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Miracles as Evidence for God

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Abstract: I examine in what sense the occurrence of events plausibly viewed as miracles can be taken as providing evidence for the truth of theism.

Miracles as Logically Incapable of Providing Evidence for Theism

As was noted in an earlier discussion in this series, to call an event a miracle is to make a claim about the cause of the event's occurrence. Christians understand belief in the Resurrection not simply as involving the claim that Jesus returned from death, but as also involving the claim that this event was supernaturally caused by God. To call an event a miracle, therefore, is to affirm the existence of God. It seems, then, that miraculous events cannot function as evidence for God, since this would involve a vicious circularity of presupposing that God exists in order to call such events miracles, but then arguing that God's existence can be confirmed on the basis of the occurrence of miracles.

The superficial attractiveness of this argument is belied by the fact that if one asks convinced sceptics 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, the supposition being that its speaker 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 sceptic is to be construed as requesting is good reason to believe in the occurrence of an event, the best explanation of which is that God, or perhaps a supernatural agent understood as acting in accordance with God's purposes, caused it. It is the event, not the subsequent description of it as a miracle, which functions as evidence for God. All that the sceptic 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.

Thus, while it is true that once the event is described as a miracle one commits oneself to the existence of God, this in no way prevents the event from functioning as evidence for God, since it is on the basis that theism provides the best explanation of

the event that one is prepared to call it a miracle. To claim otherwise, is analogous to claiming that a corpse, the existence of which is best explained on the hypothesis of a murderer, cannot function as evidence for the existence of a murderer. Once the corpse is described as a homicide victim one commits to the existence of a murderer, but this scarcely implies that the corpse cannot function as evidence of a murderer. Analogously, the fact that an event is described as a miracle scarcely implies that it cannot function as evidence for God. It is not, therefore, question-begging to claim that events best explained as acts of supernatural intervention by God can be taken as providing evidence for God.

Miracles as Epistemologically Incapable of Providing Evidence for Theism

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 [that is to say an event which is supernaturally caused]: 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.¹

The issue of whether it is always more rational to view an unusual event as having a natural rather than supernatural cause, no matter the event or the context in which it occurs, has already been examined in the previous instalment of this series. In terms of our present discussion, it suffices to make two further points.

First, Mill, as is characteristic of those making this type of objection, ignores the possibility that theism may be entertained as a hypothesis. As has already been

¹ John Stuart Mill, *The 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 (Books I-III), ed. John M. Robson, Introduction by R.F. McRae (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974). Bk. 3, Ch. 25, Section 2.

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. We routinely experience intelligent agency bringing about what is otherwise vastly improbable. For example, we are familiar with the fact that intelligent agents, say engineers, bring about events that nature would not otherwise produce. 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 bare alternative that it occurred by chance does not entail a logical contradiction and thus cannot be so completely shut out as to leave no alternative to intelligent agency.² 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.”³ 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 unintelligent causes. As Douglas Geivett comments,

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 nonevent than be forced to come up with a plausible explanation that is compatible with naturalism.⁴

² Plantinga, raises the issue that the recognition of design may be understood as more like perception than inference, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). 245. 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.

³ Grace M. Jantzen, “Hume on Miracles, History, and Apologetics” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 8 (1979) 318-25, 324.

⁴ Geivett, “The Evidential Value of Miracles” 178-195 in *In Defense of Miracles*. Ed. Douglas Geivett & Gary Habermas. (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1997) 182.

Conclusion

I conclude that the claim that one could never reasonably come to view an event as a miracle unless one is already committed to the truth of theism is mistaken. If there occur events that nature could not reasonably be viewed as producing on its own, and if their occurrence is best explained on the supposition that God exists, then such events constitute evidence that God exists.

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