

Are Miracles Identifiable?

1. Some naturalists argue that no matter how unusual an event is it cannot be identified as a miracle.
 1. If this argument is valid, it has serious implications for those who believe in miracles.
 1. It would mean that no unusual event that lays claim to divine origin could be considered a miracle.
 2. Theistic religions like Judaism and Christianity, in which miraculous claims are central, could not actually identify any of their unusual events as miracles, no matter how much evidence they could produce for the authenticity of these events.
 2. There are two aspects to the case for the identifiability of miracles.
 1. Miracles in general must be identifiable before a particular miracle can be identified.
 2. Certain distinguishing marks should serve to identify a specific event as a miracle.
2. Alastair McKinnon's Argument Against Miracles.
 1. According to some, miracles cannot be identified because the concept of a miracle is not coherent.
 1. Alastair McKinnon claims that "the idea of a suspension of natural law is self-contradictory. This follows from the meaning of the term."
 2. For if natural laws are descriptive, as we have suggested, then they merely inform us about the actual course of events.
 3. But nothing, McKinnon says, can violate the actual course of events.
 4. The contradiction stands out more clearly if we substitute "the actual course of events" for "natural law."
 5. A miracle would then be defined as "an event involving the suspension of the actual course of events."
 6. Therefore, a person who insisted upon describing an event as a miracle would be in a rather odd position of claiming that its occurrence was contrary to the actual course of events.
 2. McKinnon's argument can be summarized as follows:
 1. Natural laws describe the actual course of events.
 2. A miracle is a violation of natural law.
 3. But it is impossible to violate the actual course of events (what is, is; what happens, happens).
 4. Therefore, miracles are impossible.

3. If this is true, then miracles cannot be identified in the natural world, since whatever happens will not be a miracle.
 1. But herein lies the first and most basic problem with this argument.
 1. If whatever happens is ipso facto a natural event, then of course miracles never happen.
 2. This however begs the question; this definition of natural law is loaded against miracles because no matter what happens within the world is by definition a natural event.
 3. This eliminates in advance by definition the possibility of any event in the world ever being a miracle.
 4. This fails to recognize even the possibility that not every event in the world is of the world; it fails to recognize that a miracle can be an effect in nature by a cause that is beyond nature.
 2. This leads to a second objection -- McKinnon has incorrectly defined natural law.
 1. Natural law should not be defined as what actually happens, but as what regularly happens.
 2. While it is true that natural laws are descriptive, they do not just describe what happens; they describe what happens in a regular and predictable way.
 3. Thus, when what happens is entirely irregular and unpredictable, its occurrence is not something describable by natural laws.
 4. Miracles can fall into the class of the irregular and unpredictable.
 5. At any rate they cannot be ruled out simply by defining natural law as what actually occurs.
 3. Third, since natural laws deal with regularities and miracles with singularities, miracles cannot possibly be violations of natural laws.
 1. They are not even in the same class of events.
 2. A miracle is not a mini-natural law; it is a unique kind of event that has its own identifying characteristics (subject of a later study).
 3. Therefore, to claim that miracles do not happen (or should not be believed to have happened), because they do not fall into the class of natural events is a category mistake.
 4. By the same logic we might as well say that no book has an intelligent cause because its origin cannot be explained by the operational laws of physics and chemistry.
3. Another Objection to Identifying Miracles.
 1. Some philosophers object to miracles because miracles are regarded as

contrary to the very nature of the scientific procedure for handling irregular or exceptional events.

1. When Scientists come upon an irregular or anomalous event they do not posit a miracle but simple revise their view and posit a broader natural law that includes this event.
2. To do otherwise would be to forsake the scientific method.
3. It would be to place a "No Trespassing" sign on certain events in the natural world; but any event in the natural world is fair game for science.
4. If it were, it would stultify scientific research; a belief that certain events were miraculous would bar further scientific exploration.
5. Hence, acceptance of miracles violates the proper domain of science.
6. The argument can be summarized this way:
 1. A miracle is an exception to natural law.
 2. In science exceptions are goads to a better explanation, not an indication to stop research.
 3. Hence, an acceptance of miracles would stop scientific research and progress. [This argument is specious. Its proponents cannot name one scientific discovery or benefit that must be surrendered or that would not have been discovered because of a belief in miracles and the God who enabled them.]
2. Two things should be noted in response to this objection.
 1. Like the previous objection, it begs the question by insisting that every event is by its very nature a natural event.
 1. It what ever happens -- no matter how unique and unrepeatable -- must not be considered a miracle, then miracles have been eliminated in advance by definition. [Cannot define a person, place, or thing negatively, unless every possibility is eliminated, e.g., a cow cannot be defined by saying "It is not a horse."]
 2. In short, it is a form of methodological naturalism since the very method it chooses to use does not admit the possibility of any event's ever being considered as a miracle.
 2. Some theists have pointed out that there is nothing in the scientific method that demands that all exceptional events be naturally caused but only that repeatable exceptions be so caused.
 1. If an exception to one natural law is not repeatable, then scientists have no right to posit a new law because if it is not a repeatable event then science has to right to claim that it is a natural event.
 2. Nonrepeatable exceptions to natural laws do not change those laws;

they leave them intact so there is no violation of a scientist's right to do science.

3. Since scientific laws are based on the regular and repeatable, scientists as scientists have no right to insist that every irregular and nonrepeatable event is also a natural event.
4. To do so goes beyond science and reveals a naturalistic bias against miracles.
5. In effect, it erects its own "No Trespassing" sign on the word, one that demands "No Deity Allowed Here."
6. If there is a God, then he cannot be locked out of the world that He created (the ultimate exceptional act); he certainly has the power to produce occasional but naturally unrepeatable exceptional acts within His world.

3. Thus, the only effective way to disprove miracles is to disprove God.

4. Flew's Argument Against the Identifiability of Miracles.

1. The basic objection to miracles by contemporary naturalists is not ontological but epistemological, i.e., miracles are not rejected because they are known not to have occurred, but because they are not (or cannot be) known to have occurred.
2. Flew's objection is of this category.
 1. Flew begins with this definition of a miracle: "A miracle is something which would never have happened had nature, as it were, been left to its own devices."
 1. He quotes Thomas Aquinas in support: ". . . it is not against the principle of craftsmanship . . . if a craftsman effects a change in his product, even after he has given it its first form."
 2. Not only is this power inherent in the idea of craftsmanship, so is the mind of the craftsman.
 3. So, too, a miracle bears the unmistakable mark not only of power but of divine mind.
 4. A miracle, then, is "a striking interposition of divine power by which the operations of the ordinary course of nature are overruled, suspended, or modified."
 2. Accepting this theistic definition of miracles, Flew goes on to insist that "exceptions are logic dependent upon rules. 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.
 3. Flew quotes historian R.M. Grant to the effect that "credulity in antiquity

varied inversely with the health of science and directly with the vigor of religion.

1. In short, miracles are prima facie improbable.
 2. David Strauss, a nineteenth-century biblical critic, is even more skeptical: "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.
 3. According to Flew, such skepticism is justified on a methodological basis.
 1. Flew claims to be willing to allow (in principle, at least) for the possibility of miracles (see lesson 3).
 2. In actual practice, however, he argues that there is a serious, if not insurmountable, problem -- the problem of identifying a miracle.
5. The first statement of Flew's argument.
1. The argument against miracles from their unidentifiability may be summarized as follows:
 1. A miracle must be identifiable (distinguishable) before it can be known to have occurred.
 2. There are only two ways to identify (distinguish) a miracle: in terms of nature or in terms of the supernatural.
 3. But to identify it by reference to the supernatural (as an act of God) begs the question.
 4. And to identify it in reference to the natural event robs it of its supernaturalness.
 5. Therefore, miracles cannot be known to have occurred since there is no way to identify them.
 2. Flew insists, against Augustine, that if a miracle is merely "a portent [which] is not contrary to nature, but contrary to our knowledge of nature," then it has no real apologetic value since, if a miracle is merely a relativistic event to us at present, then it provides no proof that a revelation it alleges to support is really true.
 1. That is to say, whereas Augustine's notion of a miracle would assure the dependence of creation on God, it would do so only at the cost of subverting the apologetic value of a miracle.
 2. For if a miracle is not really beyond the power of nature, but only contrary to our knowledge of nature, then a miracle is after all nothing but a natural event.

3. In any event, we could not know that a miracle has really occurred, only that it seems to us that one did.
3. Flew's point can be stated in another way.
 1. In order to identify a miracle within nature, the identification of that miracle must be in terms of what is independent of nature.
 2. But there is no way to identify a miracle as independent of the natural except by appealing to a supernatural realm, which begs the question.
 3. In effect it argues, "I know (on some independent basis) that there is a supernatural cause beyond the natural world."
 4. On the other hand, there is no natural way to identify a miracle since, unless it is already known (on independent grounds) that the event is miraculous, then it must be considered to be another natural event.
 5. From the scientific point of view, it is just "odd" or inconsistent with previously known events.
 6. Such an event should not occasion worship but should simply stimulate research for a broader scientific law that could include it.
4. From this Flew argues that it would follow that no alleged miraculous event can be used to prove that a religious system is true.
 1. That is to say, miracles can have no apologetic value.
 2. We cannot argue that God exists because an event is an act of God.
 3. For unless there is already a God who can act, there cannot be an act of God.
 4. In short, either the alleged miraculous event is known to be such because it is part of a supernatural system (which begs the question), or else we must be able to identify the event as supernatural from a strictly naturalistic perspective.
 5. But according to Flew, this is impossible, since an unusual event in the natural realm is, from a strictly naturalistic perspective, a strictly natural event.
6. The second statement of Flew's argument.
 1. The heart of Flew's argument now comes into focus; miracles are not identifiable because there is no way to define them without begging the question.
 2. The reasoning proceeds thus:
 1. A miracle must be identifiable before it can be identified.
 2. A miracle is identified in only one of two ways -- either as an unusual event in nature, or as an exception to nature.
 3. But an unusual event in nature is simply a natural event, not a miracle.

4. And an exception to nature cannot be known (i.e., identified) from within nature alone.
5. Therefore, a miracle is not identifiable.
3. Of course, what is not identifiable has no evidential value, i.e., it cannot be used to prove anything, as many do to prove the truth of Christianity.
7. A Response to Flew's Argument.
 1. What is right about his argument?
 1. His first premise is solid - we must know what we are looking for before we can ever know if we have found it; if we cannot define it then we can not be sure we have discovered it.
 2. There is no way to define miracles in terms of natural events because then miracles would be reduced to natural events.
 3. To define them in terms of a supernatural cause (God), however, is to suppose that God exists.
 4. Therefore, miracles cannot be used as an evidence of God's existence; they presuppose the existence of God.
 5. In short, the supernaturalist argues in a circle.
 2. What is wrong about Flew's argument?
 1. Some reply by saying that "It takes one to know one."
 1. We have seen that Flew as well as all of the arguments that we have seen against miracles beg the question or use circular reasoning.
 2. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander so to speak.
 3. By what right do they use circular reasoning yet deny that right to theists.
 2. But must theists just assume the existence of God?
 1. Is there a rational justification for belief in God?
 2. By rational justification is meant a sound argument.
 1. Sound arguments are comprised of only true premises from which a valid conclusion is drawn.
 2. The following premises are all apparently true.
 3. How they are known to be true and with what degree of certainty is unimportant here as long as it is reasonable to believe they are true.
 4. It is noteworthy to point out, however, that even non-theists hold them to be true.
 3. These premises are:
 1. Something exists.

1. This premise is undeniably true, since we cannot consistently deny that everything exists including ourselves.
2. We must exist before we can deny that anything exists.
2. Nothing cannot cause something; only something can cause something.
 1. Even Hume wrote, "I never asserted so absurd a proposition that anything might arise without a cause."
 2. It seems obvious enough that absolutely nothing has absolutely no power to cause anything.
 3. It is a fundamental presupposition of scientific exploration that "every event has a cause."
3. The effect cannot be greater than its cause.
 1. It is generally accepted that every effect resembles its cause in some significant manner.
 2. Water can rise no higher than its source is one way of saying that the cause must be equal to the effect in some significant way (although not necessarily in every way).
 3. Computers, for example, do not resemble their creators in every respect, but what they are programmed to do is no better than their programmer (GIGO).
 4. It is not legitimate to point to a student's exam and say that it bears no significant resemblance to the pen that produced those marks on the paper, because there is only an accidental relationship between the pen (which is only an instrumental cause of the exam) and the exam.
 5. On the other hand, there is an essential relationship between the student's mind (the efficient cause of the exam) and the exam.
 6. It is in this latter sense that an effect resembles its efficient cause.
4. Now granting that these premises are true -- and it seems reasonable to believe that they are -- then all that remains is to put them together in a valid way for the resulting argument to be a sound one.
 1. That is, a valid conclusion from true premises will yield a true conclusion.
 2. The following is a widely held theistic argument based on these three premises.
 1. If something exists and if nothing cannot cause something, then

- it follows that something must necessarily and eternally exist.
2. It must eternally exist since, if nothing ever was, then nothing could now be.
 3. But something undeniably now is.
 4. Therefore, something always has been.
 5. Likewise, something must always have been because nothing cannot cause something.
 6. But if something is and if nothing cannot cause something, then it follows that something must necessarily always have been.
 7. And, since the cause must bear some significant similarity to its effect, which is an intelligent moral being, then it is reasonable to posit an intelligent, moral cause of everything else that exists.
 8. If this is so, then the theistic argument for God is sound.
 9. And if God exists, then there is a supernatural realm by which a supernatural event can be identified in the natural world.