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Miracles as Inconsistent with the Perfection of God

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Abstract: At a philosophical and theological level, it is often claimed that the concept of miracle is inconsistent with affirming the perfection of God. Three objections along this line of argument are examined and found wanting.

Miracles as Implying God is a Bumbler

In discussing the rationality of belief in miracles one meets, sooner or later, the objection that a perfect God would create a universe that, like a maintenance free machine, never requires intervention on the part of its maker. Peter Annet, a deist writing prior to David Hume, argues that,

if God ever acts by a different method than that of his standard laws; it must be either because he could not foresee the consequences, which is like blundering in the dark; or he foresaw it would be needful; and then it would be like a blunder in the design and contrivance; or he foreknew and determined this own works should not answer his own ends without his mending work, which is worst of all.¹

Demonstrating that objections get recycled from generation to generation, David Jenkins similarly insists that “a God who uses the openness of his created universe . . . to insert additional causal events from time to time into that universe to produce particular events or trends . . . would be a meddling demigod, a moral monster and a contradiction of himself.”²

Leaving aside the emotionally slanted prose that characterizes the writing of those making this objection, the claim seems to be that the perfection of God implies that He create a universe which requires no intervention. Presumably, a God who performs miracles must be conceived as something of

¹ Peter Annet, *Supernaturals Examined in Four Dissertations on Three Treatises* (London: 1747), p. 44.

² David Jenkins, *God, Miracle, and the Church of England* (London: SCM, 1987), p. 63.

a bungler who is analogous to a beginning painter who paints himself into a corner and then cannot get out except by undoing some of his previous work. The universe, like a well-made machine, is most perfect if it does not require service calls to adjust its operation. A universe in which God finds it necessary to intervene is a universe unworthy of being created by a perfect God.

But why think the perfection of God implies that if He creates a universe it must be along the lines of a maintenance free machine? Why not, for example, think of the universe along the lines of a musical instrument? Musical instruments exist precisely to be played, that is to say, intervened upon. To claim that the creator and upholder of the universe could never appropriately intervene in its history seems founded more on a rationalistic prejudice that any adequate idea of nature implies an absolutely settled order that can never be interfered with than on the theistic view of a creation that is loved and valued by its creator.

More fundamentally, most theists maintain that God has endowed people with 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 inconceivable. As F.R Tennant notes,

if ... the world ... [has] a derived or devolved activity permitted to it, as relatively independent of its self-limited Creator; and if any of God's creatures are in their lesser way also creators: then ... why should not God encounter obstacles within His own created world? Is it not inevitable that He will do so? ... [Those who insist that God would never intervene in the natural order are] so shocked at the attribution of anything like arbitrariness to the Deity that, in their zeal to rule it out, they also by implication remove all possibility of God's directivity, of adaptation of immutable purpose to emergent needs. In their haste to eliminate from the idea of God the very anthropic quality of caprice and changefulness, they ascribe to Him the equally anthropic qualities of indifference and impassive obstinacy.³

There appears, therefore, no reason to think that God's perfection implies a creation which suffers no intervention. Indeed, it seems safe to say that we

³ F.R. Tennant, *Miracle and Its Philosophical Presuppositions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925) pp. 90-91.

might expect precisely the opposite. Thus Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall observe that

the intensely personal nature of God invites us to expect that the relationship between God and creation will never be merely a static business of maker and made, source and product. It will instead involve real personal engagement, real mutuality, real self-giving, real interpersonal knowledge and exchange.⁴

Miracles as Implying that God is Unjust

A further attempt to suggest that miracles should be viewed as incompatible with the perfection of God is the charge that the occurrence of miracles would imply that God is unjust. Again, such charges are hardly new, being raised by a number of eighteenth-century deists. Thomas Woolston, for example, insists that Jesus's cursing of the fig tree, (Mk. 11:12-14, 20-21) especially at a time when figs were not in season, displays a petulance and triviality that discredits his other miracles.⁵ We find this objection echoed by contemporary writers such as James Keller,⁶ Christine Overall,⁷ and Jordan Sobel⁸ in their insistence

⁴ Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall, *The Mystery of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 74.

⁵ Thomas Woolston, "A Third Discourse on the Miracles of Our Saviour" in *Six Discourses on the Miracles of Our Saviour and Defences of His Discourses* (1727-1730; repr., New York: Garland Publishing, 1979) pp. 6-8. Woolston's example is less than convincing inasmuch as it displays an ignorance of fig trees. F.F. Bruce notes that,

"...when the fig leaves appear...they are accompanied by a crop of small knobs called taqsh...a sort of forerunner of the real figs. These taqsh are eaten by peasants and others when hungry...If the leaves appear unaccompanied by taqsh, there will be no figs that year. So it was evident to our Lord, when he turned aside to see if there were any of these taqsh on the fig tree to assuage His hunger...that the absence of the taqsh meant that there would be no figs when the time for figs came...The whole incident was an acted parable. To Jesus the fig tree, fair but barren, spoke of the city of Jerusalem, where He found much religious observance, but no response to His message from God." *The New Testament Documents*, Revised 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 73-74.

⁶ James Keller, "A Moral Argument Against Miracles." *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 54-78.

⁷ Christine Overall, "Miracles and Larmer" *Dialogue* 42, (2003): 123-135.

⁸ Jordan Sobel, *Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 309.

that it would be arbitrary and unfair for God to perform a miracle for some individuals but not individuals in apparently similar circumstances.

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 can just as easily be asked why certain other goods such as 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 a greater amount of good in the world. This suggests that standard theistic responses to the general problem of evil are also relevant to the question of why some individuals directly experience a miracle, but others do not.

More specifically, a number of 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, it is ironic that certain critics who make this objection⁹ also maintain that the perfection of God requires that He perform no miracles.¹⁰ It is hardly clear that one can have it both ways.

Second, 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. Thus Jesus in one instance provides food for a crowd of people who had so committed themselves to hearing his message that they were prepared to go without food to the extent that they were about to faint from hunger (Mt. 15:32), but faced with a hungry crowd who only wanted free food, he refuses to perform a similar miracle (Jn. 6:26). A soul making theodicy should not be over pressed, but it is nevertheless true that in many instances suffering draws individuals closer to God. It will not do, therefore, for Keller to make the assumption “that the goods which believers have seen as conferred in a miracle on one person are typically not matched by an equal good conferred on another who is not the recipient of a miraculous benefit.”¹¹

Third, 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. As David

⁹ Overall, “Miracles and Larmer”, pp. 123-135.

¹⁰ Overall, “Miracles as Evidence Against the Existence of God” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (1985): 347-53.

¹¹ Keller, “A Moral Argument Against Miracles”, p. 59.

Mckenzie argues, such objections fail to take into account “the actual relations that are prominently displayed in the lives of believers involving prayer, belief, community, and recovery.”¹² McKenzie goes on to note that

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.¹³

In this context, it deserves emphasis that those experiencing miracles do not have noticeably less suffering in their lives than those who do not. The Apostle Paul, hardly a stranger to the miraculous, reports that in addition to routinely experiencing hunger, thirst and sleeplessness, he was scourged five times with thirty-nine lashes, beaten with rods three times, shipwrecked three times, and was once stoned and left for dead (2 Cor. 11:23-27) and Jesus frequently reminded his listeners that those to whom much is given much is required (Lk. 19:11-27). This suggests that miracles are best understood not as conferring some private individual benefit, but as a divine investment that enables individuals to go forward in furthering God’s purposes in the world.

Fourth, it seems that God is generally reported to perform a miracle through the instrumentality of a human agent. God does not directly heal Paul of his blindness, but rather instructs Ananias to go to Paul as the instrument through whom Paul will receive divine healing. This requires 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). 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. That God, even in the case of miracles, is to be understood as working in cooperation with human agents, helps to make sense of the fact that miracles are not typically reported to occur in settled

¹² David Mckenzie, “Miracles Are Not Immoral: A Response to James Keller’s Moral Argument against Miracles,” *Religious Studies* 35, no. 1. (1999): 73-88.

¹³ Ibid.

climates of disbelief. The Gospel of Mark records that in the location where Jesus grew up many people refused to take him seriously, making the claim that this is the reason that Jesus “could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them” (Mk. 6:5).

Fifth, considerations such as those just mentioned undermine the charge that miracles are just arbitrary and that no pattern can be discerned in their occurrence. As Mckenzie observes,

by and large they [miracles] seem to be reported in the context of a believing community, as a result of prayer, with expressions of great faith by those involved... Surely when we see these experiences over and over, as charismatic Christians report, in the context of faith in God and in response to the prayerful appeal for divine intervention, it is reasonable to say that there is a pattern to the miraculous, though in faith and humility believers would always confess that we can never control God.¹⁸

It appears, therefore, that the claim that God is unjust in performing miracles unless He likewise performs a miracle in similar physical circumstances cannot be maintained. It takes an unrealistic and overly simplistic view of the relation of miracles to the spiritual life of religious believers. Further, it fails to take into account the role human cooperation plays in God’s willingness to bring about a miracle and presupposes a narrow individualism that does not do justice to the relation of miracles to a community of faith.

Miracles as Inconsistent with God’s Transcendence

A strange, but nevertheless in some theological circles widely urged, objection to belief in miracles is that they are inconsistent with God’s transcendence. The view underlying this objection seems to be that if God were to intervene in the natural order he could not be understood to be the infinite transcendent agent upon which all of creation depends for its very existence. One thus meets the claim that to think of God performing miracles is to reduce Him to being an ‘agent among agents’ rather than the transcendent cause of all creation. Presumably, to think of God as performing a miracle is to reduce Him to the status of a secondary cause. Walter Kasper, for example, insists that

¹⁸ Ibid. 82.

there are serious theological objections to this concept [miracle]. God can never replace this-worldly causality. If he were on the same level as this-worldly causes, he would no longer be God but an idol.¹⁴

It is difficult to think of this claim as posing anything other than a false dichotomy. It is precisely the fact that God is the transcendent cause of all creation, continually upholding its existence, which provides the conceptual ground for thinking that He could intervene in its history. The categories of primary and secondary causes are expressions of the idea that, although nature is ontologically distinct from God, it is totally dependent upon God for its existence. Created entities are not God; they have their own natures and causal powers. They depend, however, for their very existence upon God continually willing them to be. One can hardly deny God the ability to intervene in history on the basis that He is the fundamental condition of there being history. That God might causally interact with created entities is in no way to deny that He also continually causes their very existence. Paul Gwynne is therefore correct in his observation that,

the almost hackneyed claim that God [in performing a miracle] would become ‘an agent among agents’ is too glib and ignores the fact that primary causality alone does not exhaust the attributes of God, especially the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. What that claim misses is a sense of the potential for this transcendent-immanent, divine agent to act in an inter-personal manner which may involve occasional, particular actions in time and space.¹⁵

Conclusion

Claims that belief in miracles is incompatible with affirming the perfection of God cannot be sustained. There is no inconsistency in believing that the God who creates and upholds the universe also on occasion directly acts in its history.

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¹⁴ Walter Kasper, *Jesus The Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 92.

¹⁵ Paul Gwynne, *Special Divine Acts* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1996), p. 244.