

## Miracles, Divine Action, and the Christian Perspective

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**After exploring various definitions for miracle and its characteristics in Christian thought, I will consider modes of action for carrying out such events in light of an overarching position that ‘miracle’ must be defined in relation to a higher purpose. Determining what this purpose is presents greater concerns than either definitions of miracle or mechanisms of divine action in carrying out miracles.**

In an introductory biology course my professor explained the function of the spleen in the immune system as an organ that white blood cells enter so they can be activated to combat antigens in the body. At the time, I was satisfied with this description; later, I took an immunology course and quickly learned that things were not as simple as I had first heard. For a white blood cell to enter the spleen, there is a complicated process that occurs in the vessel walls of the spleen involving all sorts of cell adhesion molecules that latch onto even more types of molecules present on the vessel wall and eventually arrest the motion of the white blood cell. The white blood cell is then able to enter the spleen through a process involving numerous cell signaling molecules and the invagination of the vessel wall. At this point, the cell is inside the spleen and can become activated as described by my introductory biology course professor. There is even more detail involved than what I have just described to finish the story.

### An Analogy?

Perhaps there is an analogous process for miracles to occur. C.S. Lewis defines a miracle as supernatural interference in the natural world<sup>1</sup>. In order for a miracle to take place which conforms to the Lewis definition of the word,

something foreign must enter into the natural world and have its effect there. Just as white blood cell activation in the spleen is not the whole story when it comes to splenic activity, a miracle’s effect in nature is not all there is to address when it comes to miracles. The miracle must enter reality. The white blood cell must come into the spleen. The interface between the two realities is where the concept of divine action becomes important. It seems that most philosophers and religious thinkers prefer to speak of miracles in terms of *their activity in nature* to the neglect of the mechanism for divine action responsible for *their existence in nature*. I would like to discuss here that mechanism of divine action. Perhaps it will complement C.S. Lewis’ take on miracles in nature as well as the Christian perspective on miracles in the Bible and today.

### Defining Miracle

The flippancy with which we use the word *miracle* and its ubiquity in the English vernacular have created an atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the entire concept. This is made especially evident when one tries to objectively examine what constitutes a miracle. People often speak of “the miracle of life,” which, for most, is really just a manner of expressing wonder at the astronomical odds against our existence. Before any one of us developed into just a

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, 1947

fetus, we were a sperm and an egg. A single sperm outraces hundreds of millions of others to reach the egg and combine the genomes of the two parents. Then, as if that were not incredible enough, after a period of 9 months we each develop eyes and ears and a nervous system which is now capable of contemplating that entire process. All the while, the planet on which each of us were conceived is spinning at 460 meters per second during that very act and, more incredible still, it is the only one (to the best of our knowledge) within hundreds of light years capable of supporting organic life.

Upon investigation of the etymologic origins of the word *miracle*, it should be no surprise many regard the aforementioned events as miraculous. The English *miracle*, derives its meaning from the Latin *miraculum*, meaning ‘to wonder at.’<sup>2</sup> Spontaneous remission of a cancer (i.e. its unexplained and unpredicted disappearance from the body) is often denoted miraculous because of the 1 in 100,000 odds of occurring in a given patient; it amazes us. We *wonder at* the remission of the death sentence (although not wondering at its equally improbable cause).

Events are labeled miraculous when, from our experience, we cannot explain why they happened the way they did; we only know that it is thus. The uncertainty felt within seems to be reflected in the varied definitions of the word. For the purpose of this paper I will assume the C.S. Lewis definition of the word (a supernatural interference in the natural world), as I believe it to be the most valid and in line with popular Christian and secular thought.

### The C.S. Lewis Position

In his book *Miracles*, C.S. Lewis makes a distinction between what he calls the naturalists, who do not believe in miracles, and the supernaturalists who do.<sup>3</sup>

The former take nature to be the whole of reality. They say that nothing exists apart from nature and therefore it may not be invaded by any outside entity. The latter believe nature is not the whole of reality, and that there exists outside of nature another reality or even multiple realities. The naturalist view leaves no room for belief in miracles for if nature is all that there is, it cannot be interfered with by an outside source. It is what scientists might call a closed system. The supernaturalists view nature as an open system which gives possibility to the occurrence of miracles because it makes the claim that nature is not the entirety of reality.

I should be clear by saying, as Lewis does, that to be a supernaturalist is not to be a Christian and to be a naturalist is not the same as being an atheist. Both views leave room for the belief in a god, which may or may not turn out to be the God of Christian theology. The Christian naturalist and the Christian supernaturalist would most likely have very different images of God. The naturalist believes in a God that is not outside of reality, but within, which produces a view of God as the sum of the parts of nature just as a grandfather clock is the sum of cogs, wood and glass.

The argument against naturalism is the subject for another paper, but I believe it is very difficult to reconcile with the timelessness of God, the incarnation, and the Gospel stories, among other doctrines foundational to the Christian faith. Supernaturalism, which we will discuss here, lends itself to a view of God who is wholly discrete and set apart from nature. It supports a *creatio continua*, i.e. the ongoing involvement of God in the universe that is accepted by most theologians. Supernaturalism seems to be the most congruent with many elements of the Christian faith and is the one held by Lewis.

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<sup>2</sup> Sezgül, 2013

<sup>3</sup> *op. cit.* ref. 1

Lewis says that it would be a fallacy to assume that miracles, as in violations of natural laws, occur for the supernaturalist. Supernaturalists believe that there is a being that created what we know as nature, and this power could also have created multiple natures subject to different natural laws than the ones which we are subject to. Lewis refers to multiple realities as being like two books by the same author<sup>4</sup>. Characters in the two books have no relation to one another except for their common derivation in the mind of the author. Likewise, our reality may have no relation to another save for its common origin in the mind of the Creator. The point at which these realities overlap, or the divine being influences nature is the point at which a miracle takes place. However, their bumping into one another or the hand of the divine dipping into nature is entirely dependent on the will of the divine. The creator may choose to make this happen or may choose not to.

At this point it is important to discuss what is meant by “the laws of nature.” Lewis asserts that there are three general beliefs about the law of nature. The first is to believe that the laws we observe, say Newton’s laws, are just facts and that although these are the laws we observe, there is no inherent truth associated with them. This is to say that given some different initial condition in the creation of the universe, the law, for all we know, could be completely different (perhaps even opposite) of what it is now. The second is to hold that natural law is simply the law of averages in practice. The implication is that what we observe is really just what occurs the majority of the time. Imagine dropping an apple from atop a tall building. The apple, you rightly predict, should fall to the ground every time. But what if, 1 time in 10<sup>999</sup> the apple were to come rocketing up toward your face? This would be a violation

of a law which applies almost all of the time. The third, which Lewis subscribes to, is the belief that the law of nature has inherent truth associated with it, and it is thus mere nonsense to suggest that something may occur which is out of accordance with that law.

It can be easily seen that the first two beliefs described in the previous paragraph do not bar miracles from happening. Although something may have happened in some particular manner yesterday, it does not follow that the same should occur today. And just because the apple falls downward a hundred million times, does not mean that it may not race towards the sky every now and then.

Much of the controversy surrounding the definition of “miracle” stems from a disagreement on whether it must be a violation of the law of nature or not. Hume, for example, said that miracles are in complete contradiction to the law of nature, and that because an “unalterable experience has established these laws” nothing can happen that contradicts them<sup>5</sup>. Lewis admits that the final belief, which implies the uniformity of the natural law in space and time, seems to pose a threat to the possibility of miracles for the same reason that Hume suggests. It is at this point he claims that a miracle, contrary to popular belief (and that of Hume), is *not* an event that defies the law of nature.

Rather than a *deviance* from a law of nature, Lewis says that a miracle is the overlapping of two realities in which the activity of the supernatural power is completely subject to, and even dependent on, the natural law. In reference to the miracles of Christ, Lewis says, “miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy...” This is to say that once God decides to influence reality (however he may choose to do so), the

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *op. cit.* ref. 2

events that follow have a completely natural explanation<sup>6</sup>. At any given moment, we may not be able to explain a certain miracle. But given all relevant facts surrounding the event, and if enough is known about the laws governing that event, it is right that we should expect to eventually have a logical explanation.

Many might suggest that the progress of science has made it more impossible to believe in miracles. Lewis, however, asserts that a greater awareness of the natural law, which is achieved through scientific investigation, increases our ability to know that if some supernatural power interferes in nature, what we had predicted as the outcome of any particular event must deviate from our initial prediction. In other words, the more we know about cancer, the more we know when something incredible has happened that seems to defy the doctor's prognosis.

It is at the point of assuming that miracles do not defy any natural law that I must take issue with Lewis. My issue is that upon the *reaching in* of the supernatural into the natural world (i.e. analogously, when white blood cells first enter the spleen), it *seems* that some law of nature has been broken. Sure, the wine may make you drunk, but it must first turn into wine. A virgin birth may occur, but at some point a sperm that has not entered the body via the normal route must fertilize an egg. Unfortunately Lewis does not address this issue, at least directly. We must assume that Lewis implies that God *somehow* knows how to influence natural laws without violation ... but, to our eyes, it looks as if an *interference* has occurred.

## Divine Action

I do not feel as if Lewis was wrong in his argument, but I believe he did not explain quite well enough. Although it may

appear as if natural law were broken when the water initially turned to wine, I would suggest that rather than being broken, the natural law was superseded. We see the same take place in our judicial system. There are times when dealing with laws pertaining to civil rights where a federal law overrides a state law. If a state has in place a law that treads on the civil rights of one of its citizens, the state almost certainly faces trouble at the federal level. The federal law is greater; it takes precedence. With miracles, let us liken the laws governing nature to the state laws, and those governing the supernatural to the federal laws. When a supernatural power supersedes a natural law, the supernatural law overrules the natural law resulting not in a violation of the natural law, but rather in the adherence to the supernatural law. This is where the metaphor breaks down because any one event inserted into nature first finds itself subject to supernatural law (in the very act of insertion), and soon afterwards finds itself to be within the jurisdiction of the natural law.

Pollard suggests that God uses the uncertainty in the behavior of quantum particles as his playground for bringing about his action in the world.<sup>7</sup> Jeeves and Berry take this thought a step further by combining it with the 'chaotic systems' that Ed Lorenz discovered in the 1960's. Lorenz, a meteorologist, discovered that when attempting to predict weather patterns if he altered some initial value of the weather conditions by some fraction of a decimal the forecast was drastically effected. This became known as 'the butterfly effect.' The idea is that a simple change in some initial condition is magnified to produce outcomes very different from those originally predicted.

This theory for divine action seems to me to be very complimentary to Lewis'

<sup>6</sup> *op. cit.* ref. 1

<sup>7</sup> Jeeves and Berry, 1998

theories surrounding miracles. It helps to explain how an increased knowledge of natural laws, rather than pushing miracles into irrelevancy, show us that miracles *must* occur once the initial conditions surrounding an event have changed. In a chaotic system, God may use the tiniest manipulations of particles to bring about his will. A cancer may be cured because he moves some particle to the left or to the right in a tumor, and once left alone that change is amplified by way of the natural law to the amazement of the doctors and the patient.

## Christianity and Miracles

The concept of a miracle undoubtedly has religious connotations associated with it. The Gospel is full of accounts of miraculous events recorded by the apostles of Jesus. You would be hard-pressed to find a Christian who does not believe in at least one or two of the miracles of Christ recorded in the Bible. Most would say that the miracle of the incarnation and the resurrection are essential beliefs for the Christ follower. Wayne Jackson says that the miracles of Jesus always had a specific, redemptive purpose<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, he says that the miracles performed by Jesus had the purpose of confirming that he was the son of God. Much like the signet ring of a king, which has on it a unique seal that no one but the king possesses, the miraculous works of Jesus were used as a sort of sign to give credibility to Jesus as the son of God.

As mentioned earlier, a supernaturalist view does not require belief in miracles; the will of the divine (in this case God) may be to not act in nature. Spinoza argued that the will of God cannot be known through his miracles because miracles “are events that are not understood and thus cannot be the basis of true knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> In opposition to this, even

though miracles may not be completely understood they may still be experienced via one’s five senses. If the scriptural witness is to be believed, the writers who recorded miracles in scripture apparently experienced them via those five senses. Perhaps one can make assumptions about the will of God from these descriptions just as we can make assumptions about a person’s will based on what we see them do and hear them say.

Throughout the biblical witness, the primary function of miracles is redemptive. The entire reason for healings, for example, always returns to providing a rationale for belief and to glorify God. For us today, the question becomes whether the will of God is to continue acting via miracles in modern times as it was in biblical times. If we agree that it is, then miracles today must still have that same redemptive purpose. If we disagree, then either the will of God regarding redemption has changed or he has a different way of carrying out that will. It seems doubtful that God’s redemptive plan has changed since the death and resurrection of Christ. However, perhaps God no longer has as great of a need to make himself known to the world in such an extravagant way as miracles. With over 2 billion Christians in the world to help perform redemptive tasks, God may rely on us to perform them.

## Conclusion

C.S. Lewis holds that miracles are events which have a supernatural cause, but are subject to natural law.<sup>10</sup> Rather than defying natural law, miracles defy what we may predict would be the outcome of some specific event. This is because God feeds an unseen element into the event, which changes its outcome. Although Lewis does a fine job of describing this process, it seems that he neglects to discuss divine action as it

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, 2012

<sup>9</sup> Harvey, 2013

<sup>10</sup> *op. cit.* ref. 1

relates to miracles. I believe that a 'chaotic' God theory blends nicely with Lewis' ideas.<sup>11</sup> To be a supernaturalist who believes God may use chaotic magnification of initial conditions to perform miracles is not to say that he does, in fact, perform them today. An investigation of the will of God is necessary to determine if miracles still occur. A close

look at the miracles in the Bible may help one to reach a conclusion as to what is the will of God. It is a difficult question to answer, but it is easier to approach with an understanding of what constitutes a miracle and what its mechanism for action in the natural world may be.

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<sup>11</sup> *op. cit.* ref. 7