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THE QUESTION OF MIRACLE

by

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and Research in partial fulfillment of
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Introduction

I have chosen in this thesis to explore the concept of miracle. My chief reason for this, apart from an interest in the topic, is that I feel that the work that has been done in this area, while relevant and useful, is somewhat incomplete.

There does not seem, in the contemporary literature of analytic philosophy at least, any sustained attempt to place miracles within a metaphysical frame. One receives the impression that miracles are logically possible but one gets very little impression of what their significance would be if they occurred. Much is said concerning the possibility of a miracle but little is said concerning how one might relate such an occurrence to philosophy and science.

This, in my view, is a mistake. The plausibility of this particular philosophic concept is very strongly tied to the philosophic resources of a theistic metaphysic; within which it is most naturally developed. This is not to assert that one must assess the truth of theism before examining the concept of miracle; it is merely to assert that a hypothesis does not receive fair treatment if viewed disconnected from its system.

The main thrust of this thesis lies in the attempt to show that the concept of miracle does not involve the notion of a violation of natural law. I have sought to show this without abandoning the idea that a miracle is, in some sense, an overriding of the order of nature.

From this it follows, I think, that many of the philosophic objections to the notion of miracle, based as they are on the idea that a miracle is necessarily conceived as a violation of natural law, lose much of their force. I argue not only that miracles could conceivably occur but also that one could have evidence which would justify belief in their occurrence.

I do not wish to over-emphasize the importance of such a conclusion but it does seem that this conclusion is relevant to a number of other areas of interest. I have attempted in the final chapter to sketch, very briefly and tentatively, the significance such a conclusion might have for some of these areas of interest. My aim in the final chapter has not been so much to establish firm conclusions as to open certain areas to a line of argument that may prove interesting and perhaps even valuable.

Due to the pressures of having to meet a dead-line in order to receive a scholarship, this thesis is somewhat shorter and less comprehensive than it would otherwise be. I would, in the future, like to say something concerning the notion of miracle as a religiously significant event. Such a discussion would, I suspect, involve an investigation of the relation of miracles and what are commonly termed providential events. I would also like, in the future, to expand chapter five, the chapter dealing with the question of evidence, and chapter six, the chapter dealing with the significance of miracle.

In chapter two of this thesis the reader will notice that I do not deal with the issue of whether the laws of nature are statistical or universal. I have not done so because this issue is not crucial to the course of my argument. The definition of miracle which I develop is independent of this issue, as are the criteria by which I propose to distinguish a miracle from non-miraculous events.

I thank Professor John Thorp for his great help during the formative stages of this thesis. He has proven a considerate supervisor, a careful critic, and a constant source of encouragement and friendliness.

* * *

The Task of Definition

I intend, in this thesis, to discuss and analyze many of the issues and problems associated with the concept of miracle. It therefore seems appropriate to begin by attempting to define what a miracle is. A correct definition should enable us to accomplish at least one, and possibly two, important tasks. A correct definition should enable us to ascertain whether the notion of miracle is logically coherent, and, supposing that the notion of miracle is not self-contradictory and hence nonsense, it may provide us with clues whereby it is possible to throw light on the epistemological problem of distinguishing a miraculous event from a non-miraculous event.

The word 'miracle', like many other words, may be used in several different ways. For the purposes of this thesis I shall distinguish between two major uses which I term subjective and objective.

Often the word 'miracle', like the word 'nice', is used, not to describe some objective fact concerning the occurrence of an event, but merely to describe the reaction of the speaker to that particular event. For example, consider the case of a not particularly religious student who, upon unexpectedly passing a difficult examination, exclaims, 'It's a miracle I passed.' Probably the student does not mean to say 'This is an event, specially caused by God, which otherwise

would not have occurred.' Probably the student means to say something along the lines of, 'Although it is likely this event has a perfectly natural explanation, I find this event unexpected and astonishing.'

Another use of the word 'miracle' is to describe some objective fact concerning the occurrence of an event, i.e. that it was supernaturally caused. Although this sense of the word "includes the idea that wonder is called for as at least part of the appropriate response, the crux as well as the ground for the wonder is that a miracle should consist in an overriding of the order of nature."¹ For example, consider the case of a terminally-ill patient who, after a period of prayer both by himself and his friends, upon being informed by his doctors that his supposedly terminal case of cancer has completely disappeared, exclaims, 'It's a miracle that I have been healed.' Probably the patient does not mean to say, 'I feel sure this event has a perfectly natural explanation but I still find this event unexpected and astonishing.' Probably the patient means to say something to the effect that, 'This is an event which never would have occurred had God not interfered with the regular course of nature and I feel wonder and thankfulness that God would do this.'

It is noteworthy that the crucial element of difference between these two uses of the word 'miracle' is not that one implies a subjective response of wonder and astonishment while the other does not but that one specifies certain objective ontological considerations which make wonder and astonishment an appropriate response while the other does not.

In commenting on the senses of the word 'miracle', Flew seems correct in his assertion that "the senses of 'miracle' that are of philosophical and methodological interest are stronger and less subjectively oriented."² If it is the case that, so long as one finds an event wonderful and astonishing, one cannot be wrong in terming it a miracle but equally one cannot insist that another person regard it as a miracle, there is very little left to be said. If, however, there are certain ontological considerations which make wonder and astonishment either appropriate or inappropriate; if one could be mistaken in terming an event a miracle, then there is a great deal to be said. I will, therefore, in attempting to define 'miracle', work with the objective sense of the term.

Any adequate definition must include and clearly articulate the basic elements which make up that which it seeks to express. Two errors are to be avoided. First, it is essential that the definition does not ignore certain vital elements and thus yield a definition which does not do justice to the concept defined. Second, it is equally essential that the definition does not express any extraneous elements not vital to the concept, thus yielding a definition which has implications differing from those drawn from a more correct definition.

It therefore behooves one, in seeking to define so complex a concept as 'miracle', to proceed very cautiously.

One must be very careful not to say too little and not to say too much. Thus, before attempting to frame a definition that neither ignores the essential nor introduces the extraneous, it is appropriate to note the basic ideas which any adequate definition of the term 'miracle' must express.

There seem to be four basic ideas that must be expressed. One of these has already been mentioned, namely the idea that a miracle is a physical event which is beyond the ability of an unaided nature to produce. Also central, however, are the ideas that a miracle "must be brought about by a rational agent, whether embodied or not,"³ that a miracle "must be an event of an extraordinary kind,"⁴ and that a miracle "must be an event of religious significance."⁵

Although these four ideas are basic, they may be treated in somewhat different ways. So treated they yield two slightly different, but strongly related, notions of what constitutes a miracle.

One way is to treat the first two ideas as together comprising a definition of a miracle and the second two ideas as together yielding criteria by which it is presumed a miracle may be recognized. On such an interpretation a miracle is a physical event which never would have occurred except through the action of a rational agent who, embodied or not, transcends nature. Such an event is recognized and termed miraculous if it is an event of an extraordinary kind and if it is seen to have religious significance.

Such an understanding of the term allows that there may occur unperceived miracles, but insists one can only recognize as miraculous an event which is extraordinary and religiously significant.

Another way is to treat all four ideas as together comprising a definition of the term 'miracle'. On such an interpretation a miracle must not only be conceived as a physical event which never would have occurred except through the action of a rational agent who transcends nature, but also as a physical event that clearly has religious significance and is of such an extraordinary nature that it is either directly perceived as a miracle or immediately inferred as such. This definition insists that "the qualia of the miraculous are of such a nature as to strongly and clearly suggest to the human mind the presence of the supernatural."⁷

It seems this latter treatment is more accurate and precise. It enables one to distinguish between physical events which, although it might be true that they could not have occurred except through the action of a rational agent who transcends nature, need not be interpreted as such, e.g. a willed bodily action; and physical events which do strongly and clearly suggest the presence of a rational agent who transcends nature, e.g. the turning of water into wine or walking on water. Such a definition also enables one to distinguish between events which, although they strongly and clearly suggest the presence

of a rational agent who transcends nature, have little or no religious significance, e.g. poltergeist activity, and events which not only strongly and clearly suggest the presence of a rational agent who transcends nature but also have great religious significance, e.g. the resurrection of Christ.

It is not being argued, of course, that it is always easy to attach a precise meaning to a term like 'religiously significant'. Neither is it being argued that it is always easy to decide into which category a particular physical event fits. Rather, it is being argued that, although there may exist borderline cases, one must distinguish between physical events which, although they might have occurred through the action of a rational agent who transcends nature, are not either directly perceived or immediately inferred as such, physical events which, although they strongly suggest the presence of a rational agent who transcends nature, have little or no religious significance, and physical events which not only strongly and clearly suggest the presence of a rational agent who transcends nature but also have great religious significance. Further, in the interests of clarity, it is urged that the term 'miracle' ought to be reserved for this last category of physical events. This is not to suggest that these other two categories are of little importance or theoretical interest. It is merely, in the interests of precision and accuracy, to draw a necessary distinction.

A possible objection at this point is that the definition that has been given is inadequate in that it ignores the fact that miracles are usually understood as being, in some sense, violations of natural law. Surely any adequate definition must incorporate the idea that a miracle must be conceived as a violation of natural law.

The usual justification for holding that a definition of the objective sense of miracle must include the idea that natural laws are violated is that this is entailed in the idea that a miracle is something which would never have occurred were nature left to its own devices. It must be realized, however, that the idea that natural laws are violated will only be a part of an accurate definition of miracle if it is indeed the case that this idea is entailed by the idea that a miraculous event is not an event which nature could produce out of its own unaided resources.

One must, therefore, if one wishes to assess the force of this objection, examine whether the idea that a miracle is an event which nature could not produce on its own really entails that such an event may only come about through the violation of natural law. One must, it seems, inquire into the nature of scientific explanation and natural law.

Such an inquiry, at least in the context of this paper, must, of necessity, be somewhat brief. This is

unfortunate since the philosophy of science is an important and fascinating area of study. I hope, however, that enough will be said to cast some light on the issue of whether or not an accurate definition of miracle entails that a miracle must violate natural law.

* * *

Miracles and Natural Law

The scientific enterprise, although it has come to embrace probabilistic as well as deductive models of explanation, tends to assume what may be termed a 'Covering Law Theory of Explanation'. In such a theory of explanation "the fundamental idea . . . is the view that the occurrence of an event is explained when it is subsumed under or covered by a law of nature, i.e., when it is shown to have occurred in accordance with some general regularity of nature." It should be noted, however, that such a law must be formulated so that it is a universal conditional that is capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed by empirical evidence.

Typically, the form of such an explanation is:

$(C_1, \dots, C_n),$

$(L_1, \dots, L_m),$

Therefore E.,

where (C_1, \dots, C_n) , is a set of singular statements describing relevant initial conditions, and where (L_1, \dots, L_m) , is a set of general laws, and where E, the event to be explained, is a logical consequence of the C's and L's but not of the C's alone.

In this context it is essential to note that the scientists' goal is not the mere formulation of experimental laws, i.e., observed regularities, but the formulation

of theoretical laws. Theoretical laws are unlike experimental laws in that theoretical laws contain terms which refer to unobservable entities and properties, e.g., electrons or genes. These laws cannot be confirmed directly by observation; they must be indirectly confirmed by the confirmation of experimental laws deduced from them. These theoretical laws are very powerful explanatory factors in that they are not usually "isolated statements but often . . . organized systems of interconnected laws with comprehensive explanatory and predictive power." 10 Thus, "science in its advanced and theoretical stage has as its primary objective a comprehensive integration and systematization of diverse experimental laws within a simple and powerful system of theoretical laws." 11

Another important goal of scientific explanation is 'micro-reduction'. This is a process whereby, with the aid of theoretical laws, "the macro-properties of an object are explained by reference to its micro-properties, i.e., the properties and relationships of its constituent parts." 12 Although some scientists and philosophers of science would disagree, most would hold that the ultimate goal of science is the micro-reduction of all the separate domains of science to a single theory, presumably a physical theory of elementary particles." 13 Thus, if science is to have a "unitary concept of explanation valid for all branches of science," 14 it would appear that scientists must subscribe to reductionism of some sort.

Also crucial, of course, to the scientific enterprise is the presupposition ~~that~~ the truth or falsity of scientific theories is independent of the personal circumstances or private views of the persons who established them. The scientist holds as a fundamental principle that the conclusions he comes to are arrived at on grounds which other observers can scrutinize and share. As Walsh appropriately observes, "scientific theories may be difficult for the layman to understand; but if they are to deserve their name, they must never be esoteric in the bad sense of holding only on the strength of some alleged personal insight or for a group of specially privileged persons."¹⁵ Scientific statements lay claim to universal acceptance and "are not a proper field for the display of partisanship of any kind."¹⁶

Thus, very briefly defined, science may be said to be a body of objective general truths, related in a systematic manner and methodically arrived at, which enable one, if one has knowledge of the relevant initial conditions, to explain and predict, subsequent events.¹⁷ As has been noted, the scientist identifies these general truths with certain basic theoretical laws which are objective in the sense that they are such that every thinker, whatever his personal predilections or private circumstances, ought to accept them if the evidence for them were put before him.

Against the background of this fairly standard view of science and its laws, we may now assess, at least in a preliminary way, the claim that a definition of the objective sense of miracle must include the idea that natural laws are violated.

It seems this claim is incorrect. One may well admit Flew's shrewd point that "only insofar as it can be shown that there is an order does it begin to be possible to show that the order is occasionally overridden"¹⁸ and also that a miraculous event is one which an unaided nature could not produce, without thereby being committed to the view that a miracle must be conceived as a violation of natural law.¹⁹

The reason such a conclusion is not entailed can be made clear if it is noted that a scientific explanation must not only make reference to general laws but also to relevant initial conditions. This means that it will not do to try and explain an actual event merely by reference to a general law. One cannot, for example, explain the event of water boiling merely by making reference to a general law which states that if water at an altitude Y absorbs X number of calories per litre it will boil.²⁰ One must also make reference to the fact that there is some water at an altitude Y and that it has absorbed X calories per litre.

Scientific laws, at least those of the type we have been discussing, are conditionals; they are in the form

'If x then y.' For this reason they cannot, in themselves, serve to explain an actual event. The structure of a scientific explanation is not the logically invalid,

If X then Y. (If such and such conditions occur then such and such an event will result.)

Therefore Y. (Therefore such and such an event has actually occurred.)

but the logically valid,

If X then Y. (If such and such conditions occur then such and such an event will result.)

X. (Such and such conditions have actually occurred.)

Therefore Y. (Therefore such and such an event has actually occurred.)

This means that a scientific explanation must not only make reference to the basic theoretical laws which describe the behaviour of matter but also to the actual matter whose behaviour is being explained. Joad expresses this point rather well when he writes,

science will never succeed in dispensing with the necessity for postulating a something which is regarded as that to which at any given moment its laws are applicable, and this something, from the very fact that it is its workings and consequences which scientific law maps and predicts, must itself be other than the operations of law. It must, that is to say, be unamenable to and unreachable by the operations of law at the particular stage which science happens then to have reached. Granted that it may subsequently become amenable yet it can only do so by giving way to a new something which assumes the role of 'brute-given' in its place. . . .

Science, then analyzes the world into a comparatively featureless and therefore unknown X, collocations, stuff, matter - the name we give to it is immaterial - and the laws which govern its behaviour. 21

To realize, however, that a scientific explanation must not only make reference to scientific laws but also to the matter whose behaviour these laws describe, is to realize that these laws do not cause or prohibit events, but merely state the pattern to which subsequent events will conform, given a certain initial situation. The laws, being merely descriptions of how matter does, and perhaps must, behave, do not actually cause or prohibit the existence of any particular situation. This point is made well by C.S. Lewis. He writes,

We are in the habit of talking as if they (natural laws) caused events to happen; but they never caused any event at all. The laws of motion do not set billiard balls moving: they analyze the motion after something else (say, a man with a cue, or a lurch of the liner, or, perhaps, supernatural power) has provided it. They produce no events: they state the pattern to which every event - if only it can be induced to happen - must conform, just as the rules of arithmetic state the pattern to which all transactions with money must conform - if only you can get hold of any money. Thus in one sense the laws of nature cover the whole field of space and time; in another what they leave out is precisely the whole real universe - the incessant torrent of actual events which make up true history. That must come from somewhere else. To think the laws can produce it is like thinking you can create real money by simply doing sums.²²

Once this basic distinction between matter and the scientific laws which describe the behaviour of matter has been made clear, it can be seen that, although a miracle is an event which never would have happened were nature left to its own devices, and, although it must be admitted that the notion of a miracle is logically

dependent upon the notion of a known order to which it constitutes an exception, this in no way entails the truth of the claim that a miracle involves the violation of natural law. The reason such a claim is not entailed is that an event which constituted an exception to the known order of nature, an event which nature could not produce from its own unaided resources, could very well be produced without breaking any laws of nature. If God or another rational agent creates or annihilates a unit or units of matter, he breaks no scientific law but he does, by the introduction of new matter into nature, or by the withdrawal of previously existing matter from existence, create a new situation which introduces into nature an effect which nature could never by itself produce. As Lewis notes,

It is . . . inaccurate to define a miracle as something that breaks the laws of nature. It doesn't. . . . If God annihilates or creates . . . a unit of matter He has created a new situation at that point. Immediately all Nature domiciles this situation makes it at home in her realm adapts all other events to it. It finds itself conforming to all the laws. If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any laws. The laws at once take it over. Nature is ready. Pregnancy follows, according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born. 23

A perceptive critic might reply that such an understanding of miracle does entail the conclusion that a miracle violates natural law. It entails this conclusion in that such an understanding of miracle inevitably comes into conflict with the Principle of the Conservation of Energy. 24

This is an important objection. It is particularly important in that this paper seeks to escape certain difficulties traditionally associated with the concept of miracle by arguing that ~~the~~ the notion that a miracle violates natural law is not entailed by a correct understanding of miracle. It is therefore essential to examine carefully whether the understanding of miracle that has been proposed violates a principle that is usually held to express a basic and fundamental natural law.²⁵

It is interesting to note that, between the years 1842 and 1847, the theory of the conservation of energy was independently developed and publicly announced by a number of different scientists.²⁶ It seems, as Rothman comments, "that the idea was 'in the air' and just ripe for acceptance by the world of science."²⁷ Rarely has a theory been developed simultaneously by so many thinkers and rarely has a theory been so readily accepted.

That this was the case was no accident. Two factors appear to explain the development and rapid acceptance of the Principle of the Conservation of Energy.

First, the beginning of the nineteenth century marked a great rise in engineering and a corresponding interest in water, wind, and steam power. This meant that the concept of 'work' became important and increasing emphasis was consequently placed upon the equivalence of work (force times distance) and kinetic energy. As Burtt notes,

when the concept of work performed became fundamental in physics, . . . all was ready for the final doctrine, already implicit in the whole movement, that causes and effects for science are both motions and the cause is mathematically equivalent to the effect in terms of work. In more popular parlance we have the postulate of the conservation of energy, energy always being revealed in the form of motion.²⁸

Second, there seem to have been certain philosophic ideas which contributed largely to the rapid development and ready acceptance of the Principle of the Conservation of Energy. It is noteworthy that a number of its proponents held this principle before they found evidence supporting it.²⁹ As Cohen notes,

All the early discoverers of the conservation of energy, Carnot, Mayer, and Joule, argued that [energy] . . . was too important to be destroyed, quite like advocates in earlier centuries had argued about material substance. . . . Actually the explanation was couched in almost metaphysical language and in highly a priori terms: . . . It is notorious that the data did not prove the hypothesis of conservation of energy. The view that they did was based on arguments that would horrify an inductive statistician.³⁰

It appears likely that the philosophic movement known in Germany as Naturphilosophie had a great influence upon the development and acceptance of the Principle of the Conservation of Energy.³¹

There thus seem to have been two chief influences which led to the development and acceptance of the Principle of the Conservation of Energy. The first, which may be termed the scientific influence, was based on the results of experiments which showed, or at least tended to suggest, that energy is conserved in an isolated

system. The second, which may be termed the metaphysical influence, was based on the philosophic contention that energy is a fundamental reality which can neither be created nor destroyed.

This interplay of philosophic and scientific influences explains, I think, why the Principle of the Conservation of Energy is sometimes taken as stating that "energy cannot be created or destroyed, although it can be changed from one form to another",³² and sometimes taken as stating that "the total energy of an isolated system remains constant."³³

It must be realized, however, that these two statements are not logically equivalent. It is possible to deduce from the statement, 'Energy cannot be created or destroyed.', the statement, 'The total energy of an isolated system remains constant.', but it is not possible to deduce from the statement, 'The total energy of an isolated system remains constant.', the statement, 'Energy cannot be created or destroyed.'. Thus, if we let p symbolize the statement 'Energy cannot be created or destroyed.', and c symbolize the statement 'The total energy of an isolated system remains constant.', we observe that p implies c but that c does not imply p .

In view of the fact that these two statements are not logically equivalent, one must be cautious in assessing the presumed evidence for the statement 'Energy cannot be created or destroyed.', which we have symbolized as p .

In particular, one must beware of the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent. One cannot, from the fact that p implies q and that q seems well-established, legitimately conclude that p is well-established. This means that even though there is an enormous amount of scientific evidence which supports the conclusion that 'The total energy of an isolated system remains constant.', one must beware of fallaciously concluding that this evidence entails or supports the conclusion that 'Energy cannot be created or destroyed.'

The only way in which the conclusion that 'Energy cannot be created or destroyed.' can be reached is by the introduction of a premise which states that nature is an isolated system. It appears, however, that the question of this premise's truth is not a matter to be settled by scientific experiment but a matter to be settled by philosophic analysis.³⁴ Scientific method may tend to confirm the statement that 'The total energy of an isolated system remains constant.', but it is hardly competent, in itself,³⁵ to settle the question of whether or not nature is an isolated system.

The conclusion is clear. Insofar as the Principle of the Conservation of Energy is formulated as a scientific statement a miracle constitutes no violation of it. One may agree that 'The total energy of an isolated system remains constant.', without thereby agreeing that nature is in fact an isolated system. Insofar as the Principle

of the Conservation of Energy is formulated as a philosophic statement incorporating the metaphysical claim that nature is an isolated system, it, by definition, rules out the possibility of a miracle.

The person who believes in the occurrence of miracles need not reject the well-evidenced scientific claim that 'The total energy of an isolated system remains constant.'; he need only reject the ontological claim that nature is an isolated system. I conclude, therefore, that, insofar as the Principle of the Conservation of Energy is asserted as a scientific law and not as a somewhat disguised metaphysical claim, a miracle need not be conceived as being in violation of it. It thus seems that the ideas that a miracle must constitute an exception to a known order and that a miracle must be an event which nature could not produce on its own do not entail the idea that a miracle must violate the laws of nature.

This conclusion only follows, of course, if it is appropriate to view a miracle as an event which is at least partially caused by an act of creation or annihilation of matter by a rational agent who transcends nature.

The phrase 'at least partially' is used because the event which is termed a miracle may be a product of both the already functioning processes of nature and an act of creation or annihilation. Thus the miracle of the virgin birth can be seen as an event in which an act of creation by God, i.e., the creation of a spermatozoon

in the body of Mary, combined with existent natural processes, i.e., the normal growth and development of a fetus during pregnancy, to produce the miraculous event we call the virgin birth. On the other hand it should be emphasized that a miracle need not have any natural processes linked to it, e.g., the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes seems to have been a direct act of creation.

On such a view as this, a miracle involves not a suspension or violation of the laws of nature but an act of creation or annihilation of that to which the laws of nature apply. On such a view a rational agent may produce within nature events which an unaided nature could not produce, without thereby violating any of the laws of nature.

* * *

David Hume and the Miraculous

It is appropriate, having defined the objective sense of the word 'miracle' and having noted that the definition does not entail the conclusion that natural laws must be violated if a miracle occurs, to examine some objections that arise in connection with the use of the term miracle. It seems fitting to begin with an examination of David Hume's famous discussion, 'Of Miracles'.

It must be noted, before an exegesis of Hume's discussion is attempted, that there exist differing interpretations concerning Hume's purpose in advancing his arguments concerning miracles.

On the one hand there is Anthony Flew who says of Hume that Hume, in developing his arguments, was striving to accomplish four things:

First, Hume is offering a defence against the impertinent solicitation of 'bigotry and superstition' and not an offensive weapon capable of positively disproving any claims made. Second, even as a defence it is supposed to serve only as a check and not as an insuperable bulwark. Third, even these limited but useful functions it can fulfill only 'with the wise and learned'. Fourth, it is concerned solely with testimonial evidence, particularly that found in historical writers.³⁶

Further, claims Flew, Hume's position in Part I of his discussion "allows the theoretical possibility of establishing that a miraculous event has occurred."³⁷

On the other hand there is C.D. Broad who claims that Hume was attempting to place an insurmountable obstacle in the path of belief in any report of miracle. Broad believes Hume's argument concerning miracles to be:

Against belief in any alleged miracle we have, by definition of the word miracle, an absolutely uniform experience. For believing in the 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. 38

Obviously, if Broad's formulation of Hume's argument is correct, Hume did feel that, at least so far as the 'wise and the learned' are concerned, his argument did constitute an insurmountable obstacle in the path of belief in any report of a miracle.

It is distressing to have to disagree with Flew, an acknowledged authority upon Hume, but it is clear that the text supports Broad's interpretation, not Flew's. The following two passages amply illustrate this:

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. 39

There must . . . 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 any miracle, nor can such a proof be destroyed or the miracle rendered credible but by an opposite proof which is superior. 40

The very most this argument seems to allow is that there might conceivably be a case where one must suspend both belief and disbelief. Hume does not allow as a theoretical possibility that the evidence for a miracle could outweigh the evidence against a miracle and it is therefore clear that he did feel, that so far as the "wise and learned" were concerned, his argument did place an insurmountable obstacle in the path of belief in reported miracles.

One must also note that Hume employs a different definition of miracle than the one developed in this paper. Hume defines 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."⁴¹

Such a definition is inadequate in that it ignores essential elements inherent in the concept of a miracle and inaccurate in that it is not the case that a rational agent acting so as to produce in nature a physical event which nature otherwise would not have produced, entails that the laws of nature are violated.

Finally, it is important to realize that Hume in his discussion is concerned with evaluating reports of miracles; not with the question of whether or not if one experiences a miracle first-hand one should believe that it occurred.

Hume's discussion of miracle is divided into two parts. Part I consists of an a priori argument. Here,

Hume argues that, because of the nature of the concepts of natural law and miracle, and because of the way in which one justifies one's belief in natural law and miracle, one is never justified, if one is a rational person, in believing any report of a miracle. Part II consists of four a posteriori arguments. Here, Hume argues that, as a matter of fact, the evidence in favour of miracles is extremely poor.

Hume's a priori argument against the rationality of belief in any report of a miracle seems to be roughly this:

1. Experience is our "only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact."⁴²
2. "It must be acknowledged that this guide experience is not altogether infallible but in some cases is apt to lead us into errors."⁴³
3. Therefore, "a wise man . . . 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 judgment the evidence exceeds not what we properly call 'probability.'⁴⁴
4. "We ought not to make an exception to this principle in favor of human testimony."⁴⁵
5. "We do not have a firm and unalterable experience that human testimony is always trustworthy."⁴⁶

6. "A firm and unalterable experience has established the laws of nature."⁴⁷
7. "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature."⁴⁸
8. Therefore, since "a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is . . . a direct and full proof from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle, nor can such a proof be destroyed or the miracle rendered credible but by an opposite proof which is superior."⁴⁹
9. "The proof against a miracle from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."⁵⁰
10. Therefore, "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish."⁵¹ Given the truth of the statement that 'the proof against a miracle . . . is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined', this would seem to imply that no testimony could ever be sufficiently strong to establish a miracle.

Hume's a priori argument raises two questions. The first is, 'What force does the argument have if one grants Hume his definition of miracle?' The second is, 'What force does the argument have if one insists on employing a more accurate definition of miracle?'

Even granting Hume's definition of miracle, there seem to be problems inherent in his a priori argument.

First, purely ad hominem, it is noteworthy that Hume's treatment of miracle appears inconsistent with his treatment of induction. In his treatment of induction Hume says that the move from regular experience of event

A followed by event B to the belief that event A will always be followed by event B is logically unjustified. Presumably such belief is merely the result of a strong psychological tendency to believe in uniformity. It would seem, however, that although persons of Hume's temperament may have a strong psychological tendency to believe in absolute uniformity, it is equally true that a religious enthusiast may have a strong tendency to believe in miracles. As psychological states these two beliefs are on equal footing and Hume has not given, and would appear unable to give on his own principles, any reason for preferring one to the other or for regarding one to be false and the other to be true.

Further, if Hume's analysis of causation be accepted, namely that there exist no necessary connections so that if event A then necessarily event B, Hume, in his discussion of whether or not it is rational to believe a report of a miracle, begs the question. As Flew admits, "to dismiss out of hand all testimony to the occurrence beyond the range of our observations of a counter example, on the sole ground that such an occurrence would falsify the universal generalization based upon our observations to date would be arbitrary and bigotted."⁵²

Hume must either repudiate his explicitly stated position concerning induction and causality or else admit that his conception of what is meant by a law of nature prohibits him from pressing his theoretical objection to

miracles. If a law of nature is nothing more than a strong psychological tendency to believe in uniformity it can hardly act as a legitimate reason for rejecting reports of non-uniform events such as miracles.

A further difficulty which arises is that in saying that a miracle must contradict the whole course of experience⁵³ Hume commits himself to maintaining that no event is a miracle unless it is absolutely unique. This seems a strange and untenable conclusion. Surely, despite the fact that Elijah is reported to have multiplied food,⁵⁴ Christ's multiplication of the loaves and fishes is to be judged 'miraculous'. As C.D. Broad comments, "It seems arbitrary to suppose that two or three exceptions to a regularity necessarily prove that it is not a law of nature and consequently that none of the exceptions are miraculous."⁵⁵ Hume, if he is to be consistent with his definition, is forced to say just this. Surely Hume overemphasizes the fact that a miracle violates uniformity to the neglect of the fact that it is an event caused by a rational agent who, in some way, transcends nature.

A major difficulty which arises on Hume's definition of miracle is that his argument seems to prove too much. It appears not only to prohibit belief in reports of miracles but also to prohibit any progress in science.

The difficulty arises in virtue of the fact that belief in natural law, no less than belief in miracle, rests mainly on testimonial evidence. There have, moreover,

been statements held to express natural laws because of an invariable experience in their favour, which upon the later observation of exceptions, were abandoned. It must be realized that if Hume's a priori argument be accepted such a procedure must be judged irrational since the first reported exception, to anyone who has not observed it, occupies the same logical status as the report of a miracle. Thus,

those, . . . to whom the first exception was reported ought to have rejected it, and gone on believing in the alleged law of nature. Yet, if the report of the first exception makes no difference to their belief in the law, their state of belief will be precisely the same when a second exception is reported as it was on the first occasion. Hence if the first report ought to make no difference to their belief in the law, neither ought the second. So that it would seem on Hume's theory that if, up to a certain time, I and every one else have always observed A to be followed by B then no amount of testimony from the most trustworthy persons that they have observed A not followed by B ought to have the least effect on my belief in the law.⁵⁶

That Hume was not unaware of this possible objection can, perhaps, be inferred from his discussion of people in a warm climate who, having never directly observed that water freezes, are first told that water freezes. Hume comments that;

it must be confessed that, in the present case of freezing, the event follows contrary to the rules of analogy and is such as a rational Indian would not look for. The operations of cold upon water are not gradual, according to the degrees of cold; but whenever it comes to the freezing point the water passes in a moment from the utmost liquidity to perfect hardness.

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.⁵⁷

This seems to be an argument to the effect that strong testimony is sufficient to establish belief in 'unusual' events beyond the ken of one's experience so long as the reports of such events also indicate that the circumstances under which such events took place were somewhat foreign to one's experience.

Surely such a reply is inadequate. It ignores the fact that the "people who discover exceptions to alleged general laws are seldom the same people who explain them."⁵⁸ It often happens, for example, that a researcher reports an exception to an alleged general law even though he cannot identify any relevant background circumstance that is even subtly different from those under which more usual results are obtained. Unless, however, suitably strong testimony establishes at least a provisional belief in the occurrence of the event, the theoretician has no reason to think there is anything that needs explanation or investigation.

It might be objected that the theoretician's belief is only provisional; that if only one researcher reports an exception, and if the theoretician upon careful inspection of the report of the conditions under which the reported exception occurred can find no relevant background condition

that could serve to explain or make plausible the unusual results then the theoretician would be justified in concluding that the apparent exception never occurred.

Suppose, however, that a significant minority of reputable independent researchers report that they, on occasion, obtain similar results. Surely it is possible to imagine conditions under which it would be irrational to dismiss the reports of exceptions even though it is impossible to point to any relevant differing background condition that is even slightly different from those under which more usual results are obtained.

The investigation of paranormal phenomena seems a case in point.⁵⁹ The evidence that paranormal phenomena occur appears overwhelming even though, as yet, there is no satisfactory theory explaining such phenomena. It has proved impossible to date to identify any relevant background conditions which are subtly different from those under which more 'normal' results are obtained; just as it has proved impossible to duplicate invariably the experimental results that are sometimes obtained.

Science, if it is to progress, must admit the possibility of exceptions to alleged general laws, even though it is not always possible to indicate the relevant background circumstances which might serve to explain the exceptions; otherwise there is no need for the scientist to think there is anything that needs explanation or investigation and consequently there is no need to revise

scientific theory. Hume's a priori argument, in that it precludes this typical activity on the part of scientists, is not only an argument that precludes belief in reported miracles it is an argument that precludes the possibility of progress in science.

It appears that even if Hume's definition of miracle be granted his a priori argument must be judged inadequate. It fails in that even if one grants that a miracle must violate natural law it seems no part of the concept that a miracle must be an absolutely unique event. If, however, it be granted that a miracle need not be considered an absolutely unique event, there hardly exists a priori, "a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle."⁶⁰ It also fails for the reason that, if successful, it proves too much. It would not only preclude any belief in a reported miracle it would also preclude any possibility of progress in science.

Although Hume's a priori argument fails in its intent it does show that if a miracle is considered a violation of natural law the acceptance of a report that a miracle has occurred involves a certain conflict of evidence.

As Hume puts it,

The very same principle of experience which gives us a certain degree of assurance in the testimony of witnesses gives us also, in this case, another degree of assurance against the fact which they endeavour to establish: from which contradiction there necessarily arises a counterpoise and mutual destruction of belief and authority.⁶¹

Thus, although even on Hume's definition, one cannot a priori suppose that no evidence is sufficient to establish the occurrence of a miraculous event, the argument leaves one with the feeling that there exists a certain irresolvable tension between reports of miracles and one's belief in natural law.

The question which naturally arises is whether this seemingly irresolvable tension is inevitable or is merely a result of Hume's definition of miracle. In other words, 'What force does Hume's a priori argument have if one accepts the alternative definition of miracle that has been proposed in this paper?'

Hume's a priori argument seems to be in essence this:

1. The testimonial evidence in favour of a miracle inevitably conflicts with the evidence in favour of natural law.
2. The testimonial evidence in favour of a miracle cannot exceed, even in principle, the evidence in favour of natural laws.
3. Therefore belief in the occurrence of a miracle can never be justified on the grounds of testimonial evidence.

Note that it is an essential part of Hume's argument that the testimonial evidence in favour of a miracle must be construed as being in conflict with the evidence that is in favour of natural law. Without this premise Hume's a priori argument cannot get started.

This premise, however, does not follow from the alternative definition proposed in this paper. If a miracle need not be defined as involving a violation

of the laws of nature then the testimonial evidence in favour of a miracle need not be construed as being in conflict with the evidence that is in favour of natural law. The crucial question which emerges on this alternative definition of miracle is not 'How probable is it that the laws of nature may be violated?', but, 'How probable is it that there is a God and that He performs acts of creation or annihilation which result in miracles?'.⁶²

The questions of God's existence and nature are large and complex. It does seem, though, that the general consensus of philosophers is that God's existence cannot be disproved a priori. Presumably, if one is not prepared a priori to rule out the possibility of God existing then one is not prepared a priori to rule out the possibility that God might perform a miracle.⁶³ It is therefore the case that one cannot argue a priori that it is enormously improbable that an event which nature alone could not produce could not occur, unless one is also willing a priori to rule out the possibility of God's existence.

It might be objected that this is to ignore the possibility that a posteriori arguments for disbelief in God's existence may be adduced. If this were the case it might still be possible to generate an argument based on a conflict of evidences.

In reply to this possible objection two points may be made.

First, even if by this means one establishes a conflict

between the evidence which supports the belief that God does not exist and the testimonial evidence which supports the belief that a miracle occurred, this is hardly the conflict Hume envisaged in his original argument. The evidence held to prove the non-existence of God is not of the same order as the evidence on which belief in natural law is based. In view of the notorious difficulty in proving the non-existence of anything, it would be rash to hold that no amount of evidence could ever establish a rationally justified belief in miracle. Thus, even if there exists a conflict of evidence, this conflict does not a priori rule out the possibility that the evidence in favour of a miracle may be so great as to justify belief in the occurrence of miracle.

Second, in asserting that there exist a posteriori arguments which justify the belief that God does not exist the critic must be careful not to beg the question. For example, it is often asserted that, although it is logically impossible to prove the non-existence of God, it is not necessary to make reference to God in explaining reality and that therefore Occam's Razor precludes the assumption that God exists. Such a reply begs the question of miracle in that what is at issue is whether or not there occur events which cannot be explained except by reference to the immediate action of God. The critic is not at liberty merely to assume that such events do not occur.

Perhaps the only a posteriori argument aimed at justifying the belief that God does not exist that does not beg the question is that objection to theism known as 'The Problem of Evil.' It has been objected that natural and moral evils are inconsistent with the belief that a holy and omnipotent God exists. If this could be made out then there would indeed be a conflict between the evidence which supports the belief that a miracle occurred and the evidence which supports the belief that God does not exist.⁶⁴

Whether the existence of natural and moral evils is inconsistent with the belief that a holy and omnipotent God exists is a difficult and controversial issue. It is fair to observe, however, that the burden of proof in this matter rests upon the critic. Unless one can formally demonstrate that there necessarily exists a contradiction between the belief that natural and moral evils exist and the belief that a holy and omnipotent God exists, one is not entitled to conclude that the existence of evil implies the non-existence of God. This, it seems, is very difficult; most philosophers would agree that it has not been satisfactorily established that there inevitably and necessarily exists a contradiction between these two beliefs.⁶⁵ If this assessment of the situation is correct; if it is the case that one may accept the existence of evil and yet believe in God then it is impossible for the critic to generate an

argument against rationally justified belief in the occurrence of miracles based on a conflict between the evidence which supports the belief that God does not exist and the evidence which supports the belief that a miracle occurred.

I conclude that Hume's a priori argument fails in its intent. If a miracle be accurately defined there is no inevitable conflict between the evidence in favour of natural law and the evidence in favour of a miracle.

In Part I Hume offered an a priori argument to the effect that the testimony of others could never be sufficient to justify one in believing that a miracle occurred. In Part II Hume develops four a posteriori arguments designed to show that the actual evidence is so poor that it cannot begin to serve as grounds for a rationally justified belief in the occurrence of miracles.

These arguments, it should be noted, are not of the same high calibre as Hume's a priori argument. These arguments tend to depend upon factual claims that are questionable.

Hume's first a posteriori argument is that,

there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning as to secure us against all delusion in themselves, of such undoubted integrity as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others . . . 66

The truth of this claim is not beyond dispute. It

is possible to cite a number of examples which seem to contradict this claim.⁶⁷ Indeed Hume appears to admit this. He writes,

There surely never was a greater number of miracles ascribed to one person than those which were lately said to have been wrought in France upon the tomb of Abbe Paris, the famous Jansenist with whose sanctity the people were so long deluded. . . . what is extraordinary is that many of the miracles were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age and on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world. . . . And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events which they relate.⁶⁸

Hume's reply to his own example seems not to be a criticism designed to show that the evidence in favour of the miracles is not as good as it first appears but a dogmatic assertion that miracles cannot occur.

Anthony Flew attempts to escape such a conclusion by interpreting Hume's use of the word 'impossibility' to refer to physical as opposed to logical impossibility.⁶⁹ According to Flew, Hume must not be taken to be claiming "that something conceivable is nevertheless in fact impossible" but as claiming that the 'notion of miracle . . . is a pseudo-concept which could not in principle be instatiated."⁷⁰ It seems, however, that even on this interpretation Hume does not contest the fact that his a posteriori argument is based on a dubious claim but retreats to his a priori argument that belief in miracles is never justified on the basis of testimony.

The second a posteriori argument is phrased thus:

if the spirit of religion joins itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony in these circumstances loses all pretensions to authority. A religionist may be an enthusiast and imagine he sees what has not reality, he may know his narrative to be false and yet persevere in it with the best intentions in the world for the sake of promoting so holy a cause.⁷¹

This second argument also appears weak. No one would dispute the fact that it is sometimes the case that when 'the spirit of religion joins itself to the love of wonder there is an end of common sense.' However, to make this as a universal claim is surely a mistake. The claim that all religious believers who report first hand experience of miracle suffer from a deficiency of common sense due to their religious convictions seems simply false; as does the claim that such people universally suffer from an undue credulity and love of wonder.⁷²

Hume's third a posteriori argument is that:

it forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors who transmitted them with that inviolable sanction and authority which always attend received opinions.⁷³

This too is a weak argument. Reports of miracles are found among well-educated civilized people and these reports are not invariably received from ignorant and barbarous ancestors.⁷⁴ Although many other examples may be cited, Hume's own example concerning the tomb

of the Abbe Paris seems adequate to dispose of the claim put forward in this argument.

Further, even if it were true that reports of miracles are found chiefly amongst ignorant and barbarous people this would still be a weak argument. The underlying premise appears to be that uncivilized, 'barbarous' people do not have a sufficient acquaintance with the course of nature to distinguish a miracle from a natural event. This is a dubious premise. Joseph did not have to have a doctorate in biology to know that virgins in the normal course of events do not conceive and the disciples did not have to be nuclear physicists to realize that multiplication of loaves and fishes does not occur in the normal course of nature. It is wrong to think that because the report of a miracle comes from an 'ignorant' and 'barbarous' source that it can, solely on that account, be disregarded.

Finally, it should be noted that just as there is no a priori reason for contending that because some reports of miracles are lies and fabrications that all reports of miracles are lies and fabrications, there is no a priori reason to suppose that all ages should be equally endowed with miracles. Whether or not miracles occur equally in all ages and whether or not all reports of miracles are lies and fabrications, are questions concerning matters of fact and must be investigated empirically, not legislated a priori.

Hume's fourth a posteriori argument is that:

in destroying a rival system . . . a miracle likewise destroys the credit of those miracles on which that system was established, so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts, and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite each other.⁷⁵

This is an interesting argument. Its aim, like Hume's a priori argument in Part I, is to discredit any presumed evidence for a miracle by pointing to a conflict of evidence which destroys the force of the presumed evidence in favour of the miracle.

The argument's success, however, depends upon the truth of the suppressed premise that miracles only occur in connection with the religion whose system of theology contains the most truth and that the chief purpose of a miracle is to provide evidence of the truth of the theology of the religion in which it occurs. Given that Hume was concerned to "establish it as a maxim that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any . . . system of religion"⁷⁶ it is understandable that Hume would tend to assume the truth of this premise. Such a premise is, however, questionable. It seems a mistake to think that the sole or even chief purpose of a miracle is to guarantee the truth of the system of theology in which it occurs⁷⁷ just as it is a mistake to think that God is not active in religions other than one's own.⁷⁸ There is no compelling reason why miracles should not

occur in more than one religion and therefore a fortiori no compelling reason to regard the evidence for such miracles as 'contrary facts.'

Hume's a posteriori arguments, no less than his a priori argument, fail in their intent. They do not establish the conclusion that the actual testimonial evidence is so poor that it cannot serve as grounds for a rationally justified belief in the occurrence of miracles.

* * *

Some Contemporary Objections

In addition to David Hume's famous criticism of the concept of miracle there exist a number of more recent criticisms of the concept. These criticisms must also be discussed.

One of the most forceful and ambitious of these is to be found in Alastair McKinnon's article entitled 'Miracle and Paradox.'⁷⁹ In this article McKinnon attempts to demonstrate that the term 'miracle' "cannot consistently name or describe any real or alleged event."⁸⁰

McKinnon begins by noting that "the concept of natural law, . . . if it is to be allowed at all, is and must be universal in its application",⁸¹ and that a miracle must be conceived as either: (1) an event involving the suspension of natural law", or (2) an event conflicting with our understanding of nature."⁸²

McKinnon argues that such an understanding of natural law and the first sense of the term 'miracle' involves a contradiction. He feels that such an understanding of natural law implies that laws "are simply highly generalized shorthand descriptions of how things do in fact happen."⁸³ This involves a contradiction, however, in that a miracle will then be defined as an exception to what actually happened. As McKinnon puts it,

Miracle would then be defined as 'an event involving the suspension of the actual course of events.' And someone who insisted upon

describing an event as a miracle would be in the rather odd position of claiming that its occurrence was contrary to the actual course of events.⁸⁴

Such an understanding of natural law also precludes the acceptance of the second sense of the term 'miracle' as 'an event conflicting with our understanding of nature. It would also involve a contradiction in that one

cannot believe both that the event happened and that the conception of nature with which it conflicts is adequate. In attempting to do so one necessarily contradicts oneself.

One is like the man who says 'Yes this cat is white' then blandly adds ' . . . but I hold that all cats are black.'⁸⁵

As McKinnon comments, "such a person may reasonably be asked to surrender either the historicity of the event or the conception of nature with which it conflicts."⁸⁶

Neither alternative seems acceptable. Neither alternative makes it possible to employ legitimately the term 'miracle' to describe any real or alleged event. To surrender the historicity of the event or events in question is to admit there is no need to employ the term 'miracle' in describing events in the real world. To revise one's conception of nature is to repudiate the grounds upon which it was originally urged that the event be regarded as a miracle. One seems forced to conclude that the notion of miracles is a mere pseudo-concept.

The correctness of McKinnon's argument may be questioned however. Both McKinnon's understanding

of natural law and his understanding of miracle appear suspect.

McKinnon's first premise that one may substitute the expression 'the actual course of events' for the term 'natural law' is false. As was noted earlier, science typically assumes that an event E is explained when it is shown to be a logical consequence of relevant initial conditions and a set of general laws. Knowledge of natural law, unless one has knowledge of the relevant initial conditions, does not allow one to either predict, describe, or explain the actual course of events. It is thus a mistake to think that the terms 'actual course of events' and 'natural law' are interchangeable.

McKinnon's second premise is also dubious. It was argued earlier that the notion of miracle does not entail the idea that natural law is violated if a miracle occurs. The occurrence of a miracle does not indicate that the laws of nature no longer apply or are temporarily suspended; it indicates that God or some other rational agent, either by the creation or annihilation of matter, creates within nature an event which nature would not otherwise produce.

The difficulty with McKinnon's argument seems to be that having noted that a miracle is an event that is contrary to the natural course of events, McKinnon interprets this phrase to mean that a miracle is an event contrary to the actual course of events. Such

an interpretation of the phrase, unless one is also prepared to argue that no actual event could have a non-physical cause, is illegitimate. A miracle is contrary to the natural course of events not in the sense that it is an event which cannot actually occur, but in the sense that it is an event which cannot be explained except by reference to the action of an agent who transcends nature. Granted that such events are at least logically conceivable, it appears, contra McKinnon, that the term 'miracle' could consistently name or describe a real or allegedly real event.

Patrick Nowell-Smith, in an article entitled 'Miracles-The Philosophical Approach'⁸⁷ attempts to establish a conclusion somewhat similar to McKinnon's albeit in a somewhat different way.

Nowell-Smith begins his argument by noting that to call an event a miracle is to offer not just a description of the particular event but also an explanation of its occurrence. To call an event a miracle is to engage not only in observation but also in explanation. This means that since "evidence must be kept distinct from explanatory theory",⁸⁸ all that even the best evidence can establish is that extraordinary phenomena sometimes occur. The question of whether certain extraordinary phenomena occur must, however, be kept distinct from the question of whether these phenomena are to be termed miraculous.

The next step in the argument is the observation that "science is committed, not to definite theories or concepts but to a certain method of explanation."⁸⁹ This means that even though it might involve new terms and unfamiliar concepts it might be possible at some future point in time to frame a strictly scientific explanation of the extraordinary events we are tempted to term miracles. Thus, the "problem is not whether science can explain everything in current terms but whether the explanation of 'miracles' requires a method quite different from that of science."⁹⁰

Finally Nowell-Smith observes that a true explanation must always have predictive power and involve "a law or hypothesis capable of predictive expansion."⁹¹ Further, in explaining a miracle, it makes no sense to make reference to presumed 'supernatural' laws since it is impossible to distinguish a 'supernatural' law from a 'natural' law.⁹²

This leads to the conclusion that an event is either scientifically explicable or no explanation is possible. As Nowell-Smith puts it, "the supernatural seems to dissolve on the one hand into the natural and on the other into the inexplicable."⁹³

In reply to Nowell-Smith's argument two points will be made. The first, at least as it concerns the argument developed in this essay is a relatively minor one; the second is a more major one.

The first is that Nowell-Smith's claim that one cannot distinguish a 'supernatural' law from a 'natural' law is open to dispute.

A necessary condition of a law being considered a 'natural' law is that the predicates occurring in it are natural.⁹⁴ It has seemed clear to many philosophers that a distinction must be drawn between two classes of predicates - natural and non-natural - and that predicates from one of these classes cannot be defined in terms of predicates from the other class.⁹⁵ Insofar as such a distinction may be drawn and defended it is conceivable that the predicates occurring in a law might be non-natural. Suppose, for instance, it were a law that 'Goodness is always rewarded.' Presumably such a law would not be a natural law since neither 'goodness' nor 'reward' are natural predicates.

It may be argued of course that even if one can make a case for the possible existence of 'supernatural' laws such laws will be of little use in explaining miracles. This may possibly be the case but this is a quite different claim than Nowell-Smith's original claim that one could not distinguish a 'supernatural' law from a 'natural' law.

The second point is that Nowell-Smith's argument depends upon the premise that a true explanation must always have predictive power and involve 'a law or hypothesis capable of predictive expansion.' The truth

of this claim may be questioned. Scientific explanation does indeed involve citing 'a law or hypothesis capable of predictive expansion' but it is far from clear that scientific explanation is the only legitimate type of explanation.

One of the necessary conditions for an event being termed a miracle is that it be an event brought about by a rational agent who, embodied or not, in some way transcends nature. It is therefore noteworthy that one must, at least initially,⁹⁶ distinguish between explanations which involve agents' purposes or intentions and explanations which do not. The two types of explanation seem radically different.

In a scientific explanation an event E is the consequence of a certain set of relevant initial conditions and a certain set of relevant general laws. However, in what Swinburne terms a 'personal' explanation⁹⁷ an event E is explained by reference to an agent's intention or purpose to accomplish E or a further event F.⁹⁸ Further, in 'personal' explanations, unlike scientific explanations, it is usually the case that an event E cannot be inferred from events that usually preceded events of type E. As Swinburne comments, "You could not discover my purpose and therefore my consequent action in going out the door now by noting what I always or normally did before going out the door."⁹⁹ Usually, if one wishes to explain the actions of an agent, one

must make some reference to the agent's public utterances concerning his intentions and purposes. There appears to be no parallel to this requirement in the case of scientific explanation.

'Personal' explanations, unlike scientific explanations may have no close connection to the notion of prediction and yet still serve as an adequate explanation of an event. Consider, for example, a man with ten thousand dollars and a desire to invest his money as wisely as possible. It turns out that there are two investment opportunities which far outshine the rest. It also turns out that both these opportunities are equally lucrative and equally safe. Unfortunately both these opportunities are of such a nature that one cannot invest any sum less than ten thousand dollars. The point of this example is that the investor will invest in one or the other opportunity and that this choice will be explained by reference to the investor's desire to invest as wisely as possible. It is clear, however, that such an explanation is of no help in predicting which opportunity the investor will choose.

It might be objected that such an explanation does not explain why one particular action which was a means to a desired end occurred rather than another action which was a means to the same end. Such an objection ignores the fact that we usually accept that a particular action is explained when it is shown to have been, or at least was believed to be, a means to a desired end.

It is far from obvious that a satisfactory explanation must, or even could, explain why a particular means to an end, rather than some equally attractive means to an end, was used.

The foregoing remarks must not be misconstrued. They are intended to show, not that explanations involving reference to an agent's intentions or purposes cannot be reduced to scientific explanations, but that prima facie at least there exist important differences between these two types of explanation. It will not do therefore to assume there is only one legitimate type of explanation.

The conclusion is clear. Unless one can demonstrate that explanations involving reference to an agent's intentions or purposes can be reduced to scientific explanations, Nowell-Smith's argument fails. The concept of miracle neither dissolves on the one hand into the natural nor on the other into the inexplicable, unless one also denies the existence of agent causality and its irreducibility as a form of explanation. Given that a miracle is at least partially defined as an act brought about by a rational agent who in some way transcends nature, such a conclusion is not surprising.

A further objection that is often raised is that, although the concept of miracle may be logically coherent, and although there may exist extraordinary occurrences which one might be tempted to term miracles, one must

never term an event a miracle since this would be to impose arbitrary limits on what is scientifically explicable. Guy Robinson, in developing this objection, writes,

. . . notice what would happen to the scientist if he allowed himself to employ the concept of an irregularity in nature or of a miracle in relation to his work. He would be finished as a scientist. . . . To do this would be simply to resign, to opt out, as a scientist. . . . 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. 100

In essence this is an objection that, because there exist no criteria by which one may determine whether 'anomalies' are properly regarded as miracles or as events which indicate an inadequate understanding of natural processes, it is impossible to justify the use of the term miracle. To invoke the term is to set artificial and arbitrary limits on scientific explanation.

It may be agreed that not every way of postulating a miracle deserves consideration and that a superstitious mentality in which miracles proliferate is to be avoided. It must be questioned, however, whether it is impossible to develop criteria which would distinguish events properly termed miracles from events which are properly understood as mere indices of an inadequate understanding of natural processes.

Suppose, in the case of a particular event, the following criteria are met:

1. There is strong evidence that the extraordinary event in question actually occurred.
2. Although it is carefully scrutinized, the event cannot be identified as being of some repeatable type. (The event need not be absolutely unique merely of such a nature that it is not consistently repeatable.)
3. The regularity to which the event constitutes an exception is strongly confirmed, and is known to apply to the same type of physical circumstances in which the event in question happened.
4. The event is extraordinary, that is to say it differs greatly from what one would normally expect.
5. The event took place in a moral and religious context and has moral and religious significance. 101

Surely these criteria would serve to differentiate events which might legitimately be interpreted as miracles and events which would best be interpreted as indices of an inadequate understanding of natural processes. Whether one views an extraordinary event as a miracle or whether one views an extraordinary event as the result of some unknown natural process need not be a matter of whim.

A possible objection to this line of argument is that, although it may not be a matter of caprice or whim whether one terms an event a miracle, miracle claims, no less than scientific claims, are corrigible. To term an event a miracle, however, is to hold that the event is explained and to rule out the possibility of any future scientific explanation.

Such an objection fails. Two of the criteria for

an event being considered a miracle are that it cannot be identified as an event of some repeatable type and that the regularity of nature to which it constitutes an exception is strongly confirmed and is known to apply to the same type of physical circumstances in which the event happened. Clearly there could be new scientific evidence which would suggest either that the event can be identified as being of some repeatable type or that the regularity of nature to which the event constitutes an exception is not as strongly established as once was thought. One does not, therefore, in terming an event a miracle, prematurely rule out the possibility of a future scientific explanation of the event.

There is another related objection based on the fact that miracle claims are corrigible. This may be expressed as the claim that it is always more rational to believe that an event could be explained naturalistically if only we had the requisite scientific knowledge, than to believe that a miracle has occurred.

In assessing the force of this objection one must distinguish between pragmatic working assumptions and metaphysical presuppositions. One may endorse the principle of first seeking a natural explanation of an event without thereby being committed to the position that a supernatural explanation of an event can never be legitimately postulated. Geisler is correct when he writes:

Simply to assume . . . that there must be a naturalistic explanation for every event begs the question in favour of naturalism. . . . adopting the working procedure of always looking for a natural explanation need not be extended into a rigid naturalistic position that there are no nonnatural explanations. The scientific mind should not legislate what kind of explanations there can be. 102

There is, of course, always the logical possibility that a revision of scientific law may lead to a natural explanation of what was hitherto considered a miracle. This fact does not in itself justify the claim that it is always the more rational course to believe that all events have natural explanations. The fact that a claim is corrigible does not entail the conclusion that other logically possible claims are more probably true.

For example, given the fact that all scientific claims are corrigible, there is always the logical possibility that we are wrong in supposing that, in the normal course of events, the blood circulates in a living human body. It will hardly do, however, merely on the grounds that this claim is corrigible, to claim that some other logically possible alternative, such as the claim that we are mistaken in believing the blood to circulate, is equally probable or as well-established.

It is logically possible that some revision of scientific law might enable one to offer a natural explanation of those events one is tempted to term miraculous but it is also true that it is logically possible that no revision would enable one to offer a

natural explanation of such events. One's decision as to which of these alternatives is most probably true must be based on an assessment of evidence. Both alternatives may be logically possible but they are not necessarily equally probable.

Let us consider an example. Suppose one hears of a man who claims to perform miracles of healing through the power of God. Upon investigating, one learns that not only has this person an exemplary character but also an apparent ability to perform remarkable cures. One is able to capture on film occasions when, immediately upon the prayers of this man, fingers lost to leprosy were regrown to their original form and length in a matter of seconds, and occasions when eyes severely burned by acid were immediately restored to sight. One finds further that not only does this man appear to have the power to heal any kind of disease or injury, it is also the case that no interposition of lead screens or strong electro-magnetic fields or the like has any effect on his apparent ability to heal. Indeed it is observed that his power is apparently independent of distance since people in distant countries have experienced dramatic healing after this man prayed for their cure.

Such an example raises at least two major problems for the person who holds that it is always more reasonable to postulate a natural explanation rather than postulate the occurrence of a miracle.

The first is that such a procedure commits one to an apparently unwarranted skepticism concerning our knowledge of natural law. If one has good reason to accept the fact that such extraordinary events have occurred, and if one insists that all explanations of physical events must be natural, then one must be prepared to reject or revise the laws which led one to expect different results. This places one in the position of questioning what were hitherto thought to be basic, well-evidenced, accurate statements of natural law. One is forced, in short to adopt a position of radical skepticism as concerns the claims of science. This, it should be noted, is in sharp contrast to the defender of the concept of miracle who is able to offer an account of how one may accept the occurrence of such extraordinary events and yet retain one's faith in what seem to be basic well-evidenced accurate statements of natural law.

This is not to deny that revolutions occur in scientific theory nor that science often progresses by rejecting previously accepted statements of natural law. However, to insist on a naturalistic interpretation of such phenomena as have been described, merely on the basis of some general remarks about falsifiability and revolution in science, is at least as great an act of faith as any religious interpretation of such events.

Indeed, it may require a greater act of faith to interpret such events naturalistically. The defender

of the concept of miracle, taking his cue from Hume, may ask in 'a particular instance which is more likely; 'That a multitude of unknown processes requiring us to radically revise or even reject well-established statements of natural law have fortuitously combined to produce an extraordinary and religiously significant event.' or 'An extraordinary and religiously significant event has occurred which, although it does not force us to revise or reject any well-established statements of natural law, does seem to indicate that a transcendent, rational agent has acted to produce in nature an event which nature could not, of itself, produce.' Surely only a somewhat dogmatic and uncritical metaphysical assumption that nature is in fact an isolated system can explain the insistence of some thinkers that, no matter what the event and no matter what the context in which it occurs, it is always more rational to live in the faith that such an event has a natural explanation rather than believe it to be a miracle.

The second major objection which the defender of naturalistic interpretation must meet is that the very nature of the extraordinary powers of a 'miracle' worker may preclude a naturalistic explanation of these powers.

One wonders, for example, what it could mean to term the power to heal a 'natural' power if it were shown that the capacity to heal was not affected by distance, nor any kind of physical screening, nor by the specific

disease or injury of the person in need of healing.

Could one legitimately use the word 'natural' to describe a capacity that appears independent of other natural forces and capacities?

To insist that it is legitimate to describe such a capacity as natural is to open oneself to the charge that one has made one's position invulnerable by making it untestable and hence unfalsifiable. One cannot hold that a naturalistic explanation is compatible with any logically possible state of affairs in the physical world without leaving oneself vulnerable to such a charge.

The defender of naturalistic interpretation may, of course, note that it would be difficult to show that a certain ability is truly independent of physical limitations. There is always the logical possibility that new evidence will show that it is not.

This is certainly true but it leaves the defender of naturalistic interpretation in the awkward position of justifying his rejection of evidence to the contrary. Evidence for a particular scientific claim is never conclusive nor indeed complete; one must always reach provisional conclusions on the basis of the evidence available. Provisional conclusions may be strongly established, however, and, in the absence of evidence suggesting different conclusions, deserve one's rational assent. There could, conceivably, as in the case of the example developed, be instances where an abundance of

evidence seems to indicate the exercise of capacities independent of physical limitations.

One cannot hold that, however improbable, one must always postulate a natural explanation of an event unless one also holds that it has been firmly established beyond possible dispute that nature is an isolated system. Unless one is prepared to make such an assertion a priori it is difficult to make such a statement without begging the question.

* * *

The Question of Evidence

It has been argued that since a miracle need constitute no violation of natural law one cannot assume that the evidence in favour of natural law conflicts with the evidence in favour of a miracle. It has also been argued that certain events, if they were to occur, would be properly regarded as miracles and not as mere anomalies. The issue which now arises is the issue of evidence. It must be inquired what type and degree of evidence is necessary to justify belief in a miracle.

The fundamental principle in assessing evidence concerning past events is to accept as much evidence as is possible and yet develop a coherent account that is consistent with the evidence. Although this basic principle may be fairly easily expressed there are several subsidiary limiting principles which make its application much more complicated than it would otherwise be. These must be noted and discussed.

The first of these is the principle that differing types of evidence ought to be weighted differently. The meaning and purpose of this principle may be made more clear through an examination of the types of evidence relevant to the question of miracle.

There are three basic types of evidence relevant to the question of miracle. These are:

1. One's own experience and one's memory of one's own experience.
2. The testimony of others concerning their experience.
3. Relevant physical traces.

Swinburne includes a fourth type of evidence, namely "our contemporary understanding of what things are physically impossible or improbable."¹⁰³ He notes that this fourth type "is only a corrective to the other three, not an independent source of detailed information."¹⁰⁴

I disagree that there exists this fourth type of evidence. As has been noted, the scientific laws upon which 'our contemporary understanding of what is physically impossible or improbable' is presumably based, do not, in themselves, make any event impossible or improbable.

The reason these three types of evidence must be weighted differently is that they have different intrinsic values. For example, one's own apparent memory of a miracle must, *prima facie*, be given more weight than the testimony of another witness; it usually makes more sense to suppose that someone may be lying than to believe one's memory to be mistaken. I use the words '*prima facie*' and 'usually' because there are considerations which could justify the conclusion that another's testimony should be weighted more heavily than one's own apparent memory.¹⁰⁵ However, in the absence of such

considerations, and in view of the fact that memory tends to provide clues by which to weigh itself¹⁰⁶ one's apparent memories are to be weighted more heavily than the testimony of others.

Evidence from physical traces is also, in many cases, relevant to the question of miracle. Evidence from physical traces may be either strong or weak. If one were to film the instantaneous regrowth of a man's fingers and if that man could now shake one's hand whereas before he could not, then one would have fairly strong evidence in favour of the occurrence of a miracle. If, on the other hand, one can only verify that the account concerning a long past miracle does indeed stem from the period in question then one would have considerably weaker evidence in favour of a miracle.

In general, because physical traces tend to disappear, evidence from physical traces becomes weaker with time. Evidence from physical traces, therefore, tends to be more conclusive in establishing miracles in the recent past than in the remote past.

This is not to deny that evidence from physical traces is extremely important in evaluating accounts of long past miracles. Although one cannot usually conclusively establish that the remarkable events in question occurred, one can, in many instances, establish whether the author is accurate as concerns historical, cultural, and geographical detail. One may choose,

for example, not to accept the occurrence of the remarkable events recorded in the New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus, but it will hardly do, in the face of their historical, cultural and geographical accuracy, to dismiss these accounts as pious legends invented centuries later by a credulous church. 107

Another important subsidiary principle is that particular evidences ought to be accorded different weights on the basis of the empirical evidence available concerning their reliability. This is accomplished by a procedure which Swinburne terms 'narrowing the evidence class.' 108 Thus, if one wishes to evaluate the testimony of an individual, one does not exclusively devote oneself to investigating the worth of testimony in general, one also investigates the worth of the person's testimony in particular.

Such a procedure presupposes the general reliability of other evidence since it is only by accepting the reliability of other evidence that one can arrive at an independent basis by which to evaluate the particular piece of evidence in question. Thus, although this principle is essential, if one is to assess evidence properly, it is, by its very nature, somewhat limited. Unless one is willing to deal with an infinite regress of evidences one must admit there is some evidence which ought to be accepted even without further evidence in its favour. As Swinburne puts it,

the testing of evidence of one class can only be performed if we presuppose the reliability in general of other evidence. . . . We may have empirical evidence about the reliability of other evidence, but as such evidence will consist of more empirical evidence, we have to stop somewhere, with evidence which we can take to be reliable without empirical evidence thereof. 109

Although this principle is by its nature somewhat limited it is a useful tool for evaluating reports of miracles. For example, insofar as a person's testimony has been reliable in the past it should be weighted heavily but insofar as a person's testimony is generally unreliable it should be accorded little weight.

Finally we must note a third subsidiary principle. This is the principle that one ought not to reject coincident evidence, except in the face of extremely strong evidence to the contrary, unless a satisfactory alternative explanation can be given of the coincidence. The corollary of this is that one is justified in rejecting coincident evidences if one can offer a well-substantiated explanation which explains the coincidence of the evidence without having to assume the truth of the evidence.

One must be careful in applying this principle. Coincidence as concerns the major details of an event is usually a sign of truth but coincidence as concerns every detail is often a sign of falsity. One expects independent witnesses of an event to agree on the major

details but one hardly expects them to agree upon, or even report the same, minor details. Too standardized an account, at least as far as testimonial evidence is concerned, leads one to suspect the falsity of an account, not its truth.

This principle has an obvious use in evaluating reports of miracles. If multiple reports of a miracle exhibit both the agreement as regards the major details of the event, and the diversity concerning minor details that is characteristic of independent reports of the same event then this coincident evidence must be heavily weighted. Such evidence would be strong evidence in favour of the occurrence of a miracle.

We have discussed, at least in a preliminary way, the types of evidence relevant to the question of miracle. We have also briefly examined the principles which govern the assessment of such evidence. We are now, it is hoped, in a position to determine the type and degree of evidence necessary to justify belief in the occurrence of a miracle.

There can be no question that it is at least conceivable that the evidence could be such as to justify belief in the occurrence of a miracle. For example, if one in the presence of friends were to witness and film the instantaneous regrowth of a friend's fingers, and if one knew that both the man and his friends were religious

people of exemplary character who had been praying for this event, one would surely be justified in believing the event to be a miracle.

Equally, however, it must be admitted that the evidence in favour of a miracle is rarely this strong. Most people never directly observe a miracle and even those who have been so privileged never observe more than an insignificant portion of the miracles reported. Further, although evidence from physical traces may be relevant, it is often the case that relevant physical traces have either disappeared or serve only as a negative test for the truth of the miracle claim. 110

The question which arises therefore is whether a justified belief in the occurrence of a miracle might be established solely on the basis of testimonial evidence. In other words; given that one has had no direct experience of the purported miracle and given that the evidence from physical traces is either non-existent or inconclusive, could one conceivably justify belief in the occurrence of the miracle on the basis of testimonial evidence?

Anthony Flew denies the possibility. He writes, the criteria by which we must assess historical testimony, and the general presumptions which alone make it possible for us to construct the detritus of the past as historical evidence, must inevitably rule out any possibility of establishing upon purely historical grounds, that some genuinely miraculous event has indeed occurred. 111

Flew's conclusion is unduly skeptical. It is based on the contentions that part of the definition of a miracle is that it violates natural law¹¹² and that one must always explain events naturalistically.¹¹³ Both of these are claims we have found reason to question and reject.

Contrary to Flew, it is conceivable that a justified belief in the occurrence of a miracle could be established solely on the basis of testimonial evidence. The basic principle in assessing evidence concerning past events is to accept as much evidence as is possible and yet develop a coherent account that is consistent with the evidence available. This means that testimonial evidence, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, or in the absence of a stronger body of evidence to the contrary, could justify belief in a miracle.

How firmly established one's belief in a miracle ought to be will depend upon the amount of testimonial evidence one has in favour of the miracle. There seems, however, no question that testimonial evidence could serve to justify belief in the occurrence of a miracle.

One can escape the conclusion that testimonial evidence could be such as to justify belief in the occurrence of a miracle only if one can demonstrate that the testimonial evidence in favour of a miracle inevitably conflicts with a stronger body of evidence to the contrary.

There is small hope of accomplishing this unless one is able to show that a miracle must necessarily be conceived as violating natural law. Given the fact that a miracle need not be conceived as violating natural law, there seems little reason to deny the conclusion that testimonial evidence could be such as to justify belief in the occurrence of a miracle.

* * *

D

The Significance of Miracle

I have, in this thesis, sought to define the term 'miracle' and to clarify the relation of the objective sense of the term to the concept of natural law. I have also attempted to answer some of the more important classic and contemporary objections to the notion of miracle. Finally, in a brief and preliminary way, I have considered the question of the evidence required to justify belief in the occurrence of a miracle.

The argument to date, if successful, has established that miracles could conceivably occur and that one could have evidence which would justify belief in their occurrence. This conclusion has, I think, significant implications for several areas of study. I wish to conclude this thesis with a brief discussion of some of these.

The conclusion that miracles could conceivably occur and that one could have evidence which would justify belief in their occurrence has significant implications for a number of important issues in philosophy of religion. One of the most important of these concerns the existence of God. It appears that evidence which would justify belief in the occurrence of a miracle is also relevant to the question of whether God exists.

It is often asserted that the occurrence of a miracle need not be construed as demonstrating the existence of God. A miracle is properly defined as an extraordinary and religiously significant event which never would have occurred except through the direct and relatively immediate action of a rational agent who transcends nature. Given such a definition, the occurrence of a miracle demonstrates only the existence of a rational agent who transcends nature.

This is true but such a reply misses the point. The relevance of a justified belief in the occurrence of miracles to the question of God's existence can be made clearer through a brief discussion of metaphysical thinking.

One cannot be a philosopher and avoid metaphysics. Insofar as one is coherent in one's thinking, one will, whether one consciously intends to or not, develop a system of thought. Whatever epistemology one espouses, whatever philosophic methodology one employs, one finds oneself developing such a system. Further, no matter what system of thought one is led to defend one will find oneself defending a position that is either explicitly or implicitly metaphysical. 114

This claim must not be construed as implying that metaphysical positions cannot be provisional, that is to say open to revision on the basis of pertinent information and rational argument: the claim made is

merely that insofar as a philosopher is coherent in his thinking he develops a system of thought that may be appropriately termed metaphysical.

Neither must this claim be taken as implying that a philosopher's metaphysic completely determines what he will say concerning a specific philosophic problem. Metaphysical systems are not chosen arbitrarily; they are chosen because they have immense explanatory power, they permit one to view reality as a coherent whole. This is to say a metaphysic is adequate to the degree that, without explaining away or distorting that which it must explain, it permits one to give a coherent and unified account of reality.

There thus exists a dialectic between general metaphysical systems and specific philosophic problems. A philosopher's metaphysic influences his treatment of specific philosophic problems, but usually, specific philosophic problems influence the philosopher's choice of a metaphysic. If an important or a number of important philosophic problems remain intractable from within a certain metaphysical perspective this constitutes a good reason for a philosopher to examine other metaphysical positions. If it is the case that another metaphysical system can give a more coherent and unified account of reality it is rational to prefer it. This is only to stress the point already made that metaphysical systems are not chosen or developed arbitrarily. There

exist criteria that differentiate good metaphysical systems from bad metaphysical systems and it is possible, on the basis of these intersubjectively shared criteria, to evaluate the truth of basic metaphysical systems. 115

One cannot adequately discuss metaphysics in a page and a half. Such a sketch does, however, better enable one to judge the relevance of a justified belief in the occurrence of a miracle to the question of God's existence.

The relevance of a justified belief in the occurrence of a miracle to the question of God's existence is this. The evidence which justifies belief in the occurrence of a miracle also justifies belief in the falsity of Naturalism.

This is an important conclusion. As has been observed, a metaphysic is adequate to the degree that, without explaining away or distorting that which it must explain, it permits one to give a coherent and unified account of reality. To the degree that Naturalism is shown to be false the door is opened to a rival metaphysic which can offer a more coherent and unified account of reality. If one wishes to reject Theism, one must show there exists some non-Naturalist alternative to Theism which better explains not only miracles but the rest of human experience.

The conclusions established earlier in this thesis also have important implications for the field of Biblical criticism. 116

Systematic and intensive critical inquiry into the origin and development of the Old Testament and the New Testament is a relatively recent development belonging essentially to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 117 This is not to say there was no critical inquiry into such questions before 1800. Prior to 1800, however, such inquiry consisted only of isolated comments and must be distinguished from the systematic and intensive criticism characteristic of the last two centuries.

The fundamental idea of criticism is the careful examination of the evidence relevant to the issue in question. Insofar as criticism remains true to this task it constitutes a laudable and necessary activity. Insofar as it introduces arbitrary criteria by which to judge the evidence, or refuses to admit certain evidence as relevant in order to save a theory, it constitutes a disputable and unnecessary activity.

The aim of criticism must be to comprehend and assess the relevant evidence, not to presuppose a system into which all evidence is either forced or else discarded.

As Montgomery aptly comments, 'Models must arise as constructs to fit data, not serve as beds of Procrustes to force data into alien categories.' 118

Scholars working in the field of biblical criticism, with the exception of theologically conservative scholars, have tended to reject as historically inaccurate any Biblical account of a miracle. David Strauss, in a

book originally published in 1835, writes,

We may summarily reject all miracles, prophecies, narratives of angels and demons, and the like, as simply impossible and irreconcilable with the known and universal laws which govern the course of events. 119

Rudolph Bultmann, writing in 1961, echoes not only Strauss but a host of like-minded scholars.

It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles. 120

An historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable. 121

Presumably such statements are justified on the grounds that one can know a priori that any account of a miracle is unhistorical. This at least is the impression usually given. Take, for example, an observation made concerning the author of the gospel of Mark.

We were credulous inasmuch as the miracles, as they are narrated, cannot, in the light of our modern knowledge of the uniformity of nature be accepted as historical facts. 122

Statements such as these tend to be given more weight than they merit. The claim that one can know a priori that any account of a miracle is unhistorical is a philosophic claim. Insofar as a scholar makes such a claim he is functioning as a philosopher and not as a historian. Most scholars working in the field of biblical criticism are not, however, trained philosophers and most would claim no special competence in the area of philosophy,

The claim that one can know a priori that any account of a miracle is unhistorical has had an enormous influence upon the field of biblical criticism. One wonders, in light of the fact that such a claim cannot be sustained, whether the current skepticism concerning biblical accounts of miracle can be justified on historical grounds.

The conclusion that miracles are conceivable and that one could have evidence which would justify belief in their occurrence also has significance for Christian apologetics. If it were to be established that the biblical accounts of miracle are trustworthy this would be an important step in the apologist's task of defending his faith.

The Christian apologist cannot argue, of course, that the occurrence of miracle guarantees the truth of his faith. Other religions claim miracles and it would be rash to assume without a careful examination of the evidence that miracles have not occurred in these religions. If miracles have occurred in other religions one cannot hold that Christianity is true merely on the grounds that it can point to well-evidenced miracles.

Even if other religions cannot point to well-evidenced miracles and Christianity can, this does not guarantee the truth of Christianity. Miracles

are usually performed by, or mediated through, a human person. The fact that a person exhibits remarkable abilities neither entails that he knows, nor, if he knows that he is truthful about, the true source and meaning of his power. 123

To the degree that a miracle is an isolated and unrelated marvel it has very little significance. To the degree that it is an integral part of a large and meaningful whole it is significant. Elijah's miracle of calling fire down from heaven has very little significance considered merely as a spectacular and unique event but it has a very great significance when one considers the circumstances of Israel's history at the time when it occurred. 124 Similarly the significance of the Resurrection stems from the context in which it occurred. 125 Its meaning and significance is derived from the integral part it plays in the history of Jesus of Nazareth.

A miracle's apologetic significance lies not in the fact that it is an event which automatically demonstrates the truth-claims of that with which it is associated. The significance of a miracle lies in the fact that it itself is a fact which must be adequately explained. In certain cases such as Elijah's miracle on Mount Carmel or the resurrection of Christ it would be hard to admit the occurrence of the miracle and yet offer a better interpretation of it than does Christian doctrine.

The question of miracle is relevant to a number of other important philosophic issues. Among others it is relevant to the problem of evil, questions concerning evolution, and the problem of the mind's relation to the body. Here, however, I will close this thesis. I claim neither to have fully explored the issues I have mentioned, nor to have mentioned all the areas of philosophic interest that the question of miracle touches. My aim in this final chapter has not been to explore exhaustively the philosophic significance of miracle but only to convince the reader that the conclusions established in the first five chapters bear on a number of important philosophic issues.

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Footnotes

1. Anthony Flew, "Miracles", The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1967, vol. 5, pp. 346-353; p. 346, - hereafter cited as "Miracles"
2. "Miracles", p. 346
3. Richard Swinburne, The Concept of Miracle, Macmillan, 1970, p. 7, - hereafter cited as The Concept of Miracle.
4. The Concept of Miracle. p. 1
5. The Concept of Miracle. pp. 8,9.
6. David Hume, "Of Miracles", On Human Nature and the Understanding, ed. Anthony Flew, New York, Collier, 1962, p. 120
Hereafter cited as "Of Miracles"
7. Bernard Ramm, Protestant Christian Evidences, Moody Press Chicago 1953, p. 136, - hereafter cited as Protestant Christian Evidences
8. Jaegwon Kim, "Explanation in Science", Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1967, vol. 3, pp. 159-163; p. 159
Hereafter cited as "Explanation in Science"
9. It should be noted that the type of explanation offered by the probabilistic model is weaker than the type of explanation offered by the deductive model since the explanans of a probabilistic explanation does not logically imply the explanandum but only gives a more or less high degree of inductive support for it.
10. "Explanation in Science", p. 160
11. "Explanation in Science", p. 160
12. "Explanation in Science", pp. 160-161
13. "Explanation in Science", pp. 160-161
14. "Explanation in Science", p. 163
15. H.H. Walsh, An Introduction to Philosophy of History, Hutchinson's University Library, 1951, p. 36 - hereafter cited as An Introduction to Philosophy of History
16. An Introduction to Philosophy of History, p. 36
17. In the deductive model of explanation the logical structure of a scientific explanation is the same as that of a scientific prediction. In the probabilistic model of explanation the two are not the same since the explanans does not logically imply the explanandum but only gives a more or less high degree of inductive support for it.

18. "Miracles", p. 346

19. I take (for the purposes of this objection) the term 'theoretical law' to be equivalent to the term 'natural law'. This seems to be the most precise way of formulating what I take to be the fundamental objection since experimental laws, i.e., mere observed regularities, are 'violated' every day. As Lewis comments, "Nature as it comes to us looks at first like a mass of irregularities. The stove which lit all right yesterday won't light today; the water which was wholesome last year is poisonous this year. The whole mass of seemingly irregular experience could never have been turned into scientific knowledge at all unless from the very start we had brought to it a faith in uniformity which almost no number of disappointments can shake."
(C.S. Lewis, Miracles, A Preliminary Study, Fontana Books, 1960, p. 109, - hereafter cited as Miracles, A Preliminary Study)

20. I realize that this is an 'experimental' as opposed to a 'theoretical' law but this does not, I think, affect the validity of the point I am trying to make.

21. Frank Joad, "The World of Physics and of Plato," The Hibbert Journal, vol. (1939) pp. 132, 133

22. Miracles, A Preliminary Study, pp. 62, 63

23. Miracles, A Preliminary Study, p. 63

24. Given E=MC², it is perhaps more accurate to talk of the Principle of the Conservation of Mass/Energy. The regular way, if he wishes, substitute the term Mass/Energy for the term Energy. For the sake of convenience I will continue to use the term Energy rather than the somewhat more cumbersome term Mass/Energy.

25. That is to say the First Law of Thermodynamics.

26. Joule, Helmholtz, and Mayer, among others.

27. Milton A. Rothman, The Laws of Physics, Fawcett Publications, New York, 1963, p. 43, - hereafter cited as The Laws of Physics

28. E.A. Burtt, The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science, Doubleday/Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1964, p. 101, - hereafter cited as The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science.

29. The Laws of Physics, p. 49

30. Robert S. Cohen, "Alternative Interpretations of the History of Science", in The Validation of Scientific Theories, ed. Philipp S. Frank, Collier Books, 1961, pp. 196-211, p. 204 - hereafter cited as "Alternative Interpretations of the History of Science"

31. The laws of Physics, p. 49
32. Duane E. Roller, Leo Modelsky, "Conservation of Energy" McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology, McGraw-Hill, 1960, vol. 37, pp. 456, 457, p. 456
33. Sidney Bonowitz, "Conservation of Energy", The Harper Encyclopedia of Science, Harper, 1963, vol. 1, p. 273, p. 273
34. None of the issues relevant to such a philosophic analysis will be discussed in detail in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.
35. I do not mean that scientific evidence is irrelevant to the issue of whether or not nature is an isolated system. I mean merely that the proper assessment of the scientific, as well as other pertinent evidence, is a philosophic task.
36. Anthony Flew, "Miracles and Methodology." Hume's Philosophy of Belief, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961, chapter VIII pp. 153-213, p. 174 - hereafter cited as "Miracles and Methodology"
37. Miracles and Methodology p. 174
38. J. N. Broad, "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles." Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, vol. XVII, 1916-1917, pp. 77-95, p. 87, - hereafter cited as "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles"
39. "Of Miracles" p. 119
40. "Of Miracles" pp. 119, 120
41. "Of Miracles" p. 120
42. "Of Miracles" p. 115
43. "Of Miracles" p. 116
44. "Of Miracles" p. 116
45. "Of Miracles" p. 117
46. "Of Miracles" p. 123
47. "Of Miracles" p. 119
48. "Of Miracles" p. 119
49. "Of Miracles" p. 120
50. "Of Miracles" p. 119
51. "Of Miracles" p. 120. Also see Hume's statement (p. 132) that "we may establish it as a Maxim that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion."

52. "Miracles and Methodology" p. 205
53. "Of Miracles" pp. 119, 120
54. 2 Kings 17:14-16, Luke 9:18, 17
55. "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles" p. 36
56. "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles" p. 37
57. "Of Miracles" p. 119
58. "Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles" p. 37
59. See, for example, James, W.C. Whately, Hoyt H. Edge, Philosophical Dimensions of Parapsychology, Charles C. Thomas, Illinois, 1978
60. "Of Miracles" p. 120
61. "Of Miracles" p. 118
62. I realize that a rational agent other than God might produce a miracle. None will be said concerning this later in the essay.
63. There have been objections that the notion of miracles is inconsistent with adequate understanding of God's nature. I disagree with most philosophers.
64. Although the atheist could always escape this objection if he was prepared to admit either that God was not omnipotent or not holy.
65. See, for example, Norman Geisler, Philosophy of Religion. Tonawanda, N.Y.A., 1978
66. "Of Miracles" p. 121
67. See, for example, Francis MacNutt, Healing, Bantam, New York, 1974, - hereafter cited as Healing. Also see Morton T. Helsey, Healing and Christianity, Harper and Row, New York, 1973. Hereafter cited as Healing and Christianity
68. "Of Miracles" p. 123
69. "Miracles and Methodology" pp. 125-127
70. "Miracles and Methodology" p. 126
71. "Of Miracles" p. 122
72. See, for example, Healing. Father MacNutt hardly strikes me as a man suffering from a deficiency of common sense or an undue credulity and love of wonder.

73. "Of Miracles" p. 123.
74. See, for example, Healin.
75. "Of Miracles" p. 125
76. "Of Miracles" p. 130
77. Healin, pp. 77-95
78. I do not wish to suggest by this statement that all religions are equally true (and therefore equally false). Neither do I wish to suggest that it is a matter of indifference to God whether one is, say, a Hindu or a Christian. Rather my position would be that of Peter. (Acts 10:34, 35)
79. Alexander McMinion, "Miracle and Paradox," American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 4, 1967, pp. 300-314. Hereafter cited as "Miracle and Paradox"
80. "Miracle and Paradox" p. 300
81. "Miracle and Paradox" p. 300
82. "Miracle and Paradox" p. 300
83. "Miracle and Paradox" p. 300
84. "Miracle and Paradox" p. 300
85. "Miracle and Paradox" p. 310
86. "Miracle and Paradox" p. 310
87. Patrick McNeill-Smith, "Miracles - The Philosophical Approach," Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings, ed. William L. Rowe, William S. Tennant, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York, 1973, pp. 392-400. - Hereafter cited as "Miracles - The Philosophical Approach"
88. "Miracles - The Philosophical Approach" p. 395
89. "Miracles - The Philosophical Approach" p. 396
90. "Miracles - The Philosophical Approach" p. 396
91. "Miracles - The Philosophical Approach" p. 396
92. "Miracles - The Philosophical Approach" p. 397
93. "Miracles - The Philosophical Approach" p. 397
94. George Lindrum, "What A Miracle Really Is," Religious Studies, Vol. 12, March 1976, pp. 49-57, p. 54. - Hereafter cited as "What A Miracle Really Is"

95. The claim that ethical predicates cannot be defined naturalistically would be an example.
96. I am aware that it is a controversial issue whether what Swinburne terms 'personal explanations' may be reduced to scientific explanations. Unless, however, there was, at least initially, some reason to distinguish the two there could hardly exist a controversy.
97. The Concept of Miracle, pp. 53, 54
98. The event B might merely be a step on the way to the occurrence of event C.
99. The Concept of Miracle, p. 54
100. Roy Robinson, "Miracles," Ratio, Vol. IX, Dec. 1967, No. 2, pp. 155-164, p. 159, hereafter cited as "Miracles"
101. Phrases like 'moral and religious significance' tend to be somewhat vague. The point I am trying to make in introducing this criterion is made very well by

It may be safely asserted that a hypothesis does not receive this treatment if viewed from a detached scientific system, and further, that any hypothesis proposed must make peace with the system that it is associated with - even to revolutionizing the system, e.g., Copernicus and Einstein. It is therefore impossible to see miracles in the Christian perspective if viewed only as problems of science and history, i.e., to see only historical and scientific categories for interpretation. It is not asked that miracles be accepted blindly simply because they are associated with the Christian system; nor do we argue in a circle asking one to view miracles from the Christian position to see that as true when the Christian system is the point of issue. No hypothesis in science is confirmed until tentatively accepted as true. The tentative acceptance does not prove the hypothesis but it is absolutely necessary to test the hypothesis. (Protestant Christian Evidence, p. 129)

102. Norman Geisler, Christian Apologetics, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976, p. 272, - hereafter cited as Christian Apologetics.
103. The Concept of Miracle, p. 33
104. The Concept of Miracle, p. 33

105. One might, for example, have been intoxicated or extremely fatigued or under severe emotional or physical stress. In cases like these one's memories ought to be accorded less weight.
106. For example, one does not trust a vague memory as much as one trusts a clear memory.
107. See, for example, the section on the New Testament, (pp. 409-439) in The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, Zondervan Books, 1979, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Vol. 1.
108. The Concept of Miracles, p. 38
109. The Concept of Miracles, p. 39
110. For example, the fact that a woman who claims to have been healed of cancer, does not have cancer, is only a necessary condition of her claim being true, not a sufficient condition. The fact that she does not have cancer is consistent either with her not having had cancer but believing she had it or with her having had cancer but recovering, through natural causes.
111. Anthony Flew, Tod and Philosophy, Hutchinson & Co.; 1965 p. 145. - Hereafter cited as Tod and Philosophy.
112. "This claim" (Flew) p. 151
113. Tod and Philosophy, p. 150
114. This is true, as has been frequently noted, even of logical positivists.
115. Christian Apologetics, pp. 137-250 but especially pp. 137-250.
116. I shall confine myself to a discussion of Biblical criticism and Christian apologetics because I am most familiar with the Christian tradition. My comments are, however, I believe, pertinent to the study of other religious documents and the defense of other faiths.
117. See, for example, Donald Guthrie, "The Historical and Literary Criticism of the New Testament" in The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979, Vol. 1, pp. 437-456, p. 437
118. John Warwick Montgomery, "Science, Theology and the Miraculous," The Journal of The American Scientific Affiliation, Vol. 30, No. 4, Dec. 1978, pp. 145-153, p. 152.

119. David Strauss, in the introduction to Das Leben Jesu, 2 vol., Tübingen, 1835, translated by Mary Ann Evans as Life of Jesus Critically Examined, London, 1843, cited by Anthony Flew, "Miracles" in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, chief editor Paul Edwards, Macmillan, New York, 1957, vol. 5, pp. 346-353, p. 347.
120. Rudolph Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology", in Myth and Myth, ed. H.W. Bartsch, Harper and Row, New York, 1951, pp. 1-44, p. 5. - Hereafter cited as "New Testament and Mythology".
121. "New Testament and Mythology", p. 39.
122. F.H. Cramer, The Rise of Christianity, London and New York, 1927, p. 103, cited by Anthony Flew, "Miracles" in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, chief editor, Paul Edwards, Macmillan, New York, 1957, vol. 5, pp. 346-353, p. 347.
123. Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Problem of Miracles in the Apologetic Prem. History", Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation, 1971, 30, No. 4, Dec. 1970, pp. 151-153, p. 152.
124. 1 Kings 18:20-40. For the context see 1 Kings 16:29 - 1 Kings 18:20.
125. See, for example, Luke 9:18-27, Luke 10:21-34, Mark 9:31, 32.

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