

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIRACLES

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Abstract

In this thesis I argue that the common philosophical strategy of arguing from the laws of nature to the impossibility of miracles fails. I argue that miracles, defined as events which are unusual, supernaturally caused events of religious significance, are indeed possible. I then consider what evidence would be required in order for one to justifiably believe that such an event had occurred.

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Introduction

Miracles have played many diverse, incompatible roles throughout the history of philosophy. They have been everything from an essential element of any medieval metaphysics to phantoms of the imagination in the minds of 20th century materialists. If a philosopher by nature finds conceptual variety interesting and potentially informative, then the topic of miracles is a philosopher's dream.

There are two main questions in the philosophy of miracles—one metaphysical, one epistemological. The metaphysical question is the question of whether miracles could happen, could be real. The epistemological question is the question of whether anyone could ever be justified in believing that there had been a miracle. Both of these questions presuppose an answer to a third question, namely the question of what kinds of happenings or events count as miracles. I think these are the right sorts of questions to ask about miracles; they are the three questions of this work.

In the following I do not approach the main questions of the philosophy of miracles with an answer—positive or negative—already in mind. Instead, I approach them in a spirit captured by the Greek word *Zetesis*, which literally translates to “searching” or “investigation”. (Lunn, p. 240) To neglect this approach is, I think, a sure way to reduce enquiries in the philosophy of religion (and religious discourse in general) to grand but ultimately futile displays of vainglory and table-thumping. To adopt it is, I hope, to participate in an enquiry with the best chances of getting things right.

Chapter 1

A Definition of Miracles

Even a cursory examination of the common uses of the word “miracle” suggests that it has multiple definitions. For some the definition of a miracle is set very wide to include any event which, insofar as it defies manifest explanation, is somehow magical. Others in non-academic discourse, Richard Swinburne correctly notes, take the word “miracle” in a different yet equally wide sense, to mean an event which “was highly unexpected and highly desirable.” (p. 10) Sometimes this definition is opened up wider still by dropping the highly unexpected condition, as in the parent—knowing full well his teenage son has had sufficient practice—uttering “It’s a miracle he got his driver’s license!”

A turn to scholarly discourse achieves little improvement in the way of consensus on the definition of a miracle. Even the illustrious David Hume, whose essay *Of Miracles* contains what is perhaps the most interesting and certainly the most influential argument against miracles, offers two individual (and perhaps independent¹) attempts to define a miracle within that work. The difficulty the prevailing dissensus on this matter puts us in is exacerbated by the platitudinous but important fact that, to speak metaphorically, whether or not the gun fires is in large part a matter of how it is loaded. In Chapter 2 we’ll consider an influential argument from a definition of “miracle” and of “law of nature” to the conclusion that miracles are impossible and can never justifiably be

¹ At first Hume holds that “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature.” (p. 120) In a footnote later in the essay, Hume offers the following definition. “A miracle may be accurately defined, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.” (p. 121, n. 1) Some commentators believe the latter definition is a rephrasing of the former; others believe that each of Hume’s definitions is distinct from the other. We’ll explore the issue further in Chapter 2.

believed. On the other hand, if miracles are defined just as the statistically unlikely, then miracles must be possible and, under the right circumstances, believed. For example, should an ordinarily trustworthy fellow graduate student enter the room right now and inform me that she, having bought a lottery ticket last week, has just won the jackpot, I should not reply “That’s impossible and there are absolutely no circumstances under which I would be justified in believing your claim!” Obviously such a reply would be unwarranted, for it is of course possible, and might justifiably be believed if the appropriate evidence should come to light, that my fellow graduate student had indeed experienced a miracle, a statistically unlikely event.² The important thing to notice is that in the lottery case, as in the case where a miracle is defined as the logically impossible, it is the definition of a miracle employed that settles the metaphysical and epistemological questions of miracles.

One might applaud settling the two main questions of the philosophy of miracles in such a way on the grounds that the definition of a miracle employed in one or the other case is the correct or true definition of a miracle. It is indeed tempting to think that within the heterogeneous pool of definitions of “miracle” lies *the* definition of a miracle, a jewel in the rough patiently waiting for the crafty and intrepid philosopher to hack through the conceptual jungle and discover it. It's not clear to me that it makes sense to talk of the correct or true definition of a word in *any* case; however, if it does, I suspect any argument for the correct or true definition of a miracle will fail because no such definition

² Of course a high level of confidence in my belief that she won would require quality evidence. But being skeptical of any one person’s claim to having won the lottery is not the same as endorsing a general skepticism that *no one* had won. See Roy Sorenson, p. 60 for an analysis of the difference between case-by-case skepticism—warranted in the lottery case—and general skepticism—not warranted in the lottery case—and an application of the distinction between the two to Hume’s argument in *Of Miracles*.

exists.³ The word “miracle” is not unique in this respect. Steve Clarke uses the example of the word “chair” to make this point. (1999, p. 51) On one occasion a person might use the word “chair” to refer to the head of a Philosophy department, while on another occasion he might use the same word to refer to a piece of furniture. Clarke’s point is that the existence of one definition of a word does not entail that that word doesn’t have another definition substantially different from the first, and that any argument to the effect that one definition is the true or correct definition of the word is unreasonable. Accordingly, in what follows we’ll not pretend to be working towards the correct or true definition of a miracle.

We are left with two possible ways to proceed. We can simply stipulate a definition of a miracle and move on or we can give reasons to think that one definition of a miracle is more appropriate for the purposes of this work, a philosophical investigation of miracles, than others. Although adopting the former approach would be to follow an impressive precedent in the philosophical literature, I do not think that would be appropriate for two reasons. First, as I mentioned above, when it comes to the two main questions of the philosophy of miracles the answer given has so often depended heavily, and in some cases exclusively, on the definition employed. To stipulate a definition of a miracle, then, is to trivialize an important matter. It is also to place definitional matters out of the realm of argument. Once again, given the importance of the definition of a miracle to the two main questions of the philosophy of miracles, we need to be able to

³ It is possible to follow R.F. Holland by putting this point in terms of *concepts*, rather than definitions, of a miracle. Holland, for his part, acknowledges the existence and irreconcilability of two different concepts of a miracle, each being equally legitimate (correct, true) ways of conceiving of a miracle. (p. 44)

argue about what should count as one. Accordingly, we'll adopt the latter strategy—crystallize a definition of “miracle” from the multitude of scholarly and common definitions of that word, and motivate it for the purposes of a philosophical investigation.

One important point of departure for philosophical definitions of a miracle is whether miracle is an ontological or an epistemological category, i.e. whether an event must meet ontological or epistemological criteria in order to be a miracle. In his 1706 essay *A Discourse of Miracles* John Locke could hardly have been clearer as to which side of this divide his definition falls.⁴ “A miracle then I take to be a sensible operation, which, being above the comprehension of the spectator, and in his opinion contrary to the established course of nature, is taken by him to be divine.” (p. 256) According to Locke, then, what makes a miracle is not that the event is (occurs), or is contrary to the established course of nature in and of itself, or is caused by some divine entity, but that it is sensed, believed contrary to the established course of nature, and is taken to be divine, respectively. Thus whether or not an event is a miracle is for Locke a matter of the observer and his epistemological situation rather than the event and its properties.

Locke's epistemological definition of a miracle stands out in terms of its vulnerability to attack.⁵ Indeed, immediately after introducing it Locke puts himself on the defensive by raising and answering two criticisms. The first worry Locke considers is

⁴ Indeed, clarity seems to be exactly what Locke had in mind in light of his less-than-subtle reproach of anonymous contemporaries for neglecting to define a miracle. (p. 256 and n. 170.5)

⁵ John Earman notes that Locke's motivation for such a perplexingly vulnerable definition is the epistemologically confirmatory role Locke envisions a miracle playing. “[Locke and his likeminded contemporaries'] concern was less with providing proofs and demonstrations and more with providing grounds for reasonable belief. Miracles, non-ontically conceived, could further this goal by serving as evidence for the existence of God and for his designs and purposes. . . these miracles gained their religious force from their combination with prophecy, from their timing and coincidence, and from contextual factors.” (Earman, p. 10) I will claim that ontic miracles can effectively perform the same epistemological function.

that, on his definition, one event may meet the definition of a miracle for one person while failing to do so for another, making miracles more a matter of opinion than certainty.⁶ Locke's answer to his own objection is a thinly veiled challenge:

[T]his objection is of no force, but in the mouth of one who can produce a definition of miracle not liable to the same exception, which I think is not easy to do; for it being agreed, that a miracle must be that which surpasses the force of nature in the established, steady laws of causes and effects, nothing can be taken to be a miracle but what is judged to exceed those laws. (p. 256)

The solution to this challenge, I suggest, lies in understanding miracle to be an ontological category, to take the existence and properties of an event, rather than the judgments and epistemological background of a spectator, as determinative of a miracle. This separation between events as they are and events as they are judged meets Locke's challenge by removing subjectivity from definitional considerations to where it belongs: the epistemology of miracles. In Chapter 3 we'll deal further with the epistemology of miracles. But let us first see what arguments can be made against understanding miracle to be an epistemological category.

One worry for such an understanding is that it runs afoul of the scientific enterprise. As many commentators have noted, (e.g. Swinburne, p. 26; Robinson, p. 160-62) oftentimes what was predicted to occur on the basis of what we have good reason to believe are the laws of nature does not actually occur; instead, some other event which was not predicted on the basis of what we have good reason to believe are the laws of nature does. If the witnesses of such events deploy an epistemological definition of miracle, it is hard to see how those events can play any role in the furthering of scientific

⁶ The second objection he raises is that his definition may count as miraculous events which "have nothing extraordinary or supernatural in them, . . . thereby invalidating the the use of miracles for the attesting of divine revelation." (p.256) We will consider further whether miracles can play such roles in Chapter 3.

knowledge. As Guy Robinson says of the scientist who allows “. . . himself to employ the concept of an irregularity in nature or of a miracle in relation to his work. . . .

To do this would be simply to resign, to opt out, as scientist (sic). The trouble would be that not only would science as an enterprise be made secure from upset, but the particular theories held at a given moment would be made secure from criticism or modification. Scientific development would either be stopped or else made completely capricious, because it would necessarily be a matter of whim whether one invoked the concept of miracle or irregularity to explain an awkward result, or on the other hand accepted the result as evidence of the need to modify the theory one was investigating. (p. 159)

Robinson is not intending to draw attention to a vice of epistemological definitions of a miracle with this observation; nevertheless, I think we can make it the basis of just such a criticism. To throw the blanket of the miraculous over events which don't jive with the epistemological scheme of the observer, as an epistemological definition of a miracle does, is, as he says, to preclude such events from furthering scientific progress. Insofar as the progression of scientific enquiry is a desirable thing, then, an epistemological definition of a miracle will not suffice.⁷

A second reason why miracles cannot be so simple as to be a matter of the observer and his epistemological situation is that events which do not cohere with one's epistemological framework are, for most of us, easily induced and so not particularly special. One who wants to observe an event which *seems* to violate a law of nature (and,

⁷ Epistemological understandings of miracles have historically lead to such consequences. The case of lightning is often mentioned as an example of this. “For some time [after the work of Newton, himself a deist],” Bertrand Russell writes, “it continued to be thought impious to apply the concept of natural law to lightning and thunder, since these were specially acts of God.” (p. 100) Indeed, had Benjamin Franklin deployed an epistemological definition of miracle, he would never have suspected that the physics of thunder and lightning was more complex than simply “the wrathful judgment of God and hence [issuing] from the divine will.” (Keller, p. 32-3.)

Franklin, for his part, opted for an occasionalist perspective to make room for miracles. In a 1779 letter to Abbé Morellet, he remarked “We hear of the conversion of water into wine at the marriage in Cana as of a miracle. But this conversion is, through the goodness of God, made every day before our eyes. Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards; there it enters the roots of the vines, to be changed into wine; a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy. The miracle in question was only performed to hasten the operation, under circumstances of present necessity, which required it.” (Franklin in Amecher, p. 133)

we assume, meets any other conditions of a given epistemological definition of a miracle) need only take a trip to the local drug-dealer or pub in a slightly ignorant but willing state of mind, lay down his money, and prepare to be amazed. That is, if all it takes for a miracle is the combination of money, mushrooms, ignorance and a spirit of wonder, then miracles are more a matter of logistics than philosophy.⁸

Having rejected the idea that the definition of “miracle” we’re interested in is epistemological, we have aligned ourselves with Hume who, in an effort to distance himself from Locke, (Earman, p. 11) offers the following comments on the nature of a miracle.

A miracle may either be discoverable by men or not. This alters not its nature and essence. The raising of a house or ship into the air is a visible miracle. The raising of a feather, when the wind wants ever so little a force requisite for that purpose, is as real a miracle, though not so sensible with regard to us. (Hume, p. 121, n. 1)

Perhaps the break with Locke and an epistemological understanding of the miraculous is not as complete, though, as Hume would like. It almost goes without saying that such events as Hume describes above would astonish those who witnessed them if anyone did, probably because, as Hume says, there is a “firm and unalterable” (p. 120) experience throughout which an unaided house-raising or feather-raising (probably) “has never been observed in any age or country.” (p. 120) And these examples are hardly unique in this respect. Indeed many putative miracles, particularly of the biblical variety, (Keller, p. 15) have inspired astonishment in those who view them. We’ve rejected epistemological understandings of miracles above, but now we ask: Is it a condition of an event’s being a

⁸ Such events may still be interesting and illuminating in other non-theoretical ways. They may even support some sort of crude theology.

miracle (in Hume’s language, part of the “nature and essence” (p. 121, n.1) of a miracle) that it cause astonishment in witnesses?

Although astonishment would almost surely accompany the witnessing of, or the receipt of testimony to, a miracle, the causing of astonishment in any witness or third-party is not, for the purposes of this project, a suitable condition of a miracle. A distinction Robert Larmer introduces between subjective and objective senses of the word “miracle” will help us to see why. When used in Larmer’s subjective sense, “miracle” is used “not to describe some objective feature of an event, but rather the reaction of some particular subject to it. . . . When used this way, we get not a description of an event, but a description of the effect of that event upon some observer.” (Larmer, p. 3) On the other hand, when the term “miracle” is used in its objective sense it is used to indicate an event which meets certain ontological criteria. (Larmer, p. 4-5) The event in question might still inspire a reaction, indeed most probably a reaction of astonishment. But we draw a distinction between events which we want to refer to by the word “miracle” and how those events (probably) affect any witnesses. Since we are not here interested in the psychology or economics/sociology of miracles—the study of how people or their circumstances are affected by miracles, if at all—let us instead confine our definition of “miracle” to Larmer’s objective sense.

With Larmer’s distinction between the subjective and objective use of “miracle” in hand we are now in the position to decide the conditions we will insist an event must meet to be a miracle. In the remainder of this chapter I’ll argue that a miracle is any event which is unusual (unlikely), has a supernatural causal pedigree, and is of religious

significance. Any event which is a miracle necessarily meet all three of these conditions, and an event's meeting all three is sufficient for that event to be a miracle. Let us examine these conditions one by one.

In the philosophical literature a miracle is typically thought to be an event which is to some extent out of the ordinary, unusual.⁹ This requirement can be understood in at least four unique ways. The first, and perhaps most forthcoming, interpretation hinges on statistical likelihood. What it means for an event to be unusual in this sense is that the probability of a token of a given type of event occurring in such-and-such circumstances is below a certain threshold.¹⁰ If the probability of a token of a given type of event occurring is below the threshold and that event token actually occurs, then we say that that token event was unusual or extraordinary.

To give an example of how this first understanding of the unusuality condition plays out, consider R.F. Holland's oft-cited example of the child and the locomotive.

A child riding his toy motor-car strays on to an unguarded railway crossing near his house and a wheel of his car gets stuck down the side of one of the rails. An express train is due to pass with the signals in its favor and a curve in the track makes it impossible for the driver to stop his train in time to avoid any obstruction he might encounter on the crossing. The mother coming out of the house to look for her child sees him on the crossing and hears the train approaching. She runs forward shouting and waving. The little boy remains seated in his car looking downward, engrossed in the task of pedalling it free. The brakes of the train are applied and it comes to rest a few feet from the child. The mother thanks God for the miracle; which she never ceases to think of as such although, as she in due course learns, there was nothing supernatural about the manner in which the brakes of the train came to be applied. The driver had fainted, for a reason that had nothing to do with the presence of the child on the line, and the brakes were applied automatically as his hand ceased to exert pressure on the control lever. He fainted on this particular afternoon because his blood pressure had risen after an exceptionally heavy lunch during which he had quarreled with a colleague, and the change in blood pressure

⁹ I will use "unusual" and "extraordinary" interchangeably.

¹⁰ I'm going to resist the urge to set this threshold conclusively for reasons that will become clear below. In any case, as far as I can tell we need not get excessively concerned with exactly *how* unlikely an event must be for this discussion. Perhaps the Bayesians, who are active in the philosophical literature on miracles, can help us out on this front. Wherever our benchmark sits, though, it's its proximity to zero that's crucial to preserving a meaningful sense of unusuality.

caused a clot of blood to be dislodged and circulate. He fainted at the time when he did on the afternoon in question because this was the time at which the coagulation in his blood stream reached the brain. (Holland, p. 43)

This imaginary story is intended to be a counter-example to Hume’s definition of a miracle as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity or by the interposition of some invisible agent.” For there was no causal supernatural intervention nor was the event a violation of a law of nature; nevertheless, according to Holland, we are inclined to call it a miracle.¹¹

We’ll return to whether or not the example of the child and the locomotive is in fact a miracle below. For now, let’s concentrate on what makes it as unusual as it is. In light of the improbability of the train stopping in the way it did (i.e. as a consequence of a quarrel and subsequent strategic blood clot), and the improbability of it stopping *at all* given the circumstances (e.g. the sharp bend in the track, the anomalous activities of the child) the train should (in the probabilistic sense of the word) have run the child down.¹² But instead—luckily for the child and his mother—the statistically unlikely happened.¹³

The second plausible interpretation of the unusuality condition hinges not upon probabilities but upon history, viz. what event tokens have actually taken place before. Many events which may be accurately described as births, deaths, speeches, and feasts have occurred in the past, but no event which may be accurately described as a speech after death, as in Jesus’ post-crucifixion decree at Mark 16:15, or a feast for five thousand

¹¹ See note 3, above.

¹² Holland’s example is of course highly contrived. Accordingly, it is possible that there are no *exactly* similar circumstances in history against which to gauge the probability of the train stopping the way it did. In such circumstances we ought to take the *most* similar circumstances as salient. (cf. Swinburne on narrowing the evidence class, Chapter 3 below.)

¹³ It is easy to, in this paradigm case, support the claim that this was a statistically improbable event without resort to numerical calculations. Less clear-cut cases will, I think, demand resort to numerical calculations.

made out of a few loaves of bread and a few fish (Mark 6:35-44) has occurred. In other words, any event which occurs and meets such a description would be unprecedented for, to borrow a phrase from Hume, such events have “never been observed in any age or country.” (p. 121) So according to the present proposal what makes an event token unusual is not that it is statistically unlikely given the past, but that it categorically doesn’t belong to the past.¹⁴

A third way to understand the sense in which a miracle must be unusual is to understand a miracle to be an exception to the normal pattern of events insofar as an event like it never would (e.g., Mavrodes, p. 334) or, in the stronger case, could, happen should Nature be left to her own devices. Consider, for instance, the story we find at John 2:1-10 of Christ’s spontaneous conversion of water into wine at a marriage celebration in Cana. The party being in dire straits after the supply of wine had been exhausted, Jesus is said to have coolly converted six jugs of water into wine—good wine—to remedy the shortage. On the assumption that the event transpired as it is recorded in John 2:1-10, what made this event unusual, according to the interpretation of the unusuality condition we are presently considering, is that the water the servants poured into the jugs wouldn’t or couldn’t have turned into wine unless there was divine intervention. That sort of thing just doesn’t or can’t happen should the ordinary pattern of events prevail uninterrupted by a supernatural cause.¹⁵

¹⁴ Notice, though, the implication of this understanding of unusuality: miracles are, as some in the literature have held, e.g. Ninian Smart (p. 30), non-repeatable. So though Jesus’s post-crucifixion speech may be a miracle insofar as it is unusual in the right way, a subsequent post-death speech may not. This peculiar consequence of the proposed interpretation will form the basis of our rejection thereof below.

¹⁵ Here and for the balance of this chapter I am using the word “cause” and its cognates to refer to an event’s efficient cause. I understand an efficient cause as Aristotle did in *Physics*. “A ‘cause’ in the sense

Swinburne suggests a fourth way of capturing the sense in which an event must be unusual to be a miracle. He notes that modern scientists tend to describe the behavior of objects not in terms of their Aristotelian natures but in terms of their relationship to the laws of nature. “Given talk of natural laws,” Swinburne suggests, “an event which goes against them or ‘violates’ them would seem to be an event ‘of an extraordinary kind.’” This suggestion is deceptively simple: what we mean when we say that a miracle must be unusual or extraordinary is that it is in some way or another inconsistent with the laws of nature.¹⁶ Since Hume this has been the dominant way to understand the way in which events must be unusual in order to be miracles.

Although this fourth understanding of the extraordinary condition gives more flesh to the claim that a miracle must be an unusual or extraordinary event, it is not without its own important set of interpretive concerns. When it comes to interpreting the requirement that an event needs to be a violation of a law of nature in order to be a miracle, there arise two main questions. First, what exactly is a law of nature? Second, are laws of nature descriptive, prescriptive, or both? In the philosophical literature on miracles there are three common¹⁷ combinations of answers to these questions.¹⁸ I’ll call

illustrated by a seed, a physician, an advisor, and any agent generally, is the factor whereby a change or state of being is initiated.” (195a20)

¹⁶ It’s worth mentioning that not all are friendly to Swinburne’s presentation of the unusuality condition in terms of laws of nature. Robert Larmer, for instance, considers the condition that a miracle violates a law of nature an independent condition over-and-above the requirement that that event be unusual. So while Swinburne maintains that the condition that an event be a violation of a law of nature is an *interpretation* of the unusuality condition, Larmer maintains that the violation condition is an additional condition an event must satisfy to be a miracle. Unfortunately, though, Larmer doesn’t argue for this claim and gets significant mileage out of holding that we do not need to add the further condition that a miracle be a violation of a law of nature. It is hard to see any non-strategic reason to following Larmer’s line. So let us explore Swinburne’s more plausible suggestion that the condition that an event which is a miracle must be a violation of a law of nature is an interpretation of the unusuality condition.

¹⁷ We will consider another non-standard answer to these questions in Chapter 3.

them the “simple descriptive,” the “prescriptive generalization,” and the “nomic generalization” views.

First let’s consider the simple descriptive view. Alistair MacKinnon captures this view when he writes:

[Laws of nature] exert no opposition or resistance to anything, not even to the odd or exceptional. They are simply highly generalized shorthand descriptions of how things do in fact happen. . . . Hence there can be no suspensions of natural law rightly understood. . . . Or, as here defined, *miracle* contains a contradiction in terms. This contradiction may stand out more clearly if for *natural law* we substitute the expression *the actual course of events*. *Miracle* would then be defined as “an event involving the suspension of the actual course of events.” (p. 309)

A natural law for the simple descriptivist, then, is a universal generalization which just describes the world. If a universal generalization accurately describes the world, then it is true; if not, it is false.

On this understanding of natural laws, a violation thereof would be an event which was correctly described by a singular proposition which is logically incompatible with the relevant universal generalization. Clearly, on such an interpretation a violation of a law of nature is impossible. The true sentence describing an event which is a candidate for violation is either logically compatible with the relevant universal generalization and so not a violation at all; or else true and logically incompatible with the relevant universal generalization which, in such a case, is no longer a true universal generalization at all. Hence the idea of a violation of a law of nature is, for the simple descriptivist, incoherent.

The prescriptive generalizationist holds, like the simple descriptivist, that laws of nature are universal generalizations which describe what does in fact happen. The two differ insofar as the prescriptive generalizationist also holds that the laws of nature tell us

¹⁸ I do not mean to imply that either the questions I’ve identified or the combination of answers I will focus on are exhaustive of philosophical disagreement about natural laws.

what can, and indeed what should, happen. Holland reveals that he holds the view when he writes,

“... the law [of nature] tells us, defines for us, what is and is not *possible* in regard to the behaviour of unsupported bodies. At which point we might just as well drop the talk about describing altogether and admit that the law does not just describe—it stipulates: stipulates that it is impossible for an unsupported body to do anything other than fall. Laws of nature and legal laws, though they may not resemble each other in other respects, are at least alike in this: that they both stipulate something.” (p. 46)

In his examination of Holland’s proposal George Mavrodes correctly proposes that we understand Holland’s account of the laws of nature as “universal generalizations with a modality of necessity.” (p. 339) Could there be a violation of a law of nature given this proposal?

As things stand it would appear not—we might think that Holland’s understanding of the laws of nature returns the same result we saw McKinnon’s simple descriptivist view return concerning violations of natural laws; that is, holding that necessarily all As are followed by Bs is incompatible with the claim that one A was not followed by a B. As we’ll see in Chapter 2, this is in fact the line that Antony Flew, another prescriptive generalizationist, takes. Holland, on the other hand, defends the possibility of a violation of a law of nature by rejecting the “time honored logical principle” of *ab esse ad posse valet consequentia*; (Holland, p. 49) literally, whatever is the case, can be the case. (Walker, p. 104) This move has been heavily criticized. (e.g. Walker p. 105) We will explore a potential alternative to it in Chapter 2.

Lastly, as a nomic generalizationist Mavrodes thinks that the laws of nature have more in common with the laws of a state than the laws of logic. The nomic generalizationist thus finds Holland’s suggestion (quoted above) that laws of nature

stipulate something attractive. The laws of nature must not simply describe regularities, they must also make prescriptive claims about what can and cannot happen. But unlike the prescriptive generalizationist, the nomic generalizationist holds that the logic of the laws of nature is the logic of prescription rather than description. (cf. Mumford, p. 198) To see how this plays out, consider a modified version of Mavrodes' (p. 341-2) example.

- (1) All drivers must be licensed.
- (2) Gary, a driver, is not licensed.

Now if (1) is a descriptive generalization then (1) is incompatible with (2). But if (1) is a nomic generalization then (1) is *compatible* with (2), Gary is simply acting in a way he ought not. Accordingly, like the laws of the land and their violations, the laws of nature and their violations are compatible for the nomic generalizationist.

We now have in hand four distinct interpretations of the condition that we started with, that a miracle must be an unusual event. To summarize, we could consider the condition that an event must be unusual to mean (1) an event token which is extremely unlikely or improbable given what has happened in similar circumstances in the past; (2) an event which is the first token of its event type; (3) an event token which either wouldn't or couldn't happen should nature be left to her own devices; or (4) an event which violates the laws of nature, where the laws of nature may be considered universal generalizations, prescriptive universal generalizations, or nomic generalizations. Let us refer to these four interpretations of the unusuality condition as the "unlikelihood;" "unprecedentedness;" "supernaturalistic;" and "violation" interpretations, respectively. We are now, finally, in a position to adjudicate between them and, in so doing, decide on which understanding of the unusuality condition is preferable for our discussion.

To begin, if there is to be a clear line between the condition that a miracle be a supernaturally caused event and the condition that a miracle be an unusual event, then it is clear that the supernaturalistic interpretation of the unusuality condition is not preferable. On that interpretation all events that are unusual in the right way would by definition satisfy the supernatural causation criterion. In other words, if we accept the supernaturalistic interpretation then we eliminate the possibility that an event could be unusual in the right way and not supernaturally caused. This means that we would not be able to say, for instance, that a skilled magician's walking on water without supernatural intervention was unusual in the right way to be a miracle. Such an event is, I think, unusual enough to be a plausible candidate for miraclehood. But even if it is not, when we consider the motivation for the supernatural causation condition we'll see that we want to be able to talk about events which are candidates for miraclehood but are not supernaturally caused. We must, then, reject the supernaturalistic interpretation.

Neither will the unprecedentedness interpretation do for, if we were to adopt that approach, then once a token of a miraculous type of event had happened another event token of the same event type could not happen and be a miracle.¹⁹ So if, for instance, the resurrection of Christ did happen as told in the Gospels, the occurrence of another resurrection (i.e. another event which may be described as a resurrection) will not be a miracle because there has been one before.²⁰ Perhaps this point is better put with

¹⁹ Again, we can put this point in terms of descriptions of events. If we accept the unprecedentedness interpretation then another event standing under the same description may not occur and be considered a miracle.

²⁰ Indeed, if there had been a resurrection before, then Christ's resurrection itself, long held to be the prototypical miracle, is itself in danger of not meeting the conditions of a miracle. Furthermore, losing the unusual nature of Christ's resurrection is a live danger in the face of accounts such as that we find in 2

reference to Holland's example of the child and the train. If the conductor faints and thereby saves the life of the child, that is something which, according to the unprecedentedness interpretation, will not be unusual if it happens again. Assuming that the descriptive difference between one resurrection and another, or one conductor's fainting from a blood clot in the brain and another's, is exhausted simply by circumstantial considerations such as spatio-temporal order, to conclude that one is a miracle and the other is not is arbitrary. Accordingly, we conclude that the unprecedentedness interpretation is not our preferred interpretation.

We're left with two options: the unlikelihood and the violation interpretations. If what's been most popular in the literature were to prevail, the violation interpretation would no doubt win the day. But with good reason? Recall that we mentioned previously Holland's story of the child and the locomotive was intended to be a counter-instance to Hume's definition of a miracle as a violation of a law of nature by a supernatural agent. Hume's definition does not capture all the events we are inclined to call a miracle, the argument goes, for the story of the child and the locomotive meets neither condition. We have in Holland's story, then, an event which, if it occurred, we would be tempted to consider a miracle, but which would not be unusual in the right way if we insisted upon the violation interpretation. On the other hand, if we switched to the unlikelihood interpretation, then, as pointed out earlier, the event would be unusual in the

Kings 4. "When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them, and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes." (2 Kings 4:32-35, NRSV)

right way. Given that excluding non-law-violating events from the category is unnecessarily narrowing it, as at least some, e.g. Clarke (1999, p. 51), have thought, we ought to reject the violation interpretation in favor of the unlikelihood interpretation. As an added bonus of opting for the unlikelihood interpretation, we do not have to deal with the problem of determining what would count as a violation of a (probabilistic) Quantum law of nature.²¹

Of course, on the definition I provided earlier the hypothetical event Holland has described is not a miracle. Although the event quite clearly was of religious significance, it fails to be a miracle because it does not have a supernatural causal pedigree. And it fails to have such a pedigree because the efficient cause of the stopped train—the removal of the conductor’s hand—was natural, not supernatural.²² But suppose we wanted to argue that the supernatural actually was involved in the event in question. Larmer nicely summarizes two options we could exercise to do so.

[We] might argue that the explanatory background is not as complete as Holland claims and that the event never would have occurred had not God at some point directly intervened so as to alter the course of nature. Alternatively, [we] might argue that, even though the event was the result of converging independent causal chains with which God did not interfere, it was nevertheless prearranged by God—that is, it was part of God’s preordained plan and that when He created the universe He designed it in such a way that it would give rise to the event at precisely the time it did. (Larmer, p. 7-8)

According to Larmer, then, our choice is between changing Holland’s story at the point of the event or in the first instance: causally speaking, God was either on the scene at the stopping of the train or at the beginning of the world. If either of these was the case, then

²¹ Efforts to make sense of the violation interpretation in light of quantum laws of nature have been awkward. Swinburne holds that a violation of a quantum law of nature is an event whose occurrence is rendered highly improbable by that law. (p. 3) But this is surely an awkward way to understand the concept of a violation, for the law assigns its ‘violation’ a probability. In any case, notice that if we take such a proposal seriously we end up with something quite like the unlikelihood interpretation of the unusuality condition.

²² Here and in what follows I use the term “supernatural” literally, to mean “above nature”.

we would say that the stopping of the train met the supernatural causal pedigree condition.

At this point a few admissions are in order. First, it is clear that if indeterminism is true then God's taking the causal opportunity to prearrange *any* event at the start of the world is a non-starter. On the other hand, if determinism is true and God's creating the world with a preordained plan is taken to satisfy the supernatural causal pedigree condition, then that very condition is otiose because every event would meet it.²³ Second, if no supernatural agent created the world then, of course, that would no longer be a possible point of Divine intervention. As a third point, if deism is correct and shown to generalize to any and every supernatural agent, then of course no event will have a supernatural agent as an efficient cause. That is, if it could be shown to be true that the supernatural doesn't or can't causally interact with the world après Creation, then it is analytically true that there is only one point in time at which the supernatural could have intervened causally. We're not going to conclusively resolve the metaphysical debate between determinists and indeterminists, nor creationists and evolutionary theorists, nor between the deists and the causal interactionists, in this paper. In the absence of such a resolution, we're forced into the uncomfortable position of relying upon philosophical

²³ We might reconcile determinism with God's being the first cause of everything *and* preserve a meaningful supernatural causal pedigree condition by deploying a strategy similar to that of the 18th century naturalist Comte de Buffon. As Bertrand Russell relates, distinguishing between primary and secondary causes allowed Buffon to assert non-divine causes of such as mountains and valleys while simultaneously preserving God's creative fiat. (Russell, p. 62) Adapting Buffon's strategy, we might say that for an event to have a supernatural causal pedigree is for it to have been the work of God both in the first instance and sometime down the causal role as well. The downside is that this strategy is obviously a creation *ad hoc*, one which did not fool the theologians of the day one bit.

theses which are unproven while acknowledging that their being shown false would have important consequences for our proposal.

The proposal thus comes to this: when we say that a miracle must have a supernatural causal pedigree we mean that a supernatural agent must have causally intervened as an efficient cause at creation or at the time of the occurrence of that event. Now, one might wonder what kind of case we can make for this condition being a condition of the miraculous at all. There is, of course, the historical argument that a supernatural agent has been in some causal way involved in paradigm miracles. There is also, though, a richer and more telling argument for the condition, one which is based on the conceptual relationship between miracles and science and cuts to the heart of the philosophy of miracles.

To begin to understand the conceptual motivation for the supernatural causal pedigree condition, let us return to Guy Robinson's comments concerning the relationship between the scientist and his professional use of the concept of a miracle. We saw Robinson hold that the scientist's invoking the concept of a miracle or an irregularity to explain a result "... would be simply to resign, to opt out, as scientist (sic)." For Robinson's comment to make sense there must be some difference between irregularities and miracles and the sorts of events that scientists study.

Robinson thinks this difference is categorical. He begins his argument by defining a secular miracle as the not scientifically explicable. The problem with secular miracles, he argues, is that they present themselves as having a foot in both camps. They need to be, on one hand, events which *could* potentially have a scientific explanation;

however, on the other hand, they are by definition (i.e. conceptually) events which are debarred from scientific explanation. The contradiction, Robinson concludes, runs through the concept of a secular miracle; so that concept must be surrendered and, with it, the idea of scientific and religious systems of explanation as competitors for the same phenomena.

We can accept this argument only if systems of explanation have boundaries. What are the boundaries of the scientific system of explanation? Robinson first considers the hypothesis that uniqueness determines the boundaries of the scientifically explicable—the suggestion being that religion is concerned with explaining unique occurrences, science the repeatable.²⁴ But if science categorically excluded the unique, then, as we have seen, it would be insulated from the counter-instance in the vicious way he described above. Moreover, as Robinson himself notes, as a matter of fact science does have a way of dealing with unique results, viz. regarding them as anomalies or freak results. Some of these will be used to revise existing theories, others will be put to the side for future reconsideration. But even though they are unique events, neither anomalies nor freak results are cast into the realm of the permanently scientifically inexplicable (the realm of religious explanation, perhaps as a miracle), for both anomalies and freak results are still scientifically *explainable* even if they remain scientifically

²⁴ There is a trivial sense in which absolutely every event is unique insofar as it is the only event which is of its own exact kind. This is not the sense of uniqueness active here; rather, the sense of uniqueness Robinson is interested in is contrasted with the repeatability, typically experimental repeatability. Smart required the same of miraculous events. “Miracles are not experimental, repeatable. They are particular, peculiar events occurring in idiosyncratic human situations. They are not small-scale laws. Consequently, they do not destroy large-scale laws [i.e., the laws of nature]. Formally, they may seem to destroy the “Always” statements of the scientific laws, but they have not the genuine deadly power of the negative instance.” (Smart, p. 30)

unexplained. To this observation we add our own that there seems to be no problem with there being two, or for that matter three tokens of a type of event (e.g. a resurrection), and for each to be a miracle so long as tokens of that type remain suitably rare. So if token uniqueness will not do as a dividing line between science and religion, what will?

Robinson is unable to produce an answer, retreating to the idea that the class of the scientifically inexplicable is neither conceptually nor extensionally well-defined. (p. 162) But this is unsatisfactory: if the class of scientifically inexplicable is not well-defined, then it is entirely unclear how we can meaningfully talk of science and religion as mutually exclusive systems of explanation. Furthermore, if we do not have a clear idea of the boundaries of the scientific system of explanation, then the scientist may accidentally treat a bizarre event he has met with as under his purview—an anomaly or a freak result—when as a matter of fact it was beyond the purview of his enterprise—a miracle. In other words, if science is to have the sorts of boundaries that Robinson needs to get his argument off the ground, and the scientific enterprise is not to reduce to cherry-picking, we need a better answer, a conceptual answer, to the question of what sorts of events he needs to treat as scientifically explicable.

We can fill this void, I suggest, by appeal to the supernatural causation criterion. To see how the supernatural causation criterion can help us define the boundaries of science, consider what it is to call an event natural. What that would mean is of course not entirely clear; however, one plausible sense of “natural” at play when one calls an event natural has to do with the nature of its efficient cause. On this sense, a natural event would be an event with an efficient cause of a certain constitution, namely immanent

rather than transcendent. If we take the supernatural causation condition to be a requirement an event must meet in order for it to be a miracle, miracles cannot be events which have purely natural causes, but rather ones which have an *unnatural* efficient cause. It is this conceptual ground upon which we can draw the lines around what science is concerned with and what it is not.²⁵

As I said earlier, the supernatural causal pedigree condition cuts to the heart of the philosophy of miracles—there is much more to be said here. Nevertheless, I think we have enough to move from the motivation for the supernatural causal pedigree condition to some of its subsidiary issues. One such issue is whether the identity or the constitution of the supernatural agent doing the causing matters. Need it be God or, more specifically, the Christian God, causing a miraculous event? If not, could the actions of an angel, or a fallen angel, or of any other supernatural agent meet the supernatural causation condition?

For those immersed in the discourse of a monotheistic culture it is certainly easy to slip from talk of a supernatural agent to talk of God—often implicitly the God of Christianity—and back again.²⁶ In the absence of argument for the assumption that God is the only supernatural agent which qualifies for performing miracles, though, it is hard to understand restricting miracles to God as anything more than an exercise in home-field advantage. In any case, it would seem that, as Larmer says, “To insist that only God can work a miracle is to place upon the term a restriction inconsistent with the way in which it is generally used.” (p. 9)

²⁵ Presumably such events will be the professional concern of theologians rather than scientists.

²⁶ For instance, Steve Clarke, whose proposed definition is phrased in terms of supernatural agents, (p. 54) consistently oscillates between using that neutral term and talking of God. As we’ll see in Chapter 3, the same is true of the exchange between Larmer and Christine Overall.

Even within the spheres of Christian theology—where one might expect to find a bastion of support for miracles necessarily being the work of God if any such bastion existed—there seem to be theological and biblical moments where the power to perform miracles is not restricted to God. Writes Russell in his book *Religion and Science*:

Among the Melanesians, the distinction of good and evil spirits does not seem to exist, but in Christian doctrine [of the Middle Ages] it was essential. Satan, as well as the Deity, could work miracles; but Satan worked them to help wicked men, while the Deity worked them to help good men. This distinction, as appears from the Gospels, was already familiar to the Jews of the time of Christ, since they accused Him of casting out devils by the help of Beelzebub.²⁷ (p. 92)

Without implying either that the Devil's existence or activity in nature is necessary to Christianity or that the Devil plays an ineliminable role in Christian theology, we can at least see that there is neither a principled reason to restrict miracles to the action of one supernatural entity rather than another, nor a principled reason to require a particular constitution on the part of a supernatural miracle worker. Until some such argument is made and shown to be sound we tentatively conclude—following Hume's cosmopolitan requirement that a miracle be the work of the deity or an invisible agent—that the supernatural causal pedigree condition can be met by the visiting of causal activity on nature by any supernatural agent.

We now arrive at the last condition of the proposed definition of a miracle: that an event which is a miracle must be of religious significance. We said at the outset of this chapter that miracles are often said to be connected to religion in some meaningful way. What a religious significance condition is intended to do is to exclude events which are unusual, have a supernatural causal pedigree, but are aberrant or capricious, from the

²⁷ Presumably Russell is referring to passages such as John 1:39, NRSV.

category of miracle; it is the link with religion that miracles, as a category, must have in order to be distinct from wanton supernatural acts. (Swinburne, p. 8-9)

There are three ways in which we might hold an event to be religiously significant. First, we might say a miracle is religiously significant insofar as it falls in line with a pattern of intelligible divine activity. For instance, if we find in theology or scripture²⁸ a supernatural agent's plan for the world, and an event occurs which fits with that plan, then that event is religiously significant. Alternatively, we could leave supernatural intentionality out of the matter of religious significance altogether by holding that religious significance is a matter of confirming any particular religious doctrine or prophesy. Finally, we might take religious significance in the Lockean sense of establishing the divine credentials of a person. In this way the religious significance of an event might be taken to be its capacity to convince the previously unconvinced of the sacred nature of some otherwise profane agent.

Some have wanted to insist that we privilege one of the above three interpretations of religious significance as *the* understanding of religious significance. Although there might be practical differences in degree, as far as the religious significance condition is concerned the three types of religious significance will be considered equivalent to one another. Furthermore, just as we saw above in our discussion of whether the identity or constitution of the supernatural agent performing was important, we see in the current discussion no reason to privilege one religious system over another when it comes to religious significance. This means that an event of religious significance in one of the

²⁸ I use "theology" and "scripture" loosely, to refer to religious artifacts both written and verbal which (in part) specify patterns of supernatural activity.

three ways to the Satanist but not the Christian is (ontologically) indistinguishable, for our purposes, from the event which is of religious significance to the latter but not the former. Either meets the condition of religious significance as developed here, until some good argument can be made for indexing religious significance to one particular religion or theology.

We now have an explanation of all of the conditions an event must meet to be a miracle. Some, though, might say our list is incomplete because it does not include the condition that a miracle be fortuitous. It is necessary, it might be claimed, that an event which is a miracle is necessarily an event which benefits someone. Certainly it is true that many paradigm miracles are fortuitous. The miracle of the wedding at Cana, Holland's story of the child and the locomotive, the feeding of the five thousand, and Jesus' many healings at the touch of His hand are obvious cases in point. But I think this is a contingent condition that many paradigm miracles in fact meet, not a necessary one. Consider, for instance, Jesus' walking on water. The familiar story, as told at John 6: 16-21, is that Jesus' disciples had started across the lake when the weather took a turn for the worse. Jesus is said to have walked out across the lake to them during the height of the storm and boarded the boat, upon which the boat is said to have immediately and safely reached the opposite shore. Now Jesus' presence on the boat, which calmed the disciples and brought them safe passage, was certainly fortuitous for them. But the initial miracle—the walking on water—was not particularly fortuitous for anyone involved. In other words, had Jesus employed more conventional means to reach his disciples we would not say their fortunes had thereby suffered. Perhaps a more clear-cut example is

the case of a levitating man. Suppose a man who professes to be a prophet rises three feet up in the air by an act of God, hovers there for a moment, and then slowly descends back to Earth. The prophet's actions do not benefit anyone, but this is flimsy ground upon which to claim there is no miracle.

The conceptual underpinning of the intuition that the fortuity of an event is only a contingent feature of a miracle is actually to be found in a distinction we made earlier between Larmer's objective and subjective senses of the word "miracle." The fortuity one finds in an event falls under the same heading as the astonishment one finds in that event: the fortuity of an event is a function of the effect that the event has on a person, not of the properties of the event.²⁹ Because we are interested in Larmer's objective sense of "miracle," we therefore conclude that an event could, but need not, be fortuitous to be a miracle.

We are now finished our elaboration of the conditions an event must meet in order to be a miracle. We have seen that in order to be a miracle an event must be unusual in the probabilistic sense, have a supernatural causal pedigree insofar as a supernatural agent must be its efficient cause, and be religiously significant in at least one of the three ways we considered. By affirming each of these conditions is necessary for an event to be a miracle, and an event's meeting all of them is sufficient for that event's being a miracle, we tacitly reject what Swinburne has called "the Humean tradition."

The Humean tradition [of writing on miracles] is the tradition that there is a very high improbability (if not a logical impossibility) in the balance of evidence favouring the

²⁹ Of course the way an event affects someone *is* going to be a matter of the ontic properties of the event. For example, if my fellow graduate student needs to pay her rent the amount of her lottery win is going to be the part of the lottery win that affects her fortuitously. What I'm claiming is that the fortuity of the lottery win is not itself an ontic property of the lottery win.

occurrence of a miracle in the sense of a violation of a law of nature by a god; *this improbability arising not from empirical considerations, such as current lack of relevant historical evidence or difficulty of acquiring it, but from logical considerations, in virtue of what we mean by 'violation', 'evidence', 'law of nature' etc.* (p. 20, emphasis added)

Instead of opting for a definition of a miracle which followed the Humean tradition's precedent of stacking the logical deck against miracles, we have given reasons to prefer our definition for the purposes of investigating whether miracles are possible and, if so, whether there can be justified belief in their occurrence.

Chapter 2

The Metaphysics of Miracles

Although in the previous chapter I have suggested, against the Humean tradition, that the philosophy of miracles does not rise and fall on definitional considerations, the potency of my critique hangs on its ability to not succumb to its own charge. In its role as the dominant paradigm of philosophical writing about miracles the Humean tradition has produced a number of arguments concerning the possibility of, and justified belief in, miracles. It would be at best disingenuous, at worst negligent to dismiss these arguments solely on definitional grounds. In this chapter we'll detail the most popular and influential arguments of the Humean tradition—both epistemological and metaphysical—and raise an objection to the tradition's metaphysical arguments. We begin with the locus of the tradition: Hume's essay *Of Miracles*, originally intended for his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) but eventually published as Section X of *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. (1748)

Hume's essay is divided into two parts. In Part I he concerns himself with the logic of miracles; specifically, he considers whether there could be a miracle and what kind of evidence would be necessary to establish the belief that there had been one. In Part II Hume switches from the abstract to the particular, arguing that, as a matter of fact, no miracles which could serve as the foundation of a system of religion have in their favour evidence sufficient to meet the epistemological burden of proof established in Part

I.³⁰ No part of the following discussion depends on whether there actually have been any miracles; instead, we'll concentrate on the issues Hume considers in Part I.

Hume's first logical move in Part I is to make a broad point about the kind of evidence that's salient when reasoning about matters of fact.

Though experience be our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact; it must be acknowledged, that this guide is not altogether infallible, but in some cases is apt to lead us to errors. One, who in our climate, should expect better weather in any week of June than in one of December, would reason justly, and conformably to experience; but it is certain that he may happen, in the event, to find himself mistaken. (Hume, p. 115)

This passage broadly frames the coming argument, emphasizing the ultimate importance of empirical considerations when reasoning concerning matters of fact.³¹ Part-and-parcel with Hume's wholesale rejection of a priori reasoning concerning matters of fact is a rejection of any necessary matters of fact—the fallibility thesis. Even in the case where there is the strongest *prima facie* evidence of a necessary connection between two events, the case where the two have constantly been observed in conjunction with one another, we do not have a guarantee that they will continue to occur in conjunction in the future. So although we cannot guarantee that the weather of June will be warmer than that of December as it *ex hypothesi* has always been observed to be, we do have extremely good reason not to expect snow next June.

³⁰ Hume's explicit qualification in Part II notwithstanding, Antony Flew emphasizes that Hume is almost universally misunderstood to be arguing that there has never been *any* violation of a law of nature which has enough evidence in its favour to evince belief. (Flew, 1969, p. 198-99) In Hume's own words, "I beg the limitations here made may be remarked, when I say, that a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion." (p. 134)

³¹ To recognize the import of this point is to avoid one of the cardinal sins of interpreting Hume on miracles: taking Hume to be offering an a priori argument against the possibility of miracles. In 1990 Robert Fogelin offered just such an interpretation of Hume. Antony Flew dryly and correctly responded by noting that when it comes to Hume on miracles, "proofs against proofs are no proofs." (1990, p. 142) Fogelin recanted his 1990 interpretation in a later work. (2003, p. 17-19)

Of course events³² are not always found to be in constant conjunction; sometimes the conjunction of two events is more variable.

Some events are found, in all countries and ages, to have been constantly conjoined together: Others are found to have been more variable, and sometimes to disappoint our expectations; so that, in our reasoning concerning matters of fact, there are all imaginable degrees of assurance, from the highest certainty to the lowest species of moral evidence. (Hume, p. 115)

The frequency with which two events are observed to be conjoined forms the basis of Hume’s distinction between a proof and a probability.

A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence. In such conclusions as are founded on an infallible experience, he expects the event with the last degree of assurance, and regards his past experience as a full *proof* of the future existence of that event. In other cases, he proceeds with more caution: He weighs the opposite experiments: He considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments: to that side he inclines, with doubt and hesitation; and when at last he fixes his judgement, the evidence exceeds not what we properly call *probability*. All probability, then, supposes an opposition of experiments and observations, where the one side is found to overbalance the other, and to produce a degree of evidence, proportioned to the superiority.³³ (Hume, p. 116)

³² Here and in what follows “events” means “event types” unless explicitly indicated otherwise.

³³ Some scholars have noted that the experience Hume privileges in reasoning concerning matters of fact must be universal, not local. That is, the experience pertinent to Hume’s discussion can’t just be that of any particular agent’s, but must be that of *all* agents. There are two main reasons why. The first is to forestall the objection that reasoning from only one’s own experience places a significant limitation on the matters of fact upon which one could reason to a conclusion. “Nobody, *e.g.*, has had enough personal experience of death to make it reasonable for him to judge, simply from the regularity of his own experience, that a dead man never rises again.” (Broad, p. 89) A separate but equally compelling explanation of why Hume must appeal to collective experience is to be found in cases where an agent reasons from uniform experience of the constant conjunction of events to a matter of fact when another has had uniform experience of the disjunction of the same events. Consider Hume’s own example of this: the case of the Indian Prince. Upon being informed (presumably by someone from a northern climate) of the effects of frost, the Indian Prince would reason from his uniform experience of the liquidity of water under every circumstance to the conclusion that his informer must be lying. So the Indian Prince is reasoning in the right sort of way, but not arriving at the right conclusion as to the effects of cold. As Hume himself says, “Such an event, therefore, may be denominated extraordinary, and requires a pretty strong testimony, to render it credible to people in a warm climate: But still it is not *miraculous*, nor contrary to uniform experience of the course of nature in cases where all the circumstances are the same. (Hume, p. 119, n. 2) On its most straightforward construal, this sentence supports the idea that the experience of those in colder climates, *i.e.*, “where all the circumstances are the same,” are relevant in determining whether the freezing of water is a miracle. Since in such circumstances there is uniform experience that water freezes when the temperature drops, we conclude that, notwithstanding the Indian Prince’s misgivings, such an event is not a miracle.

Returning to the example of the weather of June, we see that the evidence constitutes a proof that the future will conform to the precedent of the past. This accords us “the last degree of assurance” that next year’s weather will follow suit. But if we were to change the example to involve the weather of December and of March in a northern climate, we would have only a probability that the latter is better than the former, therefore we would only cautiously expect next year’s weather to follow suit.

After explaining the proof/probability schema in the abstract, Hume applies it to the “particular instance” of testimony. (p. 116) Each of us commonly and necessarily uses testimony to make our way in the world. (Hume, p. 116) But the justification for our reliance on human testimony is itself not a priori; rather, it’s because we discover in the course of experience that testimony generally adheres more strongly to the true than to the false that we treat it as a reliable source of evidence when reasoning concerning matters of fact.

Were not the memory tenacious to a certain degree; had not men commonly an inclination to truth and a principle of probity, were they not sensible to shame, when detected in a falsehood: Were not these, I say, discovered by *experience* to be qualities, inherent in human nature, we should never repose the least confidence in human testimony. (Hume, p. 117)

Of course the fallibility thesis applies here as well; even if testimony had always *been* reliable, we would not be entitled to conclude that testimony will always *be* reliable, there being no a priori or necessary connection between the general accuracy of testimony on many occasions in the past and its accuracy in the future.

The next step Hume takes is to develop the two factors which may mitigate the degree to which a given testimony is to be taken as bona fide evidence for the claim

made, i.e. accorded the status of proof, probability, or neither. The first of these has to do with the kind of report given and the subject-matter of the report.

And as the evidence, derived from witnesses and human testimony, is founded on past experience, so it varies with the experience, and is regarded either as *proof* or a *probability*, according as the conjunction between any particular kind of report and any kind of object has been found to be constant or variable. (Hume, p. 117)

Of course, if a particular kind of report has been found to be given of a particular kind of object (or event) often, then further testimony to that point tends towards a probability, with the constant conjunction of the kind of report and the kind of object or event reported constituting a proof. “Suppose, for instance, that the fact, which the testimony endeavours to establish, partakes of the extraordinary and the marvelous; in that case, the evidence, resulting from testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual.” (Hume, p. 118) The second factor mitigating the quality of testimonial evidence has to do with the quality of the agents providing the testimony. The quality of the testifiers is, unsurprisingly, to be judged by appeal to experience, namely, by appeal to the strength of the correlation between the testifiers’ past testimony and the facts testified to, and the general quality of the character they display. “We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary, with too violent asseverations.” (Hume, p. 118) As for the extreme case, “A man delirious, or noted for falsehood and villany, has no manner of authority with us.” (Hume, p. 117)

These cautionary remarks about testimony should not distract us from appreciating the role that such a discussion plays in Hume’s argument. A discussion of the mitigating factors of testimony is otiose unless Hume allows that testimony may non-trivially participate in reasoning concerning matters of fact, amounting, according to the degree to which the mitigating factors just mentioned prevail, to either a probability or a proof. This is a crucial point that is worth restating, if only because it has been missed too often in analyses of Hume’s argument against miracles. Testimony may compete with other experiential evidence insofar as it may form a proof or a probability which is in conflict with the evidence of direct experience.³⁴ Thus testimony is in the position to defeat a proof from experience.

Having applied the general insights of the beginning of the essay to the particular case of testimony, Hume brackets that discussion and returns to miracles to add the last piece of the puzzle to his argument: the laws of nature. A complete explanation of the conception of laws of nature at play in Hume’s text is regrettably absent; however, we get some information about the nature of laws of nature from Hume in the following passage. “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.” (Hume, p. 120) What Hume seems to be suggesting here is that the laws of nature are instances of the special case of conjunction in experience we saw Hume mention at the outset of the

³⁴ The inverse point can also be made. As much as Hume allows testimony to compete with experience when it comes to matters of fact, so he allows experience to compete with testimony. Some readers of Hume have seen this as the thrust of Hume’s argument. “But the real crux [of Hume’s argument] is that, in the context of rational justification, all testimony must be subject to the critical judgement of experience.” (Flew, 1969, p. 175) Hent DeVries (p. 50) argues that this constitutes the heresy of Hume.

essay: laws of nature have in their corner uniform experience—they have always (“in all nations and ages”) been experienced to hold. As we saw above, uniform experience constitutes a full proof. Therefore we have a full proof in favour of the future integrity of the laws of nature.

At this point in our reconstruction of Hume’s argument against miracles we hit a divide in interpretation. Some have taken Hume’s principal conclusion to be that miracles are impossible; others have taken Hume to be mainly making an epistemological point about when one would be justified in believing that a miracle had occurred. In fact, as we’ll see below (and as noted above), he is making both a metaphysical and an epistemological point and it is not clear which (if either) is the principal claim. But let us focus for the moment on the argument of the passage quoted immediately above—the argument which has as its conclusion that miracles are impossible. We might think that that argument runs as John Earman formulates it.

“Hume also thought that induction proceeds by a straight rule which is not easy to formulate in general but which takes on a simple form in the case of uniform experience. As a first cut, we can try to state the corollary as: If n As have been examined, all of which were found to be Bs, then if N is sufficiently large, the probability that all As are Bs is 1. . . . So here in a nutshell is Hume’s first argument against miracles. A (Hume) miracle is a violation of a presumptive law of nature. By Hume’s straight rule of induction, experience confers a probability of 1 on a presumptive law. Hence, the probability of a miracle is flatly zero. Very simple. And very crude. (Earman, p. 23)

Upon this interpretation of Hume’s argument Earman heaps abuse, awarding it the dubious distinction of being an “object failure.” (p. 3) The irony of Earman’s analysis is that it is his own misinterpretation which is the source of Hume’s supposedly object failure, irony thickened by the fact that Earman’s misinterpretation wears its fault on its

sleeve. Hume's argument to the impossibility of a miracle is actually more complex than Earman's summary suggests. What is missing?

In his excellent book *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* Robert Fogelin argues convincingly that Earman's attribution of Hume's straight rule of induction to Hume is unjustifiable vis-à-vis both Hume's work in general and his work on miracles. In both categories of Hume's philosophy, Fogelin argues, we find evidence that for him proofs are defeasible. In the case of Hume's philosophy in general, we find what Fogelin calls an "uneliminable fallibilism," (p.48) most notably manifest in Hume's repeated claim that the "course of nature may change." (Hume in Fogelin, p. 48) In the case of Hume's philosophy of miracles, Fogelin convincingly argues that Hume's straight rule of induction is not necessary for Hume's argument and, in fact, runs counter to the text at several points. Now, if Fogelin is right when he claims that proofs are defeasible for Hume (at least in the case of miracles), then Earman is not entitled to claim that for Hume a proof confers a probability of 1 on a presumptive law and a probability of 0 on its violation because a probability of 0 means a violation has no chance of occurring.³⁵ In our discussion of the fallibility thesis above we probably have enough evidence to conclude that Fogelin is correct concerning Hume's attitude towards the defeasibility of proofs. But let us return to our reconstruction of Hume's argument against miracles to appreciate, with Fogelin, that Hume in fact treats proofs as defeasible.

³⁵ Ideally Hume would've chosen better language when describing proofs as warranting "the last degree of assurance." We'll show below that it is possible to make sense of such strong language—which forms the bulk of Earman's textual evidence for his attribution of Hume's straight rule of induction to Hume—without holding that it entails commitment to the straight rule of induction.

In Hume’s own words, the upshot of the metaphysical argument thus far is that, “There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of a miracle; . . .” (Hume, p. 120) Now, if this were the end of Hume’s argument, then Earman’s characterization thereof would be sufficient and the argument would not be regarded as seminal.³⁶ But this is not Hume’s conclusion. He continues where we left off, “. . . nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, *but by an opposite proof, which is superior.*” (Hume, p.121, emphasis added) What Earman brushes off is the emphasized portion, which asserts in no uncertain terms that a proof from direct experience may be defeated by another proof from experience. Thus we are forced to conclude that the proof for a presumptive law does not confer a probability (in the modern sense) of 1 on that law, for it may in fact turn out to fail.³⁷

It is evident from our earlier discussion that the sort of evidence Hume has in mind to oppose the proof of the laws of nature is testimonial evidence. The burden of testimony to the existence of a miracle is heavy—testimony which amounts to a probability is insufficient; the testimony must amount to a proof. This is emphasized by Hume with the famous maxim with which he concludes Part 1 of his essay.

The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), ‘That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that

³⁶ Indeed, Earman (p. 9) himself notes Spinoza’s analogous argument in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. (83:108)

³⁷ Presumably, the best we can say for the probability (in the modern sense of the word) of a law of nature is that it asymptotically approaches 1.

its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior.’ (Hume, p. 121)

Inverting the list of mitigating factors of testimony we considered earlier, we see that the testimony to a miracle would, in order to constitute a proof, have to be given by men of a sufficient number who had always proved trustworthy; who had no personal stake in the matter; who all agree with one another; and who present their testimony in measured tones. (Fogelin, p. 8)

The testimony to a miracle must come up perfectly clean on these dimensions to constitute a proof, for the deck is stacked against testimony to a miracle when it comes to the other mitigating factor: the kind of event testified to have happened. In Hume’s exact words: “the evidence, resulting from the testimony, admits of a diminution, greater or less, in proportion as the fact is more or less unusual.” (p. 118) As we have seen, a violation of a law of nature is for Hume perfectly unusual because such a thing has never happened before.³⁸ Thus the nature of the event testified to constitutes the greatest challenge to the truth of the testimony. It is a challenge which testimony may in principle meet if it is perfect according to the first mitigating factor. “In that case,” Hume tells us, “there is proof against proof, of which the strongest must prevail, but still with a diminution of its force, in proportion to that of its antagonist.”³⁹ (p. 120)

³⁸ This is most closely related to the unprecedentedness interpretation of the unusuality condition we considered in Chapter 1.

³⁹ Unfortunately, Hume neither elaborates on what makes one proof stronger than another nor on how the strength of a proof is to be judged. Presumably the strength of a proof from testimony will depend on subsidiary considerations like how many more than “a sufficient number” of testifiers there are. Similarly, the strength of the opposing proof will presumably depend on similar considerations like how many times the relevant law has been experienced to hold. It is not clear how these factors are to be judged.

With these comments on testimony in place we finally have the full picture of Hume's argument for the impossibility of miracles. Hume sets up testimony and direct experience as the two axes of evidence when reasoning concerning matters of fact. Each amounts to a proof or probability in any particular case, according to the degree to which it meets the criteria discussed above. In the case of miracles, we have a full proof from uniform experience against the possibility of any miracle. Yet this proof may in principle be successfully challenged by a proof from testimony. So we are not entitled to conclude that miracles are in general impossible. But we do see that the testimonial evidence to the existence of a miracle must amount to a proof which is stronger than the proof from uniform experience against it. When the two axes of evidence conflict, and each bears out a full proof, the stronger proof must prevail, but only in strength proportionate to that of the defeated proof. As for the epistemological coup de grâce, we see that the belief that any putative miracle was impossible and so didn't happen could only be successfully challenged by perfect testimonial evidence. And even if such a challenge were successful, it would, as Hume's maxim told us, only leave us with tentative justification for the belief that a miracle happened.

Antony Flew picks up this line of argument, but holds that Hume has actually argued to a much stronger conclusion than he has let on. In fact, Flew argues that Hume has succeeded in arguing what C.D. Broad thought (for the wrong reasons) Hume was arguing all along. Broad offers the following summary of *Of Miracles*.

Against belief in any alleged miracle we have, by definition of the word miracle, an absolutely uniform experience. For believing in a miracle we have only our experience as to the trustworthiness of testimony. And this is not an absolutely uniform experience, however trustworthy we may suppose the witnesses to be. Therefore we have never the

right to believe in any alleged miracle however strong the testimony for it may be.
(Broad, p. 80)

We have already seen why this recapitulation of Hume's argument will not suffice—it fails to acknowledge that Hume treats testimony as in principle capable of providing a proof of a miracle of greater strength than the countervailing proof from experience. But although Broad's summary is, as Flew puts it, “at a superficial level unfair,” it accurately captures (at least the epistemological element of) the position to which Hume is led, “perhaps unwittingly, by the logic of his own arguments.” (1969, p. 177)

Flew stylizes himself as a contemporary ally of Hume's argument, setting out to show that it in fact leads to the stronger conclusion that testimonial evidence could *never* weigh conclusively in favor of the existence of a miracle. The key to Flew's amended version of Hume's argument is the idea that the laws of nature are general nomologicals rather than numerical universal propositions. The difference between the two is a difference in kind. Numerical universal propositions simply describe a volume of uniform experience of the conjunction of two events. General nomologicals, on the other hand, are universal propositions which both have been and also could again be thoroughly tested for reliability. So the propositions “Absolute power corrupts absolutely,” and “All objects inside Earth's atmosphere accelerate towards the Earth at 9.81m/s^2 ,” are both universally quantified propositions, but by virtue of the extensive and potentially repeatable testing of the latter and the absence of such testing of the former only the latter qualifies as a general nomological.⁴⁰

Universal propositions which have become general nomologicals are

⁴⁰ This is not to imply that only science can generate general nomologicals. Flew is clear that general nomologicals are not limited to those universals which science produces. (1969, p. 187)

... fundamental canons of our historical criticism. Finding what appears to be historical evidence for an occurrence inconsistent with such a nomological, we must always insist on interpreting that evidence in some other way: for if the nomological is true then it is physically impossible that any event incompatible with it could have occurred. (Flew, 1969, p. 207)

The cash value of true general nomologicals, then, is that they tell us what is physically possible and what isn't. It is important to note that this does not imply all currently accepted general nomologicals are true, or that any of them are, by virtue of their current acceptance, in principle inviolate; a currently accepted critical canon may turn out, in the end, to be false. (1969, p. 207) What cannot happen, according to Flew, is testimony to a counter-instance in and of itself falsifying a critical canon.⁴¹ The most such testimony could occasion is a retesting of the nomological of which it is supposed to be a counter-instance. If such retesting one way or another manages to reproduce what was testified to be a singular counter-instance, then the currently accepted nomological must be surrendered as false. (Flew, 1976, p. 30) Only such a failure during testing could show a general nomological to be false. If, on the other hand, the general nomological survives such testing, then the evidence for its truth (and for the falsity of the testimony to the contrary) is of course only strengthened accordingly. (1969, p. 207)

It should be clear by now where Flew places the error of Hume's original argument. By holding that the evidence for the laws of nature lay only in the volume of confirming instances, Hume was forced to accept that testimonial evidence could at least in principle overrule the prima facie physical impossibility of a miracle. But, because they have survived testing, the laws of nature are a cut above untested universal

⁴¹ This is especially the case when testimony challenging a general nomological is testimony to an event alleged to have happened in the past. The further in the past the worse the light in which the testimony is cast.

propositions. They tell us what is physically possible and what is not. And the variety of uniform experience they have in their favour is never going to be outweighed by testimonial evidence to a violation. There are two conclusions to this argument: first, miracles, as violations of a law of nature by a supernatural entity, must thereby be physically impossible; second, testimony to a miracle could never justify belief in the miracle in preference to belief in the general nomological it is supposed to violate.

Flew's is not the only neo-Humean argument to the conclusion that miracles are physically impossible. Alastair McKinnon provides another influential attempt to argue to this conclusion. McKinnon, though, lodges the locus of the impossibility of miracles one conceptual notch higher than Flew. Where Flew held that miracles were logically possible but physically impossible, McKinnon holds that miracles are both logically and physically impossible.

McKinnon begins his a priori argument against the possibility of miracles with two definitions: one of a law of nature and one of a miracle. As for the former, we saw in the previous chapter that McKinnon subscribes to a simple descriptivist understanding of laws of nature. "They are simply highly generalized shorthand descriptions of how things do in fact happen." (McKinnon, p. 309) Miracles, on the other hand, are events involving the violation or suspension (McKinnon's preferred verb) of a law of nature. With these two definitions in hand, the rest of the argument falls easily into place. Any event which is properly termed a miracle cannot, by definition, be subsumable under a natural law, but also, by virtue of being an event, must, by virtue of the sorts of things laws of nature are, be subsumable under a natural law if it really happened. Things become more obviously

embarrassing for an advocate of miracles if we modify the definition of a miracle by exchanging the phrase “law of nature” for “the actual course of events.” “*Miracle* would then be defined,” McKinnon triumphantly writes, “as ‘an event involving the suspension of the actual course of events.’” (p. 309) Whichever of these two formulations is adopted, the conclusion is the same: the very idea or concept of a miracle is self-contradictory. One who confronts what appears to be a miracle, then, is in a dilemma. Either the conception of the laws of nature that generated it, or the reality of the miracle itself, must be jettisoned.⁴²

We have now seen three arguments “from the very nature of the fact,” as Hume said, against the possibility of miracles.⁴³ First we considered Hume’s balance of proofs argument, according to which the proof from uniform experience constituted the strongest possible, but defeasible, evidence against the possibility of miracles. Next we saw Flew strengthen Hume’s conclusion by arguing that the evidence in favor of tested general nomologicals, i.e. the laws of nature, can *never* be outweighed by the evidence in favour of a counter-instance. Since the laws of nature tell us what is and is not physically possible, then, miracles are not physically possible. Lastly we considered McKinnon’s argument, which held that miracles, as violations of natural laws, were logically impossible. With these three arguments in hand we now have an understanding of a good

⁴² Given the nature of the discussion that dominates the philosophical literature on this subject, it is somewhat surprising that McKinnon does not seem particularly partial to either option. On the contrary, he seems to be just as ready to surrender the reality of the miracle as to surrender the conception of the laws of nature which generated it. This both accounts for McKinnon’s distinctiveness in the tradition and manifests his enthusiasm for the primacy of logical consistency.

⁴³ Of course we have seen several arguments concerning justified belief in miracles as well. The epistemology of miracles is not our concern in this chapter; we’ll leave these authors’ epistemological arguments to Chapter 3.

cross-sample of the arguments that constitute the Humean tradition of philosophical writing on miracles. As such we are now in the appropriate position to turn an evaluative eye to the tradition.

We have seen a similarity in strategy running through the authors of the Humean tradition that transcends the similarity we would expect from different members of a philosophical movement. Each of the arguments we considered above attempted to reason in one way or another from the laws of nature and the uniform regularities in experience they account for to the impossibility of miracles. The details, of course, differed from one argument to another. And these details are obviously of tremendous importance when it comes to analyzing these arguments individually; nevertheless, in the course of our critique we can dispense with the particularities of each case if it can be shown that there is something wrong with the general strategy of arguing from the laws of nature and/or uniform experience to the claim that miracles are in any sense impossible. This is precisely what I will attempt to show: I'll argue that neither the laws of nature nor the uniform regularities they account for speak against the possibility of miracles.

In Chapter 1 we argued that an event must necessarily have a supernatural causal pedigree in order to be a miracle. This means, we elaborated, that the efficient cause of any event which is a miracle must be a supernatural entity. Now, we noted that the idea that a miracle must involve supernatural causation is not universally agreed upon—there are senses of the word which do not require supernatural causation. Earman (p. 8 & 22) has gone so far as to say that the supernatural causation criterion is irrelevant even to Hume's argument, Hume's care to insert supernatural causation into his definition

notwithstanding. Earman's reasoning is that Hume's argument (or at least Earman's mischaracterization of it) works against not only violations of laws of nature at the hand of the Divine, but also against violations with which the Divine is not involved. We might wonder, with Earman, whether Hume's argument or a variant thereof works on violations which are not instances of supernatural causation. But the present task is to determine whether it works against the possibility of miracles.

As far as miracles are concerned, it seems clear that Hume, like us, saw the need to distinguish miracles from other exceptional or marvelous events. It is precisely such considerations which appear to prompt Hume to expand upon his first definition of a law of nature in a footnote in the middle of the essay. (p. 119, n. 2) Flew agrees with this interpretation, writing, "Hume can provide no conception of a law of nature sufficiently strong to allow for any real distinction between the miraculous and the extremely unusual." (p. 204) Some modern commentators have taken this a step further, arguing that Hume progressively narrows his focus through the course of his essay, such that by the end of Part II, Hume is actually directing his argument against the ultimately unlikely event.

"Hume amends the definition of a miracle as he goes along to reflect the fact that the miracle-reports which matter are those which can serve as the foundation for a religion, and such miracles—those which must be attributable to nothing less than the interposition of a deity—are those events which must be *maximally* improbable" (Buckle, p. 14)

There is both textual and substantive reason, therefore, to think that Hume, like Flew and McKinnon, holds that a miracle must be an instance of supernatural causation.

The relevance of this discussion to the present evaluation of the Humean tradition becomes apparent when we consider the types of events that laws of nature range over.

However we cash out the details of the laws of nature—whether we take the simple descriptivist or the prescriptive nomological or some other view—it is agreed that the laws of nature tell us things about nature, i.e. natural events. They are, as it were, concerned, and only concerned, with the category of natural events. Steve Clarke puts it thus: “Laws of nature are *of nature*; they should not be expected to account for the behavior of things which have been supernaturally interfered with.”⁴⁴ (1997, p. 96) David and Randall Basinger similarly write, “Direct acts of God cannot be violations because an event can only be a violation of a natural law, strictly speaking, if there are no nonnatural causal factors involved.” (p. 15) Finally, William Rowe writes, “. . .the laws of nature tell us what must happen only if what happens is due entirely to natural forces.” (p. 133) The thrust of these authors’ claims can be illustrated by appeal to a thought experiment.

Suppose two people, Lettie and Mac, have spent their entire lives within a sphere of a diameter which has always been fixed. The exterior of the Sphere shows signs of moderate flexibility, but no force within the Sphere is sufficient to flex it. It is translucent, letting in enough light and allowing them enough room to live lives we would recognize as human. In fact, their lives are very much like our primitive ancestors’ lives, but for the boundary of the Sphere. Part of their daily routine is to explore the Sphere systematically to learn about their surroundings. They do this by way of a cycle of experimenting, observing, and hypothesizing, and they are meticulous in following this

⁴⁴ It should be noted that Clarke, for his part, only turns this observation against the strain of argument to the conclusion that miracles are conceptually incoherent. This is because he is primarily concerned with when it is rational to believe that a miracle has occurred, and he takes the metaphysical arguments relevant to such concerns to only be those which hold that a miracle is conceptually incoherent. To correct this unnecessary narrowing of focus we simply need to acknowledge that the other arguments against the possibility of miracles fail for just the same reason.

methodology. Over the course of the finest years of their lives Lettie and Mac accumulate a vast collection of data on the behavior of the objects of the Sphere. They have even gone so far as to formalize their knowledge of the Sphere into handy rules, which collectively constitute the universal propositions they call “the laws of the sphere.” One of the laws of the sphere is that the objects of the Sphere exhibit a certain attraction to one another, an attraction that varies in a predictable way according to the mass of the objects involved.

One day, while Lettie is testing this particular law for the umpteenth time, something strange happens. As she unfetters her test object, a rock, the flexible shell of the section of the Sphere nearest the rock caves, as if it were pushed inward by a giant finger outside the Sphere. The interior side of the shell envelopes itself completely around the rock, immobilizing it and thus canceling its attraction to the other objects of the Sphere. Upset by the failure of the law of the Sphere which held that the rock should have been attracted to the other objects of the Sphere, Lettie runs to tell Mac what has happened.

Disturbed by Lettie’s report, and with much more than a kernel of disbelief, Mac asks Lettie to duplicate the event. Lettie unfetters the very same rock and, to her dismay, watches as the walls of the Sphere stay put while the rock behaves in accordance with the law under testing. An exasperated Lettie says to Mac, who is now wide-eyed with suspicion, “Neither I, nor this rock, nor anything within the Sphere is responsible for the event I saw. What happened was what was not supposed to happen.” Mac is conflicted: one the one hand, he trusts Lettie, his sphere-mate, entirely; on the other, Lettie is now

telling a story which is very hard to believe because he knows the sides of the Sphere have never collapsed before and that there is nothing within the Sphere that could exert such a force.

Mac lays his suspicion aside for the time being to reflect on the consequences of believing Lettie. Even if Lettie is telling the truth, he reasons, the laws of the sphere are still the laws of the sphere—they are not expected to hold when something as unnatural happens as the side of the Sphere spontaneously and due to no force inside the Sphere becoming concave in the way Lettie maintains it did. He decides to suspend his belief, but acknowledges that nothing the two have discovered during their passionate search for knowledge of their surroundings means that the event she relates could not have happened.

This thought experiment draws out two distinct and important points. First is a point about the existence of the laws of nature. When miracles are understood as the Humean tradition understands them (i.e. as the work of a supernatural agent), the existence of laws of nature is perfectly compatible with the existence of miracles because the laws of nature range in scope over only natural events.⁴⁵ The second is a point about the content of the laws of nature. What the laws of nature tell us about the events of nature is not going to weigh on the possibility of supernaturally caused violations of laws of nature either; the content of the relationships the laws of nature capture are as unrelated to the question of miracles as the existence of such relations. In terms of the thought

⁴⁵ What we mean by “range in scope” is just that only purely naturally caused events may be the relata of a law of nature. So, for example, a law like ‘God punishes impiety’ is no law of nature because any punishment would be by His hand. ‘Caesar punishes impiety,’ on the other hand, would be a law of nature. (Unless God made Caesar do it.)

experiment above, neither the fact that the objects of the Sphere accelerated towards one another, nor the rate at which they did so, weighs against the possibility of miracles.⁴⁶ As such, appealing to either the existence or content of laws of nature to answer the metaphysical question of miracles is simply to appeal to the wrong kind of evidence; it is to make demands of the laws of nature that they cannot meet. This is the error of the Humean tradition's arguments against the possibility of miracles.

The plain consequence of this discussion is that the question of whether a miracle could happen (is possible) is not a question of what the laws of nature tell us can or should happen. Still some may object: whatever conceptual boundary we might have thought we could carve out between miracles and natural events will, it might be objected, always collapse. This is the position McKinnon advocates.

Now no one will deny that events can be discrepant with pictures and conceptions of the universe which have thus far seemed entirely adequate. But they cannot be discrepant with a true or adequate conception of the universe nor indeed with the actual course of the universe itself. The reason is quite simple. By definition, the actual course of events includes what we might call the actual course of every event. Events may be and often are strange and disturbing. But they are never 'outside nature.' They are never 'out of line' with the real way of the world. This is a matter of definition and no intervention, whether divine or diabolical, can alter it. (McKinnon, p. 312)

McKinnon is at least partially correct. He is correct that if a miracle should occur it must occur in nature. That means, of course, that any miracle necessarily involves natural elements, viz. people, places, and things which are quite of this world. Like such things and the events they are parts of, miracles must be located in space-time and be in principle sensible. Indeed, if the definition of a miracle we developed in Chapter 1 is to

⁴⁶ The content of the law is, though, a part of what makes a miracle a miracle. Recall the argument in Chapter 1 that miracles must be unusual. What could, though need not necessarily, make a miracle unusual is that it is an event which doesn't accord with the content of the laws of nature. More on this below.

be accepted, then miracles must have religious significance, so must occupy enough of reality to make that possible. All of this suggests that miracles are in one non-trivial sense natural events. But worries such as McKinnon's are not entirely warranted; miracles are not in *every* sense natural.

Another and perhaps more common sense of "natural" has to do with causal relations. We might use the term in such a sense when we want to make a point about the causal circumstances of an event. Take, for instance, the case of birth. In the medical context, the degree to which any particular birth is assessed as natural increases or decreases proportionate to the degree to which it occurs in conjunction with medical intervention. On the unnatural pole of this scale is birth by Cesarean section. On the other pole is vaginal birth with the absence of labor-inducing pharmacologicals. Vaginal birth with the use of such pharmacologicals is somewhere in the middle. The important point to notice is that the correct application of the term "natural" to a birth is, in the present sense, parasitic on the conditions under which it comes about.⁴⁷

So in one sense we say an event is natural insofar as it occurs in the world around us. But in another important sense, a miracle must, as an event with a supernatural cause, be unnatural. In this sense miracles really are out of this world. And it is on this conceptual ground that we find the tools to allay McKinnon's suspicions. There are two senses of "nature" or "natural" at play here: in McKinnon's sense we mean by these words an event which is actual or real; in our second, causal, sense we mean an event which is real and for which other natural events, and only nature or natural events are

⁴⁷ I explicitly disavow any negative connotations this use of "natural" carries with it by virtue of its historical use as a tool of oppression.

responsible. To insist that these two senses of the words “nature” or “natural” cannot co-exist is to insist on an equivocation.

Another objection to the foregoing counter-argument might run as follows. Allowing for (supernaturally caused) exceptions and the laws of nature to co-exist is unscientific, for it allows a slot for scientists to shove bizarre results, and so to insulate currently accepted laws of nature from counter-instances. It must indeed make scientists—or at least philosophers of science—nervous when defenders of justified belief in miracles start making comments like, “The law of gravity, along with other natural laws, can be saved from the threat of apparent counter-examples by appeal to the miraculous.” (Clarke, 1997, p. 97) But Clarke is not in the awkward position his phrasing suggests. In Chapter 1 we considered the stultification of scientific inquiry as an objection to epistemological definition of miracles. There we noted—and it is a point that warrants repetition—that the concern that miracles stultify scientific inquiry is epistemological, not metaphysical. As the epistemology of miracles is not our present concern, a full explanation of how we might block scientists’ convenient use of the category will have to wait; however, we can begin a response to the objection by applying the conclusion we came to in our discussion of Robinson in Chapter 1. There we argued that miracles are a different *kind* of event, a kind that scientists are not concerned with accounting for in their professional work. So it would seem any bracketing of miracles by scientists should be expected and applauded, not condemned. This is in fact Clarke’s position on the matter. (1997, p. 97)

At this point let us pause and acknowledge what has and has not been argued. Throughout this chapter we've set aside our own definition of a miracle in favour of the dominant definition of a miracle as a supernaturally caused violation of the laws of nature. The goal of this chapter to this point has been to show that even if such a definition were granted, the strategy of arguing from the existence or content of laws of nature, or uniform regularities of experience, to the claim that miracles are impossible is faulty. This is strictly a negative argument—if it is successful, it only shows that the three arguments surveyed above do not work. It does not show conclusively that there is no good argument for the impossibility of miracles, nor does it make any positive claim that miracles are possible. The last task of this chapter is to return to our own definition of a miracle and apply it to the latter gap by appeal to recent work in modal metaphysics.

In his paper “Miracles: metaphysics and modality,” Stephen Mumford sets out to construct a modal metaphysics which satisfies the intuition that miracles are logically possible. Mumford begins his account with a definition of a miracle which is *sui generis* in the literature insofar as it privileges supernatural causation to the exclusion of all other putative conditions of a miracle. “[A] miracle =_{df} a natural event E with a supernatural cause E_s.” (Mumford, p. 192) With this definition in place, Mumford (p. 197) provides a logical space for miracles with a map similar to that of Fig. 1.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ The difference between Mumford's map and Fig. 1 is minor. Mumford holds that not all that is naturally necessary is actual, i.e. there could be an event which was naturally necessary and not actual. He provides no argument for this, and I see no reason to follow suit.

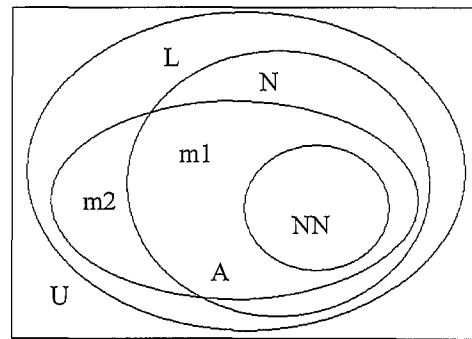


Fig. 1

For our purposes, the domain of quantification of this map is events. L is the class of events which are logically possible; N is the naturally possible; NN is the naturally necessary;⁴⁹ A the actual; m1 and m2 are miraculous events.⁵⁰

With this modal mapwork in place we are now in the position to develop our alternative to Holland's awkward surrendering of the theorem *ab esse ad posse valet consequentia* we considered in Chapter 1. In allowing m2 we are allowing that an event which is naturally impossible may occur on account of supernatural intervention. This would seem to put us in the same position as Holland, namely in the position of having to explain how we allow for $\neg\Diamond p \ \& \ p$. The solution is to draw a distinction between different kinds of possibility. If we distinguish between natural and logical modalities, as we have, then it makes sense to talk of natural possibility as distinct from logical possibility. Following Mumford, we refer to natural or nomic possibility as \Diamond_N , logical possibility as \Diamond_L . We formulate the axiom of natural possibility as $p \rightarrow \Diamond_N p$, and the axiom

⁴⁹ The class NN is different from the others insofar as it is unclear whether there are any naturally necessary events at all. Mumford correctly treats this as an open question to be determined by science. (p. 196)

⁵⁰ As Fig. 1 illustrates, a miracle may be an event which is naturally impossible but logically possible (m2), or an event which is naturally possible (m1). As these results allow for non-law-violating as well as law-violating miracles, they are consistent with the definition of a miracle we arrived at in Chapter 1, provided m1 and m2 also meet the conditions of our definition of a miracle which are absent from Mumford's.

of logical possibility as $p \rightarrow \diamond_{LP} p$. To hold that there can be events such as m_2 is to surrender the axiom of natural possibility, for what is the case when it comes to m_2 cannot *naturally* be the case; however, the axiom of logical possibility remains intact, for what is the case when it comes to m_2 can *logically* be the case. Mumford, for his part, finds this proposal altogether a “sensible and coherent account of the relation between logical and nomic modalities.” (p. 198) I am inclined to agree. In Fig. 1 we have a modal metaphysics which allows for the possibility of law-violating miracles at a minimal sacrifice of intuitive nomic modal commitments.⁵¹

I can think of only one other reason to deny that miracles, as we have defined them, are possible. One might object to the possibility of miracles on the basis that the possibility of miracles presupposes something that is itself impossible in some sense: the existence of a supernatural miracle worker. There are two broad categories of strategy commonly used to mount such a challenge: argue for the truth of naturalism or argue from evil. As for the first strategy, charges of question-begging are often raised against the naturalist when he makes anything stronger than a contingent claim that all that exists is the natural world. (e.g. Larmer, p. 60-73; cf. Mumford, p. 193) As for the second sort of strategy, a number of well-developed theodicies may be appealed to in order to reconcile the existence of a supernatural being with evil in the world. This is not the place to detail such strategies. For present purposes it is enough to note that even if we cannot find a successful theodicy, arguments from evil typically only attempt to show the non-existence of *God* or, further, to show the non-existence of the Christian God. The

⁵¹ If the sacrifice of the axiom of nomic possibility is just *too* much to bear, it should be noted that we still have modal room for m_1 miracles.

possibility of miracles is safe from this challenge, as everyone in the philosophical debate, as we noted in Chapter 1, accepts to one extent or another that miracles may have a supernatural cause of any identity and still be a miracle. So it would seem that neither strategy is capable of proving that there exists no supernatural candidate for working a miracle.

On the other hand, we certainly have no conclusive proof of the existence of God. We are in the awkward position, then, of deliberating about the possibility of events which presuppose the existence of an agent whose existence is, so to speak, up in the air. Since we have no good reason to think that there is not a supernatural agent capable of working miracles, I tentatively conclude that miracles, as we defined them, are possible. But this conclusion is asserted in full view of the fact that miracles, as we defined them, are possible if and only if there is in fact a supernatural agent capable of causally interacting with the world in the right way.

Of course the metaphysical claim that a miracle is possible if and only if there is in fact a miracle-worker does not imply its epistemological cognate—we need not necessarily *believe* that there is a supernatural miracle-worker in order for there to *be* such a miracle-worker. Although, as we will shortly see, it is the epistemological claim that we could be justified to believe a miracle has or could have happened, and so justified to believe that a supernatural miracle-worker existed, which raises the ante of the debate to the level of world-views. It is to these epistemological issues that we now turn.

Chapter 3 The Epistemology of Miracles

In Chapter 1 we considered the range of issues associated with defining a miracle. In Chapter 2 we explored the metaphysical question of whether miracles are possible. We now turn to what Keith Young (p. 115) has referred to as the most important issue in the philosophy of miracles: the epistemological question of whether one could be justified in believing that a miracle had occurred.⁵² There are two elements to this question. First is the conceptual element: what are the necessary and the sufficient conditions for justified belief in a miracle? Once we have these conditions we will be in the position to consider the second, practical, element: what are the prospects of their being met? In this chapter we'll concentrate on the conceptual element, though we'll have some brief comments on the prospects of the conditions of justified belief in a miracle being met along the way.

We begin with a quick review of the arguments of the Humean tradition, focusing on their epistemological strands. We'll start, as we did in the previous chapter, with Part I of Hume's *Of Miracles*. As we saw, Hume begins Part I with the premise that experience is "our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact." For Hume, experiential evidence, we saw, licenses conclusions about matters of fact with varying degrees of certainty. If two states of affairs are always observed in conjunction then this constitutes a (defeasible) proof that the future will follow suit. If the correlation of two

⁵² It should be noted that this epistemological question is distinct from the factual epistemological question of whether we are in fact justified in believing that any event in history which is purported to be a miracle did in fact occur. As we noted in the last chapter, such considerations are, by and large, what Hume is concerned with in Part II of *Of Miracles*. But this is not the place to follow Hume's lead and answer this factual question; rather, it is the place to lay the philosophical groundwork for answering it.

states of affairs is less than perfect, but occurs more often than not, then we have a probability that the future will follow suit.

We then saw Hume apply this theoretical framework to the particular case of testimony. Most but not all testimony, on the one hand, correlates with the truth. There is, then, a probability that future testimony will follow suit. The laws of nature, on the other hand, have always, “in all ages and countries,” been observed to obtain, so we have a proof that they will continue to do so. When it comes to our beliefs about the world, then, given that proofs accord one “the last degree of assurance” we seem to have the best possible reason to believe that miracles, as violations of laws of nature by a supernatural agent, will not occur.

But this is not the end of the story: as we noted, the last degree of assurance proofs accord one in deliberation about matters of fact is not an absolute assurance. Even proofs are fallible; experience may “lead us into error” notwithstanding its uniformity. Furthermore, the epistemic force of a proof is subject to the force of any countervailing proof. In the case of miracles, this means that a proof from experience against belief in a miracle may in principle be defeated by a stronger proof from testimony.⁵³ But because of the considerable strength of the proof from experience in favour of any law of nature, any proof from testimony which is sufficient to defeat it must meet an overwhelmingly stringent set of conditions. Such testimony must be ideal in every way, e.g. be that of a sufficient number who have always been truthful, are non-partisan, etc. And even if testimonial evidence of such outstanding quality is furnished the result is a belief which

⁵³ On the topic of the strength of proofs, see note 40 above.

rests on precariously epistemic thin ice, is only cautiously believed to have happened by the bewildered subject who has accepted the substantially mitigated force of the lesser miracle. In the absence of a proof from testimony, the proof from experience carries the epistemic day with the degree of assurance that remains after deducting the epistemic weight of testimonial evidence, if any.

The upshot of Hume's epistemological argument in Part 1, then, is that one could in fact be tenuously justified in believing that a given event had been a miracle just in case testimony to that fact is of such outstanding quality that it countervails the epistemic weight of direct experience in favour of an unbroken law of nature. From the very nature of his argument it is clear that Hume considers the chances of the balance of proof versus proof turning out in favour of the proof from testimony dim. Indeed, at the beginning of Part II of his essay he remarks, "In the foregoing reasoning we have supposed, that the testimony, upon which a miracle is founded, may amount to an entire proof, . . . , but it is easy to shew, that we have been a great deal too liberal in our concession, and that there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence." (p. 122)

Antony Flew, as we saw, picked up where Hume's argument in Part I left off, arguing that the evidence in favour of a miracle could *never* carry the epistemological day. Recall that the cornerstone of Flew's neo-Humean argument against both the possibility of miracles and justified belief in miracles is the distinction between general nomologicals and numerical universal propositions. Both categories of proposition are universally quantified; however, only the former, having survived past testing for reliability which may in principle be repeated in the future, are cornerstones of

understanding and historical interpretation. By virtue of their having survived testing, then, we have very good justification to believe that general nomologicals are true.

When it comes to belief in a miracle, according to Flew, we have a choice between believing the general nomological which the miracle is supposed to have violated or the singular historical proposition asserting the supposed miracle. When judging the truth of a claim to a miracle, then, we judge the evidence in favor of the truth of the relevant general nomological against the evidence in favor of the truth of the miracle report. Because the relevant general nomological has been tested in the past and could be tested again in the future, and the miracle report neither has been nor can be tested, the evidence in favour of the latter could never be better than the evidence in favour of the former.⁵⁴

Lastly, we saw McKinnon argue that miracles are impossible because they are conceptually contradictory. This charge, we saw, followed from his definitions of a law of nature and of a miracle. But we saw that McKinnon did not rest with charging the term “miracle” to be self-contradictory, and so logically impossible, he also made the corresponding epistemological point. If someone were to believe that a miracle actually took place he would be required to believe both that the account of laws the acceptance of which is responsible for the event’s being a miracle is correct and also that a counter-instance to that account of the laws of nature occurred. The result is of course an

⁵⁴ As we noted, this does not mean that reports of miracles are judged to be false on a priori grounds; on the contrary, according to Flew miracle reports may occasion the retesting of the relevant general nomological. If such testing bears out the truth of the miracle report, then we will have demonstrated that an accepted nomological was in fact false. But this does not leave us believing in a miracle, for belief in the report would no longer be belief in a miracle because the general nomological which made it a miracle has been demonstrated to be false.

intolerable logical tension between beliefs, a situation where either the belief in the laws of nature as they stand or the belief in the reality of the miracle must go. Hence for McKinnon belief in a miracle requires belief in a contradiction, a belief which obviously can never be justified.

In his influential book *The Concept of Miracle* Swinburne challenges the epistemological arguments of the Humean tradition. In contrast to the precedent of the Humean tradition, for Swinburne the epistemological question of miracles does not rise and fall on the logic of any particular account of the laws of nature or miracles; rather, it rises and falls on evidential considerations.⁵⁵ According to him, whether or not a person is justified in believing an event E was a miracle is a matter of the quality of the available evidence to the effect (1) that E occurred; (2) that E was a violation of a law of nature; and (3) that E was caused by a supernatural agent. If the evidence sustains these three conclusions, then, according to Swinburne, one is justified in believing that E was a miracle.

We begin our reconstruction of his argument with the reasons one could give to think that (1) was met, that a given event actually did occur. Hume's account, at least, suggests that the reasons we might have to think that a violation of a law of nature occurred are testimonial and the reasons we might have to think a violation has not occurred are experiential. Swinburne rejects this duality, arguing that there are in fact four categories of evidence to which one may appeal as evidence that a given event

⁵⁵ This reaction to Humean writing on miracles is at least as old as Arnold Lunn's 1950 article *Miracles—The Scientific Approach*.

(whether consistent with the laws of nature or not) has actually occurred. These categories are:

. . . our own apparent memories of our past experiences, the testimony of others about their past experiences, physical traces and our contemporary understanding of what things are physically impossible or improbable. (The fourth is only a corrective of the other three, not an independent source of detailed information.) (Swinburne, p. 33)

This list is intended to be exhaustive and its members not mutually exclusive in general.⁵⁶

(Swinburne, p. 35)

Now, the cases we are most interested in for our purposes are cases where evidence from different categories conflicts—particularly when the conflict is between evidence of the first three kinds, which we’ll collectively refer to as “primary evidence,” and evidence of the last kind, which we’ll call “corrective evidence.”⁵⁷ To address cases where evidence from one or more categories warrants a different conclusion than the evidence from another, Swinburne develops one basic and three subsidiary principles of assessing evidence.

The basic principle is to consider as many pieces of evidence as possible, regardless of kind. If artificial restrictions are placed on evidence which would otherwise be pertinent in the assessment of whether or not a belief is justified, this casts serious doubt on the force of the remaining, accepted evidence. In the case of miracles, the general tendency would be to exclude corrective evidence, or at least to underemphasize it in relation to primary evidence. The Humean tradition rightly insisted that such evidence is in fact relevant to the justification of belief in a miracle.

⁵⁶ For instance, a videotaped confession to a crime would count as an instance of the first three categories in a trial for the theft of the videotape.

⁵⁷ Intra-categorical conflicts between pieces of evidence are left aside in favour of inter-categorical conflicts. I do not see this as a problem; in any case, I suspect Swinburne would consider intra-categorical and inter-categorical conflict isomorphic.

Of course acknowledging that all pieces of evidence in any category need to be taken into account does not entail that all pieces of evidence ought to be weighted equally—a point emphasized by Flew. Enter Swinburne’s first subsidiary principle: evidence of different kinds ought to be given different weights. If Jones claims that he witnessed a priest personally turn water into wine, we have one piece of primary evidence to that belief. The priest’s subsequent testimony constitutes another piece of evidence in favour of belief in the conversion, but it is of decidedly minor weight because the priest may have something to gain by claiming the water turned to wine. Further testimony to the conversion by parties at arm’s length from the priest will be accorded greater weight.⁵⁸ But the cumulative evidence of apparent memory and testimony is clearly less weighty than the physical traces in this case. If chemical testing reveals that the liquid is in fact not wine but, say, grape juice, this countervails any apparent memories of Jones’s *and* the testimony of others, especially in light of the conflict between that evidence and the corrective evidence. If this principle sounds familiar, it should—we have already seen something quite like it. Recall Hume’s words: “I deduct the force of the weaker from the stronger, and reject the greater miracle.” In the current case, it would, ex hypothesi, be a greater miracle that Jones’s chemical test of the wine gave the wrong result.

⁵⁸ A version of the point that greater objectivity increases the weight of testimony is made by Dan Dennett in his recent book *Breaking the Spell*. “Miracle-hunters must be scrupulous scientists or else they are wasting their time—a point long recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, which at least goes through the motions of subjecting the claims of miracles made on behalf of candidates for sainthood to objective scientific investigation. . . . If [religion] really isn’t entirely natural, if there really are miracles involved, the best way—indeed, the only way—to show that to doubters would be to demonstrate it scientifically. Refusing to play by these rules only creates the suspicion that one doesn’t really believe that religion is supernatural at all.” (p. 26)

In contrast to the first, Swinburne's second subsidiary principle offers an insight that Hume did not. "The second subsidiary principle is that different pieces of evidence ought to be accorded different weight in accordance with any empirical evidence which may be available about their different reliability, obtained by a procedure which I may term narrowing the evidence class." (Swinburne, p. 38) To narrow the evidence class is to index the epistemic weight accorded to a particular piece of evidence to the most closely analogous historical situations. This point is most clear when it is made in connection with testimony. Insofar as it is to be accorded any weight at all, the bulk of the weight of the priest's testimony in the above case comes not from, as Hume suggested, the general propensity amongst men to tell the truth; rather, it stems from narrower considerations like, for instance, the general propensity amongst the clergy to be interested in and espouse the truth or, even narrower, from the priest's own history of telling the truth in the most similar situations. The priest's testimony would be weightiest if we could narrow the evidence class to his track record in other cases of water-to-wine conversion and show he was reliable under those circumstances. We might not be able to narrow the evidence class down this much without ending up with an empty set, but the further we narrow it down the more epistemically weighty the relevant evidence.

The third and final subsidiary principle is to not reject corroborated evidence "... unless an explanation can be given of the coincidence; and the better substantiated is that explanation, the more justified the rejection of the coincident evidence." (Swinburne, p. 39) To return once again to the case with which we have been working, if everyone in Jones's village was present and all but Smith, a resident, provide testimony to the

conversion of the water, and no physical traces are available, then the villagers' cumulative testimony must be taken as substantially weightier than Smith's unless a satisfactory explanation for the discrepancy can be offered up. And the better the reason Smith can give for his charge that the Emperor has no clothes, the more weight Smith's testimony ought to receive in the overall assessment of the evidence.

Swinburne does not intend these principles of evidence weighting to be exhaustive or to be blindly applied without attention to circumstantial details, but rather to be a rough-and-ready guide to assessing conflicting evidence to determine whether a belief that an event occurred is justified. Let us now apply them to a specific and, apropos the arguments of the Humean tradition, more pertinent case: the case where primary evidence (evidence of the first three kinds) conflicts with corrective evidence (evidence of the fourth kind). Considering this case, Swinburne makes a faintly Humean observation:

Now I would urge that . . . since claims that some formula L is a law of nature, and claims that apparent memory, testimony or traces of certain types are to be relied on are claims established ultimately in a similar kind of way . . . and will be strong or weak for the same reasons, . . . so neither ought to take automatic preference over the other.”
(Swinburne, p. 43)

The suggestion is that all of the categories of evidence are considered evidence for the same sort of reasons—each category of evidence allows us to account for particular data and make predictions about future data—so no category of evidence automatically trumps the others. Most relevant to our current case, if the laws of nature do not have a trump on the other categories, then evidence of the first three kinds can, in principle, outweigh evidence from the fourth. In other words, then, when there is a conflict between primary evidence and corrective evidence things could work out such that the former is weightiest.

The logic of Swinburne's account thus far is, I think, impeccable. We can demonstrate this, as Swinburne does, by testing it with an example provided by Hume.

Thus, suppose, all authors in all languages agree, that, from the first of January 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days: suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: that all travelers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction: it is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived. (Hume, p. 134-5)

Here we have a conflict of primary evidence with corrective evidence. In favour of belief that the event occurred we have multiple pieces of primary evidence in the form of multiple testimony.⁵⁹ On the other hand, we have corrective evidence from our current understanding of what can and cannot happen (the laws of astrophysics, for instance) to the effect that the event, as reported, cannot, indeed should not, happen. To weight the evidence we weight the primary against the corrective evidence. We see that the primary evidence in favor of the event ought, by the second and third subsidiary principles, to be weighted heavily since it is given by those who putatively should know (the authors) and is uniformly corroborated without countervailing explanation, respectively. The evidence, then, seems to bear out the belief that the eight-day darkness did in fact happen.

Swinburne's second condition of justified belief in a miracle requires that we have good reason to believe that the event we have good reason to believe occurred was also violation of a law of nature. As we noted in Chapter 1, what counts as a violation of a law of nature is parasitic on what counts as a law of nature. Swinburne is best understood as a prescriptive generalizationist who emphasizes the predictive capacity of laws of nature. A violation of a law of nature is, for him, a non-repeatable counter-instance to a

⁵⁹ This assumes that traditions can be reduced to a chain of testifiers to memories of past experiences.

law of nature, where a counter-instance is understood to be an event the occurrence of which was not predicted by the (relevant) laws of nature. (p. 26) What could give us good reason to believe that an event was in fact such an event?

The question of whether an event is a counter-instance to a law of nature is easily settled by checking whether there is any corrective evidence against belief in its having occurred. If so, then the event is to be believed a counter-instance to a law of nature; if not, then it is not. Next we need to determine whether a counter-instance is repeatable or non-repeatable. If the relevant law of nature can be reformulated so that it accounts for and predicts all it had previously accounted for and predicted plus E, without sacrificing simplicity or predictive power, then this is evidence that E is repeatable. In such a case the epistemological consequences are clear. “There cannot be *repeatable* counter-instances to genuine laws of nature, that is, counter-instances which would be repeated in similar circumstances. . . . [that would] only show those purported laws not to be genuine laws” (Swinburne, p. 27) On the other hand, if no such reformulated law is forthcoming because no candidate reformulation yields an increase in predictive power, or does so but with an unacceptable sacrifice in simplicity, then there is good reason to think that E is in fact a non-repeatable counter-instance to that law. And if we have good reason to believe that E is a non-repeatable counter-instance then we are forced to believe in both a violation of a law of nature and the law which is violated, on pain of adopting a reformulated law which is a worse law than the one currently in use.

One questionable aspect of this account is Swinburne’s requirement that a violation of a law of nature be non-repeatable. In Chapter 1 we provided reasons to think

that there could be multiple tokens of a given type of miraculous event so long as such tokens remain to some degree or another statistically unlikely. Furthermore, in the same chapter we argued that contrariness to the laws of nature is not the preferred interpretation of the requirement that an event be unusual in order to be a miracle. Therefore the relevant epistemic question for us is not “Do we have good reason to believe an event E is a non-repeatable counter-instance to a law of nature?” but “Do we have good reason to believe that an event E is unusual?” Despite the apparent dissimilarity between these questions, each will be answered by appeal to the same sorts of considerations, viz. the prevalence of similar events in the past. If we can show that the past prevalence of tokens of a given event type makes the likelihood of the token event E occurring sufficiently low, then we are justified in believing that E is unusual.

At this point we have examined in detail the first two of Swinburne’s conditions of justified belief in a miracle. These two cannot by themselves be sufficient for a justified belief in a miracle, since, as we have repeatedly seen, in order for a person to be justified in believing that a Humean miracle had occurred she must be justified in believing not just that a violation of a law of nature had actually occurred, but that that violation was caused by a supernatural agent. On our account, likewise, justified belief that an event was a miracle requires not just that we have good reason to think the event unusual, but also that we have good reason to think it was caused by something supernatural, outside nature. What reason might we have to think that an event was in fact supernaturally caused? I will argue that we would have good reason to believe that an event E was supernaturally caused if (1) there appears to be no forthcoming

naturalistic explanation for E; (2) there is reason to believe there never will be a naturalistic explanation for E; and (3) E appears to have religious significance.

As for the first of these, a natural explanation of a candidate for miraclehood must not be forthcoming. We just now described how this condition could be met when we discussed Swinburne's account of the circumstances under which one would have good reason to believe that an occurring event was a violation of a law of nature. Recall that we saw Swinburne argue that we would have good reason to consider an event a non-repeatable counter-instance to a law of nature if it was not predicted by a law of nature and no reformulated law of nature may be created which would account for and have predicted it without an unacceptable loss in simplicity or overall predictive capacity. In such a situation, we have an event for which a naturalistic explanation is not forthcoming. Granted, we may always modify the relevant law or laws to force a naturalistic explanation; however, any attempt to do so, as we saw, would be at the cost of the virtues of simplicity or predictive capacity for the relevant natural laws, at the cost of adopting worse laws.

But the (apparent) absence of a natural explanation cannot by itself be sufficient for there to be good reason to believe an event was the result of a supernatural agent, for it fails to take account of the circumstance where the needed reformulation of the laws of nature is not forthcoming but nevertheless warranted.⁶⁰ To militate against that possibility we must also have reason to believe there will *never* be a naturalistic explanation for the event in question. Patrick Nowell-Smith, for one, argues that this is a

⁶⁰ This is precisely the distinction we saw Robinson draw between an unexplainable and an unexplained but explainable event in Chapter 1.

pipe dream. All explanation, says he, must be in terms of laws which are used to formulate verifiable predictive hypothesis. (p. 357-9) Science is committed, Nowell-Smith says, to this method of explanation. (p. 357)

An explanation must explain *how* an event comes about; otherwise it is simply a learned (or tendentious) name for the phenomenon to be explained. . . . If miracles are “lawful” it should be possible to state the laws; if not, the alleged explanation amounts to a confession that they are inexplicable. (p. 359)

So, on Nowell-Smith’s view, one either produces an explanation in terms of laws (i.e. a scientific explanation) or one produces no explanation at all.

There are two problems with this argument. First, Nowell-Smith’s dependence upon an identity between explanation by appeal to laws and scientific explanation is questionable. If I have been correct so far, we can define the boundaries of science otherwise, viz. by appeal to the distinction between natural and supernatural efficient causes. Second, I think, as others (e.g. Larmer, p. 47-8) have, that explanation in terms of laws need not be the only type of explanation. If what we mean by “explain” is “determine an efficient cause,” then at least one variety of explanation need not be based upon laws. But even if I am wrong about this, there are three considerations which lend inductive support to the idea that, for certain events if they occurred, there may not be a lawful explanation at all.

First, if accepted laws which would have to be reformulated to lawfully explain an event are extremely well established, then this constitutes reason to think any reformulation of them to accommodate the candidate event will not ever be warranted. Second, if there are a substantial number of laws which would have to undergo substantial revision, this too lends itself to the conclusion that there will never be a

satisfactory scientific explanation of a candidate for a miracle. Third, as Paul Dietl notes, some events which meet the conditions of a miracle may, by their very natures, be precluded from experimental repetition, so debarred from scientific (predictive) explanation. Dietl considers the example of a prophet who has been asked to perform at random one miracle selected at random from a list of twelve compiled by non-believers. If he is able to perform as requested then, by their very natures, the necessary and sufficient conditions of the events he occasions will be beyond the scientists' grasp. As Dietl says,

[T]here is nothing which could be pinned down as the independent variable in a scientific explanation [of the prophet's miracles]; for no conceivable candidate is necessary. The prophet asks God to do miracle No. 4 at midnight then goes to sleep. . . . We are dealing with requests and answers, that is thoughts, and thoughts not as psychological occurrences but as understood. No natural law will do because only vehicles of thought could function as the natural *explanans* and no such vehicle is necessary. (p. 132)

Now, Dietl's conclusion is too strong; naturalistic explanation is not categorically ruled out. Reformulations of the relevant laws occasioned by other scientific developments may eventually come, as Flew pointed out, to retroactively explain events which cannot be experimentally repeated. The important point to notice is that the probability of this turning out may, in the cases of some candidates for miraclehood, be lessened by virtue of the sorts of events they are.

The third and final condition that must be met to have justified belief that an event is the work of a supernatural agent is the event's recognized religious significance. In Chapter 1 we considered the various ways that an event may have religious significance. We said that an event could be religiously significant if it fit a pattern of intelligible divine activity; confirmed any particular religious doctrine or prophesy; or established the

divine credentials of an immanent agent. The *recognition* of an event's religious significance in one of these ways is necessary for one to have good reason to think that it was the work of a supernatural agent.

Now, just as we said in Chapter 1 that the religious significance of a given event is not tied to any particular system of religion or theology, neither is the *recognition* of religious significance. A thought experiment of Swinburne's will help to bear this out.

[Suppose a miracle] E occurs in answer to a request (a prayer) addressed to a named individual (e.g. a prayer addressed 'O Apollo' or 'O Allah'). Other such requests are sometimes granted by the occurrence of violations of laws of nature, but otherwise violations are far less frequent. The making of a request of this kind is often followed by a voice, not being the voice of an embodied agent, giving reasons for granting or refusing the request. These reasons together with the kinds of events produced show a common pattern of character. (Swinburne, p. 58)

Although one must know at least something about the religious system upon which the addressee of a prayer is a religiously significant figure in Swinburne's situation, one need not subscribe to it in order to recognize the religious significance inherent in the answering of the prayer. One might obstinately refuse to alter any of one's practices or beliefs on the basis of the religious significance of the answer to another's prayer, but this hardly counts as denying (or not recognizing) its religious significance.

In sum, then, we have outlined the three necessary conditions of a justified belief that an event was the work of a supernatural agent. First, we have argued that an event has no forthcoming naturalistic explanation if it was not predicted by a law of nature and no reformulated law of nature may be created which would account for and have predicted it without an unacceptable loss in simplicity or overall predictive capacity. Second, we have argued that there is good reason to believe there never will be a naturalistic explanation for an event when the laws which would need to be changed to

account for it are, as things stand, well-confirmed and numerous, and/or are it is the sort of events that, by its very nature, defies scientific explanation. Third, we have argued that an event must be recognized to have religious significance in one of the three ways we outlined in Chapter 1. If each of these three conditions obtained of a given event, then, I think, this would be sufficient to justify the belief that that event was supernaturally caused. Further, the better an event meets each of the three conditions (e.g. the more religious significance it is recognized to have), the better the reason for accepting a supernaturalistic explanation of the event. For the less forthcoming or foreseeable a naturalistic explanation is, and the more forthcoming a supernaturalistic explanation is, the greater the explanatory power of the belief that a given event was supernaturally caused.

Against this account it might be argued that an event's meeting these three conditions is insufficient to warrant the conclusion that it is supernaturally caused, for to believe that an event was supernaturally caused would require the belief that there exists a supernatural miracle-worker. Swinburne, for his part, holds that this can work in the favour of justified belief in a miracle insofar as whatever miracle-independent evidence we can produce to justify belief in the existence of a miracle-worker is indirect evidence for a justified belief in miracles. But the inverse claim can also be made. Swinburne appears to fail to appreciate, or at least substantially under-appreciates, that the stakes of justified belief in a miracle are as high as the world-view of naturalism. The high stakes, plus Swinburne basic principle to allow all evidence—including indirect evidence for the truth of naturalism—admit a not-insignificant diminution in the weight of the evidence

for a putative miracle being believed to be the work of the supernatural. For some, namely those who accept theism before assessing the evidence in any one particular case of a putative miracle, the force of such evidence will be substantially mitigated. But for others, namely naturalists, an epistemological commitment to theism is the straw that breaks the camel's back when it comes to belief in a miracle. We will return to this theme below.

First, however, we must consider an objection to those who, like us, would take justified belief in a miracle to entail justified belief in a miracle-worker. Christine Overall has argued that the occurrence of a miracle would actually constitute reason to think at least one putative miracle-worker, the God of Christianity, *does not* exist.⁶¹ She adopts the dominant Christian understanding of God as omnipotent, omniscient, all-loving supernatural agent, and defines a miracle as a violation of a law of nature. She then argues as follows.

In the past, some philosophers and theologians have urged us to consider the supposed order, regularity, and harmony of the universe as evidence for the existence of a benign and omnipotent God. But if order, regularity, and harmony constitute evidence for God, then miracles cannot *also* be accepted as evidence for his existence, for they are, to follow the metaphor, dissonances in the harmony, holes in the patterned fabric of the universe. Hence, a Christian believer cannot have it both ways. A miracle, a violation of natural law or a permanently inexplicable event, is a moment of chaos, a gap in the spatio-temporal structure. If one were to occur it would therefore have to constitute evidence against the Christian God's existence. (Overall, 1985, p. 350)

As Larmer, the foremost critic of this argument, has pointed out, this argument is really an instance of the problem of evil, a broader problem of reconciling a given character of God with the way we find the world. (Larmer, 1988, p. 79; cf. Overall, 2006, p.356)

⁶¹ Overall restricts her account to the Christian God; however, if this assumption strikes one as unpalatable, she could, as will become apparent, always replace it with restricting her account to interesting supernatural agents.

More recently, Overall has explained exactly what kinds of evil miracles would constitute if they occurred. She has argued that if a miracle occurred it would constitute a cognitive evil insofar as it would “seriously compromise the human capacity to understand the universe;” (2006, p. 356) an ontic evil insofar as it would be “a flaw in the order, regularity, and predictability of the universe, a divine afterthought, an *ad hoc* intervention;” (2006, p. 356) and a moral evil insofar as it would “reflect caprice, bias, and triviality on the part of God.”⁶² (2006, p. 358) How could the God of Christianity exist while events of such a nature also exist?

During a discourse spanning 20 years Larmer has mounted a number of challenges to Overall’s argument. He has presented reasons to think that her definition of miracles is insufficient; (1988, p. 79) questioned her premise that miracles, as permanently inexplicable events, frustrate our attempt to understand the world so constitute cognitive evils; (1988, p. 81) and argued that Overall does not fully appreciate how compatible supposed miracles qua moral and ontic evils are with the existence of the Christian God (1988, p. 76-82 & 2003, p. 113-16). In a series of responses Overall has subsequently defended herself on each of these points. In an effort to move the debate forward I will offer a fresh critique (or perhaps a fresh version of an existing critique) of Overall’s argument. I will first outline my counter-argument, then consider a challenge Overall

⁶² The idea that miracles, as instances of such evils, create theological problems is at least as old as Smart’s 1970 book *Philosophers and Religious Truth*. There he argues that miracles must be ontic evils in order for God to show himself (“remove the veil”) given nature’s independence from Him. (Smart, p. 41) On this view miracles do not constitute cognitive evils unless they happen all the time. “But to break through all the time would be to destroy them and to mislead men, for the strangeness of the miraculous and its rarity reflect the otherness and transcendence of God.” (Smart, p. 41) As for miracles as moral evils, Smart seems to concede the point and treat miracles as subsidiaries of the general problem of evil.

might make to it given her rejoinders to Larmer's philosophical writing about miracles in the past.

Overall desires to prove the following conditional: if a miracle were to occur it would be evidence that the Christian God does not exist. Now, on any definition of a miracle which sees miracles as instances of supernatural causation, it is an analytic truth that if there is a miracle there must have been a miracle-worker. If Overall is correct, then, we are in a logically awkward position: *if* a miracle occurred and was believed to have occurred we have reason to believe both that one particular putative miracle-worker does not exist and also that a supernatural miracle-worker does, indeed must, exist. I would like to propose that what should give here is not the analytic truth, but the theological premises concerning the putative miracle-worker upon which Overall's argument depends. I will argue that if a miracle occurred that was incompatible with what was believed to be the character of the miracle-worker then we should surrender our beliefs about the character of the miracle-worker or the belief that the miracle was a product of the miracle-worker in question instead of surrendering our belief that the miracle-worker exists.

Suppose that up until recently it was widely believed that my behaviour always and everywhere exemplified the peak of Victorian morality. Being somewhat of an oddity, no doubt, my behaviour is recorded in a number of reliable written records which uniformly record that that I only behave with moral virtue. One day, though, reports start to come in that I have recently been exhibiting thoroughly licentious behaviour in the town square. On Overall's logic this new information should be taken as evidence for the

belief that I do not exist. Ordinarily, though, we would conclude that everyone had to date believed something false about my character, or that the behaviour in question is only mistakenly believed to be mine by the reporter(s). In other words, beliefs about character and responsibility are more easily surrendered than beliefs about existence. So if a miracle were to happen and reflect moral, ontic, and cognitive evil, then the belief that the supernatural agent responsible is a good one will become questionable. The more such miracles happen, the more questionable such beliefs will become and (assuming that Overall is right about the incompatibility of evil events and the God of Christianity) the more we will be inclined to believe that the Christian God does not exist. I am happy to leave to Larmer and Overall the debate over whether or not the miracles central to Christianity exhibit vice rather than virtue. My point is purely conceptual: in the face of the existence of a counter-instance to the supposed character of a divine agent responsible for a miracle we should not conclude that that agent does not exist; instead, we ought to surrender our belief that the responsible agent possesses such a character or was responsible. In such a way we can get out of the logically awkward position into which Overall's argument seemed to lead us.

This critique suggests that the real lesson to be learned from Overall's argument is that if we have justified belief that a miracle happened then we have a source of information about the character of the supernatural entity responsible. The idea is that miracles are at least in the position to participate in an epistemological feedback loop with the theological frameworks they must (on our definition) fit into in order to be miracles in

the first place.⁶³ This would entail that miracles are to be considered not just as (conclusive) evidence of the existence of at least one supernatural miracle-worker, but also as evidence in projects such as Lindsey Affleck’s transcendental deduction of the psychology of God, a study which aims “. . . to illuminate what God might be thinking; more specifically, what He wants and why He could want it, especially in relation to human life.” (p. 1) Such a project is obviously faced with significant challenges, not the least of which is establishing the identity of the supernatural cause of a given event; however, miracles may prove to be key elements to such a project insofar as, if one has occurred and is believed to have occurred, then that event may tether some, and detach other, theological claims about the character and intentions of at least one supernatural agent to tangible reality.⁶⁴

Overall, for her part, would probably suggest that my counter-argument begs the question insofar as the premise that a miracle presupposes the existence of a miracle-worker assumes precisely what is at issue: whether there is or is not a miracle-worker. A similar charge forms the basis for a substantial part of her critique of Larmer’s definition of a miracle as “an unusual and religiously significant event beyond the power of nature to produce and caused by an agent which transcends nature.” (Larmer, 1988, p. 14)

⁶³ There is evidence that Overall would approve of this. In an objection to Larmer’s definition of a miracle (which we will examine below), she writes “But to adopt [the concept of supernatural causation in the definition of a miracle] is to preclude any examination of the possible relationship between God and events that are labeled miraculous. My claim is that this relationship cannot be regarded as straightforward and unproblematic; it must be critically assessed.” (1997, p. 743) Critical assessment of God or any other supernatural agent’s creation of a miracle presupposes the sort of theological feedback loop I am suggesting miracles, if they occurred, could participate in. In any case, admitting supernatural causation as a condition of an event’s being a miracle in no way implies that only God could satisfy the requirement.

⁶⁴ In support of this point it is worth mentioning that Affleck refers to a number of events which are at least eligible to be considered miracles on our definition, most notably God’s staying of Abraham’s hand to save Isaac and Job’s misfortunes at the hand of the Adversary.

Overall objects that this definition is circular because it makes analytic the relationship between God (who is for some reason accepted by both Larmer and Overall to be the only supernatural agent) and any event we call a miracle.

The problem is that . . . if we were ever to identify an event as a miracle in Larmer's sense of the term, then *de facto* we would have decided that God exists. There could be no *argument* from the existence of a miracle to the existence of God. A miracle, in Larmer's sense, cannot function as evidence for the existence of God, for to call an event a miracle is, by definition, to assert the existence of God. (Overall, 1997, p. 743)

Whether or not this is a fair criticism of Larmer is, for the moment, an open question.

The crucial point for present purposes has to do with the logical legitimacy of including supernatural causation in a definition of a miracle. We should be clear that defining a category does not imply that the metaphysical precommitments of the category are in fact reality. Those precommitments only have ontological purchase if a member of the category is assumed or shown to actually exist, and only have epistemological purchase when justified belief in the reality of a member of the category is assumed or demonstrated to obtain. So by defining miracles as involving supernatural causation, and drawing out the analytic tautology that follows,⁶⁵ nothing logically scandalous has transpired. On the contrary, the metaphysical and epistemological cards are laid on the table.

As might be guessed from the foregoing discussion, Larmer emerges from the shadow of the Humean tradition defending a position opposite that of Overall's. He argues that a miracle is not necessarily a violation of a law of nature and that accepting that assumption constitutes the error of philosophical writing about miracles—both in

⁶⁵ “If we can say, ‘Here is a miracle, in Larmer’s sense of the word,’ then we are already saying that God exists. It is tautologous to say, ‘Here is an event produced by supernatural causation. This shows that there is a supernatural cause.’” (2003, p. 126)

favor and against—from Hume forward. He argues for this claim from an atypical perspective of the laws of nature. Larmer takes the laws of nature to be universal conditionals discovered by scientists. (1988, p. 19) These conditionals are functions from circumstances to events. For instance, “if acute force is applied to a human’s knee her lower leg will move involuntarily” qualifies as a law of nature. But such a function, like all functions, requires an input to generate an output. “What this means is that scientific explanation must not only make reference to the laws of nature, but also to the actual “stuff” of nature, the matter or, more accurately, mass/energy, whose behaviour is described by the laws.” (1988, p. 20) Elsewhere Larmer has referred to the “stuff” of nature as the “material conditions” which are subject to the laws of nature. (2003, p. 109; 2004, p. 556)

The consequences of these considerations concerning the laws of nature are startling. “Overriding nature” is taken by Larmer to be an operation on circumstances (material conditions; stuff), not conditionals.⁶⁶

If we keep in mind this basic distinction between the laws of nature and the “stuff” whose behaviour they describe, we see that, although a miracle is an event which never would have occurred had not nature been overridden, . . . , this in no way entails that a miracle must violate the laws of nature. The reason this is true is this. If God creates or annihilates a unit or units of mass/energy He breaks no law of nature, but He does, by the creation of new mass/energy, change the material conditions to which the laws of nature apply. He would thereby produce an event which nature on its own would not have produced. (Larmer, 1988, p. 20)

So the existence of laws of nature is perfectly compatible with the existence of a miracle; logically, miracles are not violations of laws of nature.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ It’s worth noting that this is an atypical use of this verb in the literature. Usually overriding nature is taken to be one and the same as violating a law of nature.

⁶⁷ One problem with this view immediately presents itself. Isn’t at least one law of nature, namely the First Law of Thermodynamics, violated by God (or anyone/anything else, for that matter) creating or

Larmer wields the conclusion that miracles are not violations of the laws of nature at the various participants in the literature with impunity. More relevant than this line of criticism, for our purposes, is the bearing his thesis has on the epistemological question of miracles. The immediate consequence of it is that corrective evidence—evidence from our contemporary understanding of what is (naturally) possible or impossible—is no longer evidence against the belief that a miracle had occurred. The (accepted) laws of nature—our contemporary understanding of what is possible and not possible—are on Larmer’s proposal irrelevant to belief in miracles.

According to Larmer, the right kinds of considerations to appeal to are those that justify the world-view of theism. He holds that justified belief in a miracle presupposes the truth of theism. Accordingly, in order to defend justified belief in miracles the theist must establish three (related) things:

First she must clarify and develop the notion of agency, since implicit in any defense of miracles is the notion of an immaterial agent with the ability to produce or influence events in the material world. . . . Second, she must show that there is a body of evidence which supports her in postulating the existence of immaterial agents capable of influencing events in the material world. . . . Third, the theist must show that her views concerning immaterial agents and agent causality are part of a larger system of thought which not only explains the body of data which physicalism does not explain, but also the body of data which physicalism explains extremely well. (1988, p. 88)

If the physicalist/naturalist world-view is falsified by way of accomplishing each of these three tasks, and if the primary evidence weighs in favour of the occurrence of an event

annihilating a unit or units of mass/energy? Larmer thinks not, appealing to a distinction between the strong and weak forms of the First law of Thermodynamics. “Energy cannot be created or destroyed” is the strong form; “In an isolated system the total amount of energy remains constant” the weak. On his view, miracles would violate the strong form, but not the weak; furthermore, Larmer argues, the experimental evidence only warrants the weak. To hold otherwise, Larmer alleges, (1988, p. 61-73) is to beg the question in favour of physicalism/naturalism. So the occurrence of miracles is in fact, despite initial appearances, consistent with the First Law of Thermodynamics.

which is in fact a miracle, then, according to Larmer, we are justified in believing that a miracle has occurred.

Overall has extensively criticized this view. Her criticisms can be collected into two broad categories: complaints of circularity and complaints of unduly anthropomorphizing nature. The latter is not particularly germane to our discussion; we'll focus on the former. Overall argues that both Larmer's definition of a miracle and his general methodology are circular. We've already briefly seen why Overall considers Larmer's definition to be circular. Recall that we saw Overall argue that to accept a definition of a miracle which involves supernatural causation is to beg the question insofar as it is to assume what is at issue, namely whether there is or is not in fact a supernatural agent doing the miracle working. This criticism was shown to fail when applied to purely definitional considerations. But it was also noted that Overall's criticism would have bite if one assumed that there are members of the category while intending to show that there are members of the category. Insofar as Larmer holds that justified belief in a miracle presupposes the truth of theism, this is precisely what he does. Indeed, "If we start out, as Larmer does, by presupposing that the universe has an outside beyond which natural laws do not apply, and that something on the outside can intrude into this universe, then we have already built into our ontological system the transcendent being whose existence is at issue." (Overall, 2003, p. 125) Any status miracles have as evidence for the existence of God derives from the world-view that must be in place before justified belief in a miracle is, for Larmer, even an option.

The conclusion to be drawn from this criticism of Larmer is that theism cannot be a precondition of a justified belief in a miracle. But if we accept this then we must also accept the converse point that one may not approach justified belief in a miracle by assuming (tacitly or explicitly) that physicalism/naturalism is true without begging the question. This requires—at least insofar as we want to consider good reasoning a priority when it comes to justifying belief in a miracle—that we set aside any metaphysical precommitment to theism or atheism when considering whether an event meets the conditions of justified belief outlined above.⁶⁸

In sum, then, I have argued that there are three conditions which, if met, would justify the belief that an event was a miracle. First, we must have good reason to believe that the event actually occurred. Second, we must have good reason to believe that the event which occurred was unusual. Third, we must have good reason to believe that it was caused by a supernatural agent. I've argued that we must deliberate as to whether or not these conditions are met by any event from as metaphysically neutral a standpoint as possible, while simultaneously acknowledging that the meeting of these conditions is sufficient (though not necessary) for belief in the supernatural. Some final qualifications are now in order.

First, I do not mean to imply that these are the only conditions under which someone may believe that a miracle happened. Justification is not logically prior to

⁶⁸ This recommendation is not unprecedented in the epistemological literature. Richard Feldman, for instance, introduces the distinction between epistemic disagreement at the “isolation” and “full disclosure” stages. (p. 219-20) At the isolation stage, two people have examined similar bodies of evidence in favour of proposition P; at full disclosure, more than just similar bodies of evidence is available to each person: they each know what the other has decided the evidence warrants, and why. On Feldman's account, we may understand our present proposal as a call to examine whether an event ought to be believed a miracle at the stage of isolation rather than full disclosure.

belief: one may believe something without having any good reason. This is, I think, what we call faith. As a matter of fact, there are a good many (religious and non-religious) propositions which are believed without terribly good reason.

Second, if the conditions of justified belief are met this should not be taken to imply that a person is somehow *required* to believe that a miracle had transpired. All the meeting of these conditions establishes is that one has license to believe that a miracle had occurred. So all of the villagers might, for instance, have good reason to think that the sun will appear to rise tomorrow, and all accept that those reasons are good, while some simultaneously believe that the sun will *not* appear to rise tomorrow because, say, they also and more strongly believe that the apocalypse is imminent.

Third, a point commonly made in the literature is that one may at one time be justified in believing something which nevertheless turns out to be false. It's a palpable truth that this is an inevitable consequence of the examined life. For instance, it may turn out to be false that I get the job, even if I believe on the basis of good evidence, e.g. the interviewer promising me the job, my being the only available candidate, and my having the right amount of coins in my pocket, that I will do so.

These qualifications, especially the last, invite further comment. I have urged that when evaluating the evidence in favour of belief in a miracle we need to suspend our theistic or atheistic precommitments. But what happens once this artificial suspension is over and these precommitments are rolled back into the evidentiary results?

Since there are no significant consequences if an examination of the evidence does not sustain the belief that there was a miracle, we'll focus on the case where the evidence

balances in favor of justified belief in a miracle. If one was previously an atheist then he would, we have seen, have reason to, but would not be rationally required to, believe in the supernatural. On the assumption that an atheist finds himself converted to the theistic world-view, is he obligated to subscribe to any particular variation of that world-view? Recall that we held that in order to be a miracle an event must be religiously significant, and this significance must be recognized by a person in order for her to have good reason to think that the event was the work of a supernatural agent. This seems to weigh positively in favour of the converted theist subscribing to the version of theism upon which a given event is religiously significant. If it is religiously significant for more than one religious system, then she would be *prima facie* obligated to subscribe to the one with which the believed miracle best fits.⁶⁹ Again, we would not say that this obligation must be fulfilled on pain of irrationality—it may be overridden by other factors like, for instance, the acceptability of the normative commitments of the religious system which accords the greatest amount of significance to the believed miracle. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for a person who was committed to a particular variety of theism before the examination of the evidence.

It will certainly not escape anyone that the argument of this chapter is in perhaps the most fundamental respect thoroughly Humean in character. When confronted with a report of a miracle, wrote Hume, “I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. *I weigh the one miracle against the other; and*

⁶⁹ If there is no substantial difference, then the believer is faced with a Buridan’s ass problem.

according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle.” (p. 121, emphasis added) Regardless of the shortcomings of Hume’s epistemological analysis of miracles, he was right to require that epistemological justification rises and falls on the presence and strength of the evidence to a miracle.⁷⁰ With this in mind I’ve argued that a demanding set of conditions must obtain for belief in a miracle to be justified. Given this high standard, it should come as no surprise that I find the prospects of an event meeting these conditions doubtful. But we should consider this substantial burden one that must be borne in order for a miracle to, as Hume said, command our belief.

⁷⁰ For a similar reaction to Hume’s essay, see Smart (esp. p. 36)

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