christianity as a heretical offshoot, and insofar as the miracles associated with Jesus could be seen to lend credence to the claim that he is the Messiah, the miracles reported in the New Testament tend to be dismissed in Jewish thought as unhistorical on ideological grounds. Judaism does not reject the possibility of contemporary miracles, but it does not take their actuality very seriously.⁴² The commitment to miracles seems largely eschatological in the sense that their role is understood to be that of ushering in a new age that will mark the end of history.

Islam is ambivalent in its view of miracles. The Qur'an views Muhammad as the culmination of a line of prophets, "each sent to a particular community with a proclamation from God and usually accompanied by evidential miracles."⁴³ One would expect that he, like his prophetic precursors would perform miracles, but, when challenged to perform a sign, he replies that he is only a moral messenger (Surah 17:90-93). It is true that some Muslim commentators on the Qur'an have attempted to credit Muhammad with

⁴² Louis Jacobs, "Miracles" in *A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1999), accessed August 3, 2012, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t96.e462>

⁴³ Thomas, David. "Miracles in Islam." *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, ed. Graham Twelftree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 203.

miracles. David Thomas notes that

the reference in 94.1-4 - ‘Have we not expanded thee thy breast? And removed from thee thy burden, the which did gall thy back? And raised high the esteem [in which] thou [art held]?’ - was understood by some interpreters to mean that Muhammad’s chest had physically been opened by angels and his insides cleansed, . . . [and that] the reference in 54.1-2 - ‘The hour [of judgement] is night and the moon is cleft asunder. But if they see a sign, they turn away, and say ‘This is [but] transient magic’ - was interpreted as a physical occurrence in the heavens witnessed by Muhammad and people around the world.⁴⁴

These later amplifications of texts which, on the most charitable reading, only vaguely hint at the possibility of supernatural intervention, seem an attempt to “boost [Mohammad’s] status to that of at least the equal of the greatest of his predecessors.”⁴⁵ Although not denying that in Islam, as in Christianity and other religions, there is a demographic which is ‘miracle-happy’ in the sense of readily accepting miracle reports, however poorly evidenced,⁴⁶ it is fair to say that Islam generally downplays the significance of miracles, with the exception of what it takes to be the supreme miracle, namely the Qur’an itself. The Qur’an is regarded by Muslims as a miracle insofar as they view its literary form to be so sublime that it could not have been produced by natural means.⁴⁷ Indeed, for many Muslims, the production of the Qur’an is the only miracle they are prepared to accept.⁴⁸

Christianity, it is fair to say, places a greater emphasis on the miraculous than does Judaism or Islam. Jesus, while recognizing that even the most dramatic of miracles would not convince his critics, when asked whether he is the Messiah, points to his miracles as validating his claim (Luke 7:18-23). Peter preaches the first evangelistic sermon at the miraculous event of Pentecost where disciples from Galilee were able to speak in languages they had no knowledge of (Acts 2:1-13). Peter’s message is that the prophecy of Joel has

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 204-5.

⁴⁶ David Clark reports having in his possession Turkish newspaper clippings to the effect “that when American (read *Christian*) astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon, he distinctly heard a strange sound that he only later recognized as the Muslim call to prayer.” “Miracles in World Religions.” *In Defense of Miracles*, ed. Douglas Geivett and Gary Habermas (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 204.

⁴⁷ Thomas, “Miracles in Islam”, 205

⁴⁸ Clark, “Miracles in World Religions” 204.

been fulfilled; that Jesus's resurrection has ushered in a new age in which supernatural interventions of God are to abound (Acts 2:14-41). A great deal of the growth of Christianity both historically and in contemporary times is attributed to non-Christians converting on the basis of what they take to be miraculous events, these being primarily healings, though reports of other events analogous to those recorded in the New Testament also exist.⁴⁹ Keener notes that a large cause of church growth in Asia is attributed to miraculous healings. He points out

that those who witness or are close to those who witness such reports take them quite seriously. Often these are people reared in entirely different religious traditions, for whom changing their faith tradition is socially costly, sometimes even leading to ostracism or persecution. Nevertheless, they act as if they fully regard the cures as qualitatively or quantitatively strongly different from the sorts of recoveries to which they are accustomed.⁵⁰

One finds miraculous healing playing a similar role in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.⁵¹

It appears, therefore, that at a very general level, Christianity is more accommodating of miracles than either Judaism or Islam. While all three acknowledge the possibility of miracles, Judaism and Islam are less comfortable with their actual occurrence than Christianity. If, therefore, there exist numerous well-evidenced accounts of events best explained as miracles, this counts in favour of Christianity.

Jesus' Miracles and Self-Understanding

At a much more specific level, it may be asked whether there are miracles which, if taken as occurring, confirm the central claim of Christianity, and disconfirm Judaism and Islam to the extent that these religions find it necessary to deny Christianity's central claim. The claim I am referring to is, of course, Christianity's claim that Jesus was God incarnate. It would be hard to argue that the answer is not a clear yes. It is for this reason that critics of Christianity are at pains to attack the historicity of the New Testament accounts. One does not meet individuals who, accepting the miracles surrounding Jesus's life and death, deny his divinity, though historically there have been some inclined to

⁴⁹ Keener, *Miracles*, 579-599.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 265

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 309-358.

deny his humanity. The task then is not to explain whether if the occurrence of these miracles is granted they count in this way, but how they do so.

A central point which was made earlier is that the context in which miracles occur must be taken into account. Clark Pinnock very forcefully makes this point concerning Jesus's resurrection, the central miracle of the Christian faith, insisting that

in the historical apologetic based on the bodily resurrection of Jesus, it is important to observe the full *context* of the putative event. If the occurrence be wrenched from its setting like a severed toe and held up to view, of course the Christian significance of it cannot be registered . . . The resurrection event is part and parcel of a much longer narrative.⁵²

The resurrection, as Pinnock points out is intricately connected to a web of other events. Jesus takes himself to be fulfilling Jewish prophecy, announcing that because he was present a new age of salvation had arrived (Lk 4:16-21). He both explicitly⁵³ and implicitly⁵⁴ claims to be God. He understands himself to be the suffering servant described in Isaiah 52 and 53, who will give his life as a ransom for many (Mk.10:45), but have his life restored by God (Mk.10:34). The resurrection functions as evidence for Christianity not as some starkly anomalous event, but rather in the fact that it is embedded in a larger narrative that shows it to be the culmination and validation of Jesus's ministry.

An element of this interconnectedness that should be remarked on, is the links between miraculous and 'ordinary', that is to say non-supernatural, events, which one should have no hesitation in accepting as historical. These links are such that if one denies the occurrence of the miracle one then has no satisfactory account of the ordinary event one has no reason to doubt. Consider the account of Jesus' bringing Jairus's daughter back to life (Lk.8:40-56). Suppose one wishes to accept the 'ordinary' details of the story, but wishes to excise the miracle. One accepts that Jairus had a very sick

⁵² Clark Pinnock, "Fails to Grasp Ontological Basis for Problems," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 30 (1978): 158.

⁵³ Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins which in Jewish culture was a prerogative only possessed by God (Mk.2:1-12). Note how Jesus links his ability to heal the man to his authority to forgive sins.

⁵⁴ When asked by the priests and elders to explain by what authority he was teaching in the Temple, Jesus tells the parable of the evil tenant farmers (Mt.21:33-45). In the parable the vineyard is a well-recognized symbol of Israel and the vineyard owner is God. The servants sent by the landowner are the prophets. The landowner's heir is Jesus and has a far higher status than the servants.

daughter, that he approached Jesus for help, that Jesus agreed to come but was delayed on the way, that word arrived while on the way that the daughter had died, that Jesus comes anyway, and that the daughter's regaining consciousness coincided with Jesus' visit to her sickbed. What one does not accept is that the girl was dead rather than in a coma and hence that a miracle really occurred.

Suppose we adopt the hypothesis that the girl was not really dead, but rather in a coma. Have we really done away with the supernatural as an element of the story. It seems not, since we must still explain Jesus' absolute assurance that he could heal the girl, even though, to the best of his knowledge she was dead? Such assurance seems inexplicable in the absence of miraculous power. Suppose that we excise this event from the report. Have we now done away with the supernatural? It seems not, since we have an extraordinary event as the cause of Jesus being delayed, namely his healing of the woman with the issue of blood. Does eliminating this presumably fantastic element from the narrative finally free us from any element of the miraculous? It seems not, since it was Jesus' alleged ability to heal that explains both the crowds which meet him and Jairus' approach to him in the first place. Unless there is reason to take the miraculous elements of this story as historical, there is little reason to accept the ordinary elements as historical. The point, of course, is that in many instances in the New Testament accounts, the natural and supernatural are so intertwined that there can be no question of accepting its testimony concerning ordinary events, yet rejecting its testimony concerning extraordinary events. The consequence of attempting to excise the supernatural from the natural in the New Testament does not take one to a historical core shorn of superstition, but rather leads one to disregard its claim to be a historical document, even in the face of strong reasons to trust its historicity. It is clear that "it is not possible to do justice to the historically verifiable material in the Gospels without seeing . . . Jesus as being as much a miracle worker as a teacher"⁵⁵ and that "any critical reconstruction of the historical of the historical Jesus must not only include but also, indeed, emphasize that he was a most powerful and prolific wonder worker."⁵⁶ It will not do, therefore, to attempt to divorce the historical Jesus from accounts of his miracles. As Graham Twelftree observes in this respect,

He [Jesus] cannot be seen only, or even primarily, as a wise sage or as a wandering cynic or as a Jewish holy man. He was first and foremost a prolific miracle worker of great power and popularity, expressing in his

⁵⁵ Graham Twelftree, *Jesus: The Miracle Worker* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999) 330.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 358.

activity the powerful eschatological presence of God.⁵⁷

Also of note are the numerous links between supernatural events that include not only miracles, but visions and prophecies, such that in many instances the miracles occur in conjunction with a supernatural interpretation of their significance. The miracle of the Virgin Birth—more accurately, the virgin conception—is accompanied by visions and dreams which provide an interpretation of the event’s significance. When Jesus is baptized, his special relationship to God is confirmed not only by the prophet John, but by an audible voice from heaven (Lk 3:21-22). When Jesus performs exorcisms, he is recognized by demonic powers as Son of the Most High God (Mk.5:6-7). Jesus is not only raised from the dead; he predicts his being raised, and, during the event of the transfiguration, is reassured and prepared for his coming ordeal (Mk.9:2-10). When non-Jews first receive the miracle of being able to speak in languages unknown to them, this is prepared by coordinated visions given to Cornelius and Peter respectively (Acts 10:1-48). Paul Helm is thus correct in his comment that “not only does the miraculous in [Christian] Scripture cohere with its other elements of prophecy and teaching, it is also congruent with the main thrust and message of that revelation.”⁵⁸

This element of supernatural interpretation makes it difficult for Christianity’s theistic competitors to acknowledge the occurrence of the miracles accompanying Jesus’ life and ministry as historical events, yet integrate them into a different belief system. For example, Muslims accept Jesus as a prophet, who, like the prophetic messengers before him, is given evidential miracles to validate his message. They are thus inclined to accept the Virgin Birth. They cannot, however, accept the angelic announcement to Mary that her baby be the ‘Son of the Most High’, that is to say will have an ontological status not shared by any other human (Lk.1:26-38) or Simeon’s prophetic recognition that the infant Jesus is the promised Messiah (Lk. 2:25-32). There is, however, no principled reason for accepting the claim that Mary, while a virgin became pregnant, but denying the reality or content of her vision or Simeon’s prophetic announcement. To do so, seems to strain at a gnat, but be willing to swallow a camel. If there is good reason to trust Luke’s report that Mary virginally conceived, there seems equally good reason to trust his report concerning the other supernatural events associated with the Virgin Birth.

What this means is that there can be no question of other theistic religions simply co-opting Jesus and his miracles into their own theologies. It

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Paul Helm, “The Miraculous” *Science and Christian Belief*, Vol. 3, No.1 (1991): 88.

seems impossible in any consistent way to accord Jesus the status of a great Jewish prophet, yet hold that he was massively and fundamentally deceived in his self-understanding. No Jewish prophet would dare to forgive sins, that being the sole prerogative of God alone, yet Jesus does so, asserting that his ability to work miracles is a sign of his authority to grant forgiveness (Mk.2:1-12). No Jewish prophet points to his own significance but rather to God, yet Jesus is prepared to say “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens and I will give your rest” (Mt.11:28). Jesus clearly regards himself as greater than a prophet, and both explicitly and implicitly makes claims concerning his divinity. Thus C.S Lewis notes that

a man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic-on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg-or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, In *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*. (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 50-51. Lewis was an admirer of G.K. Chesterton and he acknowledges finding this argument in Chesterton who writes: “...normally speaking, the greater a man is, the less likely he is to make the very greatest claim [of being divine]. Outside the unique case [of Jesus] we are considering, the only kind of man who ever does make that kind of claim is a very small man; a secretive or self-centred monomaniac. . . . It is possible to find here and there human beings who make this supremely superhuman claim. It is possible to find them in lunatic asylums; . . . It is by rather an unlucky metaphor that we talk of a madman as cracked; for in a sense he is not cracked enough. He is cramped rather than cracked; there are not enough holes in his head to ventilate it. This impossibility of letting in daylight on a delusion does sometimes cover and conceal a delusion of divinity. It can be found, not among prophets and sages and founders of religions, but only among a low set of lunatics. But this is exactly where the argument becomes intensely interesting because the argument proves too much. For nobody supposes that Jesus of Nazareth was *that* sort of person. . . . Upon any possible historical criticism, he must be put higher in the scale of human beings than that. Yet by all analogy we have really to put him there or else in the highest place of all.” G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, in *The Everyman Chesterton*. Ed. Ian Ker (New York: Knopf, 2011), 433. For a contemporary restatement of Chesterton’s and Lewis’ argument see Stephen T. Davis, “Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?” in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, eds. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 221-245.

On the view that we must take seriously the reports of miracles in the New Testament, we have coinciding with Jesus' view of his own identity, supernatural events which do not simply point to a general divine benevolence, but which explicitly serve to confirm his self-understanding. The very uniqueness of that self-understanding prevent religions other than Christianity doing justice to Jesus' own understanding of his life and works.

It bears pointing out that the analogy suggested by Earman, namely that the relation of miracles to doctrine is similar to the relation of data to competing scientific hypotheses, although useful, is too limiting in certain instances. In the case of relating experimental data to scientific hypotheses we are attempting by the best use of our faculties to make inferences. In the case of a miracle and its relation to doctrine there exists the possibility that the agent producing the event will also provide an interpretation of that event. Thus, a father may not only bake a batch of cookies and leave them on the counter where they will be found and enjoyed, he may also provide a note explaining why they are there; for example, he knew that his daughter would be hungry after soccer practice. The cookies unaccompanied by the note could be taken as a general indicator of the benevolent intentions of an agent - the daughter could infer that she will likely be able to enjoy eating the cookies but does not know if her father intends her to enjoy them now or later at supper - but their being accompanied by the note makes it clear what exactly the intentions of the agent are. Both the baking of the cookies and the production of the note are events that nature would not produce on its own. The note as a self-revelation of the baker, serves to make clear what exactly his specific purpose was in producing the cookies. In the same way, some miracles may serve to provide a clear understanding of the purposes of God in producing a different miracle.⁶⁰

Alternatively, a miracle may come with an accompanying supernatural interpretation in the form of a vision, the accuracy of which is open to verification by those experiencing it, and who can later report to others that accuracy. For example, Ananias in a vision is told to heal Saul of the blindness miraculously inflicted upon Saul on the Damascus road. Ananias concerned for his safety questions the instructions, but is told that Saul is God's chosen instrument to further the message of the gospel not only to Jews, but to the

⁶⁰ For example, in the accounts of the Transfiguration (Lk.9:28-36, Mt.17:1-9, Mk.9:2-10), Jesus is portrayed as speaking with Moses and Elijah concerning his coming Passion. The disciples, overcome and not knowing what to make of their miraculous experience, are spoken to by God, the message being that Jesus is God's Son and that they are to listen to him, that is to say, be obedient to him.

Gentiles. Saul is told at the time he is struck blind to go to Damascus, where he will be shown what to do. While praying in Damascus, Saul is shown in a vision that Ananias will come to heal him of his blindness. The purpose of the interlocked miracles of Saul being struck blind, while receiving instructions to go wait in Damascus, and Ananias' healing of Saul is revealed through the coordinated visions experienced by Saul and Ananias (Acts 9:3-18).

I have argued at a general level that the comprehensive developed form of theism most capable of accommodating both New Testament and contemporary accounts of miracles is Christianity. At a much more specific level, I have argued that, in the case of the New Testament, one is presented with miracles uniquely accompanied by the self-disclosure of God. It is this element of self-disclosure, such that the significance of the miracles of the New Testament is not simply inferred from the occurrence of the events, but rather revealed by the producing agent, which makes them impossible to incorporate in any non-arbitrary way into versions of theism other than Christianity. To the degree then that they have a strong claim to be considered historical events, they serve to confirm Christianity rather than other forms of theism.

Nothing in what I have said is to be taken as claiming that miracles do not occur in other religions or secular environments. As Licona notes,

if either the Jewish or Christian view is true, genuine miracles could occur among unbelievers and be entirely compatible with these beliefs. For example, God acted among a nonbeliever by healing Naaman's leprosy. . . . many accounts exist in our time of the paranormal that occur within a religious context. The Christian view allows that it might be God acting in these situations, or in some cases, that the observed phenomena are the works of demons.⁶¹

Rather, I am arguing that the New Testament miracles, taken in conjunction with Jesus' self-understanding, and moral character, serve as the lens by which other miracles can be best understood. More accurately, I am claiming that the New Testament miracles are an essential part of the fullest expression of divine self-disclosure, and thus help to serve as a means by which to understand the significance of ongoing miracles, whether these occur in explicitly Christian settings or not.

What I am suggesting is that, although all miracles serve to some degree to reveal God's nature and purposes, not all miracles are equally revelatory. A

⁶¹ Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 147-148.

life-long atheist who has gone blind from macular degeneration but who allows herself to be persuaded to go to a healing service at which she receives her sight might become persuaded that there is a God, but on the basis of that single event be unconvinced of anything but God's existence and general benevolence.⁶² Such an experience may lead her to investigate further the claims of various religions, but as a single event it has limited revelatory significance.

It is for this reason that Christian apologists need to be careful not to claim more for the doctrinal implications of various miracles than such events reasonably warrant. Healing miracles, which by far seem to be the most common type of miracle, can reasonably be taken as a sign of God's care and mercy, and can be taken to confirm the central aspects of Christianity inasmuch as they appear to especially occur in conjunction with Christian outreach or revival. To go further than this, however, and take them as confirming very specific points of disputed doctrines is to project onto them an interpretation that the context in which they occur does not warrant. Put differently, although miracles can include a very large and very specific element of self-disclosure from God not every miracle will necessarily contain the same degree or element of self-disclosure of God. It is vitally important, therefore, that whatever element of self-disclosure there is be distinguished from what we attempt to infer on our own concerning the significance of the event.

It deserves emphasis in this regard that Jesus insists that genuine miracles are to be identified by their 'fruits', that is to say can they be seen over the course of time to further human flourishing and a deeper understanding of God and His purposes. He does this in the context of warning his disciples that not all supernatural agents are friendly; just because an event is the result of supernatural agency it cannot be automatically taken as furthering God's purposes. A large part of Jesus' ministry involved exorcism, with evil spirits recognizing Jesus' identity, but nevertheless resisting him (Mk. 1:21-28, Lk. 8:26-39).⁶³ Leaders of the early church such as Irenaeus and Athanasius recognized the need for a ministry of exorcism,⁶⁴ and there are numerous

⁶² There is, of course, no guarantee that the woman will abandon her atheism; she might simply accept the event, but not inquire too closely whether it can be accommodated by her world-view.

⁶³ To take the reality of demonic possession or oppression seriously, is not to deny that a great deal of nonsense can also accompany the subject. The fact that someone can be 'misdiagnosed' as possessed does not, however, demonstrate that there are not genuine cases of possession or criteria by which such cases can be identified. See for example, Keener, *Miracles*, 837-843.

⁶⁴ R.J.S. Barret-Lennard, *Christian Healing after the New Testament: Some Approaches to*

accounts in contemporary Christian missiology of conflict encounters with what appear to be supernatural agents.⁶⁵ As an example, Keener notes the account of John Chukwu, who, as a recent convert to Catholicism, was cursed by witch doctors and awoke blind. Physicians were unable to help him but he regained his sight when the Catholic priest prayed and sprinkled him with consecrated water.⁶⁶ Keener goes on to cite many other accounts, some even more dramatic. He comments that “possession experiences are documented so widely that their appearance in ancient sources such as the Gospels and Acts should not surprise us.”⁶⁷ Similarly, it is scarcely surprising that when Christianity encounters religions which place a premium on supernatural events, but which sanction the use of such power for immoral purposes such as inflicting sickness on one’s enemies, that ‘power encounters’ of the nature described should take place. As has been argued earlier, events are not to be judged miracles simply on the basis of being the result of supernatural agency, but also on the basis of whether they are in accord with God’s nature and further His purposes.

Miracles and the Pyrrhonistic Fallacy

Many academics, especially in the West, are liable to dismiss out of hand the argument I have been making on the basis that it strains credulity past breaking point to admit the occurrence of such events. Perhaps it is true that if one admits the occurrence of certain New Testament and contemporary accounts of miracles that a strong case can be made for Christianity as compared to its competitors, but does not the acceptance of such accounts amount to special pleading? Thus, employing what he appears to view as an effective *reductio ad absurdum*, Bart Ehrman insists that if one were to admit the miracles of Jesus one must also accept “the tradition of miracles done by Apollonius of Tyana, Hanina ben Dosa, Honi the Circle-Drawer [and] Vespasian.”⁶⁸

Ehrman and many others seem guilty of the same approach found in Hume’s fourth argument of Part II of the *Essay*, namely the Pyrrhonistic error of a priori insisting that all miracles must be judged equally significant and

Illness in the Second, Third, and Fourth Centuries (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1994).

⁶⁵ Keener, *Miracles*, 845.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 856.

⁶⁸ Bart Ehrman made this claim in a debate with William Lane Craig at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, March 28, 2006. It is found in his first rebuttal to Craig. (<http://academics.holycross.edu/files/crec/resurrection-debate-transcript.pdf>) Accessed August 12, 2012.

equally well evidenced. As has already been noted in chapter six, there are at least two fundamental flaws evident in such reasoning. First, there is no reason to think that God might not perform a miracle in a religion other than Christianity. C.S. Lewis, commenting on this issue, writes

I do not think that it is the duty of the Christian apologist (as many sceptics suppose) to disprove all stories of the miraculous which fall outside the Christian records . . . I'm in no way committed to the assertion that God has never worked miracles through and for Pagans . . . If, as Tacitus, Suetonias, and Dion Cassius relate, Vespasian performed two cures, and if modern doctors tell me that they could not have been performed without miracle, I have no objection. But I claim that the Christian miracles have a much greater intrinsic probability in virtue of their organic connection with one another and with the whole structure of the religion they exhibit.⁶⁹

Second, Ehrman is wrong to claim that all miracle traditions are on the same evidential level. Licona, commenting on Ehrman's example of Honi the Circle Drawer, notes that Honi is first mentioned in Josephus as a devout person whose prayers for rain were answered.⁷⁰ However,

around three centuries after Josephus, the story is reported in the Jerusalem Talmud, with many more details. Honi prays for rain. When it does not come, he draws a circle and stands inside of it, promising not to leave his spot until it rained. When only a few drops came, Honi said this is not what he had prayed for. Then it rained violently. But Honi said he had prayed for 'rain of good will, blessing, and graciousness.' Then it rained in a normal manner.⁷¹

⁶⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 159-160. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 179, note 150, quotes J.P. Meier, who writes: "Suetonius and Tacitus seem to tell the whole story with a twinkle in their eye and smiles on their lips, an attitude probably shared by Vespasian. The whole event looks like a 1st-century equivalent of a 'photo opportunity' staged by Vespasian's P.R. team to give the new emperor divine legitimacy-courtesy of god Serapion, who supposedly commanded the two men to go to Vespasian. Again, both in content and in form, we are far from the miracle traditions of the Four Gospels-to say nothing of the overall pattern of Jesus' ministry into which his miracles fit." In *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol 2. *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 625.

⁷⁰ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 178.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Further, whereas Josephus places Honi in the first century B.C., the Jerusalem Talmud places him in the sixth century B.C., five centuries earlier.⁷² As regards Hanina ben Dosa, the first report of his miracles occurs one hundred and fifty years after the purported events, that is to say long after any possibility of eye witness testimony, whereas Mark's Gospel was written twenty-five to forty-five years after Jesus' ministry, that is to say, well within the lifetime of possible eyewitnesses to the miracles Mark's reports.⁷³ Similar difficulties exist in any attempt to put Philostratus's biography on the same level of historical reliability as the Gospels.⁷⁴

Ehrman's assertion that reports of Jesus performing miracles have no claim to be taken more seriously than the reports of Apollinius, Hanina ben Dora, Honi the Circle-Drawer, or Vespasian performing miracles appears not to be based on the usual criteria by which historians evaluate the reliability of sources, but on the assumption that the occurrence of miracles is maximally improbable.⁷⁵ If miracles are maximally improbable then all reports of them can be regarded as occupying the same evidential level; the conclusion being that, to the degree that a document contains reports of miracles, it is historically unreliable. This assumption is question-begging, inasmuch as it a priori rules out the possibility of taking seriously reports of extraordinary events which, if they occur, are best understood as miracles. To rule out taking seriously what would usually be good grounds for thinking an event occurred, on the basis that accepting the occurrence of the event suggests the action of a supernatural agent, is to assume that one can know in advance of ever examining the evidence that either God does not exist or if He does he would never intervene in history. The job of the historian is not to decree in advance what can or cannot happen, based on his or her metaphysical predilections, but rather to seek to ascertain what did in fact happen. The question of whether events best understood as miracles actually occur is an empirical one, not to be decided by an arbitrary fiat that refuses to countenance the possibility of supernatural causes.

In what has been said, it should be clear that the argument from miracle

⁷² Ibid. 179.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 146-147.

⁷⁵ "Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence. And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened." Ehrman made this claim in a debate with William Lane Craig at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, March 28, 2006. Accessed August 12, 2012, (<http://academics.holycross.edu/files/crec/resurrection-debate-transcript.pdf>)

understood as an instance of ramified natural theology presupposes as an essential precondition serious historical inquiry into records containing accounts of miracles. There can be no special pleading on the part of the Christian apologist that acceptance of the miracles reported in the Christian tradition requires less evidential support than reported miracles in other traditions. For example, faced with the hypothesis that accounts of Jesus' virgin birth are the result of New Testament authors borrowing from pagan accounts of the birth of extraordinary figures, the apologist must be prepared to give good reasons for rejecting such a hypothesis as less than plausible. She is under no obligation, however, to accept as part of her methodology the assumption that, no matter how speculative, a natural explanation is always to be preferred to a supernatural one. She is, therefore, at liberty to point out how disanalogous the proposed similarities are, and the paucity of any kind of concrete evidence to support the idea that the New Testament accounts borrowed from pagan mythology.

Indeed, she may wish to point out that, although historians can scarcely avoid making causal judgments, pride of place goes to determining what actually took place. At least theoretically, the historian might reach the conclusion that the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke provide good evidence that Jesus was indeed born of a virgin, yet remain agnostic regarding whether the event had a supernatural cause, even if to do so is to refuse to take of the question of whether a naturalistic explanation appears truly hopeless and avoid a historian's responsibility to seek the causes of events. To insist, however, that because it would be difficult to provide any adequate account of what a natural cause might look like, the event cannot be accepted as happening, even if the sources have good claims on other grounds to be accepted is to put the cart before the horse. Similarly, it is at least possible in principle that a historian might reach the conclusion on the basis of the historical reliability of the Gospels that Jesus, being dead, did in fact return to life, even if he refuses to take a stand on what the cause of that event was. Gary Habermas is correct in his judgment that,

the charge that miracles cannot be investigated in terms of normal research methods would obtain only if we knew that such events did not occur at all, or if they happened only in some non-objective realm. In either case, it would constitute a proper assessment to denying investigation by historical methodology. However, since it is an open question whether miracles occur in normal history, it would seem to be at least possible to investigate *the historical portion* of these claims with

regard to their accuracy.”⁷⁶

Even if one denies the possibility of the historian accepting the event, but not making a judgment about its cause, it will not do to insist as does G. Dawes that to view an event as a miracle must be an “explanation of last resort.”⁷⁷ If there are good grounds for thinking that the authorial intent of the sources is to report what was viewed as a miracle, if the event occurred in a context in which it can plausibly be seen to have religious significance, if the sources have characteristics that favour the historicity of the event, and if no plausible naturalistic explanations exist, any insistence by a historian that the event could not have occurred is based not on historical evidence, but the historian’s dogmatism that supernatural causation is not to be considered.⁷⁸ Historians can scarcely escape the influence of interpretive horizons based on assumptions they bring to their work, but to the degree that they do not allow their assumptions to be challenged or overthrown by actual evidence, they cease to function as genuine historians and become merely dogmatists.

Conclusion

To speak of ramified natural theology is to suggest that natural theology, as traditionally understood, has been in some way augmented. I suggest that the ‘argument from miracle’, although best understood as a special form of the teleological argument, augments traditional natural theology in two ways. First, it is not minimalist in its goals, inasmuch as it argues for a robust Christian theism. Second - and this is what permits it to move beyond minimalist goals - it insists on a detailed engagement with historical evidence; an engagement, however, that is critical of question begging assumptions that a priori deem any appeal to the supernatural as ‘impossible, improbable, or improper.’ This means that the development of the argument cannot be seen as solely the province of the professional philosopher or theologian. Rather, it must be understood as genuinely interdisciplinary, inasmuch as it presupposes the involvement of historians, archeologists, linguists and a host of other specialists that is necessary if the relevant data is to be critically engaged with in necessary detail.

I have argued that, if the miraculous events described in the New Testament actually occurred, they in conjunction with Jesus’ self-understanding

⁷⁶ Gary Habermas, “The Resurrection of Jesus and Recent Agnosticism.” In *Reasons for Faith*, edited by N.V. Geisler and C.V. Meister (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 288.

⁷⁷ G. Dawes, “A Degree of Objectivity: Christian Faith and the Limits of History,” *Stimulus* 6 (1998): 32-37. 35.

⁷⁸ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 196.

and character, provide strong reason to take Christianity as the fullest revelation of God. To the degree that this claim is made purely hypothetically it may seem of little import those sceptical of the truth of Christianity. What prevents it from being purely hypothetical is the fact that, when unjustified philosophical assumptions are set aside and the evidence is considered in detail on its own merits, the New Testament documents have strong claims to being historically accurate. Once this is made evident, one is faced not only with the reality of supernatural agency, but with the self-disclosure of God acting as an agent in the world. Placed in their context as an essential part of the overall life and ministry of Jesus, the New Testament miracles witness to the supreme revelation of God in Jesus. Understood in this way, they provide the interpretative lens by which the significance and purpose of contemporary miraculous events may be appropriated.

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