

The Supernatural and the Miraculous

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Abstract Both intention-based and causation-based definitions of the miraculous make reference to the term ‘supernatural’. Philosophers who define the miraculous appear to use this term in a loose way, perhaps meaning the nonnatural, perhaps meaning a subcategory of the nonnatural. Here I examine the aetiology of the term ‘supernatural’. I consider three outstanding issues regarding the meaning of the term and conclude that the supernatural is best understood as a subcategory of the nonnatural. In light of this clarification, I argue that a prominent causation-based definition of the miraculous should be revised so as not refer to the supernatural. I further argue that authors of intention-based definitions of the miraculous need to consider whether or not they should continue to refer to the supernatural, in their definitions of the miraculous, in light of the conclusions discerned here.

Keywords Supernatural · Nonnatural · Miracle · Causation-based definition · Intention-based definition

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Introduction

Philosophers who have attempted to define the miraculous have often done so in a way that involves reference to supernatural agency. According to Paul Dietl, ‘To call an event a miracle is to attribute it to the will of a supernatural agent and to claim that if the supernatural agent had not intervened that event would not have taken place.’¹ On my view, ‘A miracle is an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a supernatural agent.’^{2,3} A second approach to the analysis of the miraculous, due to Stephen Mumford⁴, makes no reference to supernatural agency but is focused on supernatural causation instead. According to Mumford, a miracle is ‘a natural event E with a supernatural cause E_s .’⁵ Unfortunately, none of these authors tell us exactly what they mean by the term ‘supernatural’.

In this article I attend to the term ‘supernatural’. I argue that the term is more problematic than the various philosophers who have appealed to the supernatural in their analysis of the miraculous have supposed. Philosophers who have appealed to the supernatural in their analysis of the miraculous appear to have used the term in a loose way, perhaps meaning the nonnatural, perhaps meaning a subcategory of the nonnatural. I argue that the supernatural is best understood as a subcategory of the nonnatural. Definitions of the miraculous that make reference to the supernatural need to be reconsidered in light of this clarification.

I consider the two types of definitions of the miraculous, above, and I argue that proponents of Mumford’s causation-based definition of the miraculous should not refer to the supernatural, but should refer to the nonnatural. I also argue that proponents of intention-based definitions of the miraculous will need to consider whether they should continue to refer to the supernatural, the nonnatural or the merely nonnatural (the nonnatural that is not supernatural) in their definitions of the miraculous, in light of the conclusions about the supernatural discerned here.

The Supernatural

To attach a meaning to the ‘supernatural’, we also need to attach a meaning to the term ‘natural’. This is because the supernatural stands in a particular relation to the natural. According to Stinson, the supernatural is literally ‘above the measure of

¹ Dietl, P. ‘On Miracles’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 5 (1968) 130–134, p. 131.

² Clarke, S. ‘Hume’s Definition of Miracles Revised’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999) 49–57, p. 54.

³ Dietl and I both take our cue from Hume, who tells us that, ‘A miracle may be accurately defined, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent’. Hume, D. *Of Miracles*, edited by A. Flew, (La Salle: Open Court, 1986), p. 149.

⁴ Mumford, S. ‘Miracles: Metaphysics and Modality’, *Religious Studies* 37 (2001) 191–202. Mumford’s analysis of the miraculous is defended from subsequent criticism by Morgan Luck. See Luck, M. ‘In Defence of Mumford’s Definition of a Miracle’, *Religious Studies* 39 (2003) 465–469.

⁵ Mumford, S. (2001), p. 192.

nature'.⁶ Early Christian scholars thought of nature as the state of humanity in Eden, a state from which we have now fallen. The thought that we should aspire to return to nature made use of the concept 'supernatural' problematic.⁷ Of course, God could still be understood to stand 'above the measure of nature' even before the fall, so the word supernatural was not altogether without use, given this Biblical conception of nature. However, the uses to which it could uncontroversially be put were very limited.

The Ancient Greeks and others used the term 'nature' in a way that is more familiar to modern ears, using it to refer to the world of their experience and its contents. This modern usage gradually supplanted the older Biblical conception of nature. From this more familiar point of view there was much that could potentially be understood as being 'above the measure of nature'. Any event that was unusual or unexpected, given the understanding of nature that was current at a particular time, was a potential instance of the supernatural. The term supernatural remained problematic, however, insofar as those who used the term remained unclear about what constituted the limits of the natural. Consequently, medieval scholars were generally wary of the term 'supernatural'.⁸ In the absence of a clear way of identifying the boundaries of nature, the most influential medieval conception of the supernatural was a 'contingency' or 'relative' conception according to which what counted as supernatural was dependent on what was taken to count as natural. On this view, kangaroos might count as supernatural if they were deemed not to be a legitimate part of nature. However, they would cease to be supernatural beings as soon as conceptions of the natural were suitably revised to accommodate kangaroos.⁹

The Roman Catholic Church officially adopted the term supernatural in 1567, when a decree was issued against the view that Adam's spiritual endowments in Eden were merely natural.¹⁰ This official sanctioning of the term 'supernatural' proved timely, given the rise of the 17th century mechanistic world view, which provided a vantage point from which a less problematic sense could be given to the term 'supernatural'. By the 17th century, the dominant view, especially amongst scientists, was that we inhabited a mechanistic universe in which Nature was conceived of as being a discrete orderly realm governed by immutable laws. If the natural world was a mechanism created by an omnipotent God, then it seems that that God could also intervene in the natural world, violating the laws of nature that

⁶ Stinson, C. 'The Finite Supernatural: Theological Perspectives', *Religious Studies* 9, (1973) 325–337, p. 327.

⁷ See Ward, G. 'Supernaturalism'. In J. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*. (New York: MacMillan Reference, 2003) 846–848, p. 846.

⁸ See Stinson (1973). Stinson notes that Aquinas is an exception to this generalisation. *Ibid*, p. 326.

⁹ The contingency conception of the supernatural typically goes hand in hand with a 'contingency' conception of miracles. Augustine is representative of the mainstream in his era when he tells us that miracles – and by implication other instances of the supernatural – are not 'contrary to nature' but contrary to 'Our knowledge of nature.' Cited in Harrison, P. 'Newtonian Science, Miracles and the Laws of Nature'. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, (1995) 531–553, p. 533. R. F. Holland is a recent defender of a contingency conception of miracles. See Holland, R. F. 'The Miraculous', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, (1965) 43–51.

¹⁰ See Stinson (1973), p. 327.

He had created. By providing us with a clear sense of the natural, Newton and others paved the way for the widespread usage of a reasonably clear sense of the supernatural, as that which has its recent origin in powers that are not part of the natural realm. This non-relative or metaphysical usage continues to be dominant to this day.¹¹

Although we now find ourselves able to ascribe a reasonably clear meaning to the term supernatural, this does not mean that there are no issues surrounding the meaning of the term supernatural that remain unresolved. Three issues stand out. First, the demarcation between the natural and the supernatural on the basis of the notion of a violation of a law of nature is somewhat problematic. Second, the old contingency conception of the supernatural is alive and kicking. Third, we need to grapple with the relation between the supernatural and the nonnatural. We will consider these three issues in turn. I will argue that the third issue has a direct bearing on our discussion of the definition of miracles.

Our first problem is that the demarcation between the natural and the supernatural on the basis of the notion of a violation of a law of nature is problematic. The coherence of the idea that a law could be violated was a subject of dispute in the 17th century¹² and it continues to be disputed.¹³ Now I do not think that this issue is as crucial to the coherence of the metaphysical conception of the ‘supernatural’ as it might first appear. Naturalistic philosophers typically seek to define the natural in ontological terms. For example, Roy Wood Sellars tells us that ‘... by Nature is meant the space–time causal system, which is studied by science and in which our lives are passed’.¹⁴ David Armstrong is also a naturalist and he understands naturalism to be ‘... the doctrine that reality consists of nothing but a single all-embracing spatio-temporal system’.¹⁵

At least *qua* naturalists, neither Sellars nor Armstrong is committed to the view that the natural world is fully law-governed. Nor are they claiming that the idea of something that is not contained within the ‘space–time causal system’/‘all-embracing spatio-temporal system’ is incoherent. They are only claiming that we lack evidence to warrant belief in the existence of such nonnatural entities and beings. However, if the natural world is not necessarily fully law-governed and if the existence of nonnatural entities and beings is logically possible, then it also seems logically possible that nonnatural entities and beings could intervene in the natural world without violating any particular laws of nature. Therefore, it is possible to make a coherent sense of supernatural intervention in the natural world without invoking violations of laws of nature. What is crucial to enable sense to be made of the

¹¹ However, Ward (2003, p. 848) argues, following Bauman, that the onset of postmodernity involves a ‘re-enchantment’ of the natural world. So for example, the contemporary fantasy writer J. K. Rowling does not follow the traditional path of fantasy writers, imagining the existence of a fantastic world that is discrete from this one. Instead, she postulates the existence of fantastic aspects of this world that are, for the most part, hidden from human viewing.

¹² See Harrison (1995).

¹³ Morgan Luck is a recent defender of the coherence of the concept of a violation of laws of nature. See Luck, M. ‘Against the Possibility of Historical Evidence for Miracles’, *Sophia* 44 (2005) 7–23.

¹⁴ Sellars, R. W. ‘Why Naturalism and Not Materialism.’ *Philosophical Review* 36 (1927) 216–225.

¹⁵ Armstrong, D. ‘Naturalism, Materialism and First Philosophy.’ In D. Armstrong. *The Nature of Mind and Other Essays*. (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981), p. 149.

concept 'supernatural' is that we have a coherent way of talking about the natural that leaves conceptual space open for the possibility of the supernatural, and this can be accomplished without appealing to violations of laws of nature.

A second problem for the non-relative conception of the supernatural is that the relativistic conception of the supernatural has not gone away. Liberal Christians have generally been unhappy with a robustly metaphysical conception of the supernatural, seeing it as an obstacle to faith, caused by the lack of affinity that most people are alleged to have with the supernatural and related concepts. According to Peter Forrest, '... the rejection of the supernatural is second only to the argument from evil as a contemporary intellectual obstacle to faith.'¹⁶ He proposes that this obstacle '... be removed by showing that Christianity is so 'down to Earth' that it requires nothing supernatural'.¹⁷ This unhappiness with a metaphysical conception of the supernatural can be addressed by trying to show how Christianity can do without the supernatural.¹⁸ However, it can also be addressed by trying to revive relativistic conceptions of the supernatural, a development that has the effect of narrowing the conceptual gap between the natural and the supernatural.

Recent revivers of the relativistic conception of the supernatural include Peter Winch¹⁹ and David Cockburn, who sees talk of the supernatural as being '... grounded in a primitive response of wonder ...'.²⁰ Now I do not think that proponents of a metaphysical conception of the supernatural need have any objection to this kind of talk. Indeed, it may be the most appropriate way of understanding some instances of talk of the supernatural. There is no reason why all talk of the supernatural should have to be analysed using one unifying conception. Unless recent proponents of the relativistic conception of the supernatural introduce decisive arguments that rule uses of the non-relative or metaphysical conception of the supernatural to be illegitimate, then it seems that the metaphysical conception of the supernatural remains legitimate, regardless of the degree of credibility of the relativistic conception of the supernatural. So, the recent revival of the relativistic conception of the supernatural should not itself be regarded as a threat to the legitimacy of the metaphysical conception of the supernatural.

Our third problem is the relation between the nonnatural and the supernatural. It is easy to fall into talking loosely about the supernatural as if it were simply a different name for the nonnatural. However, we should bear in mind that the supernatural is, by definition, supposed to stand in a particular relation to the natural; it is, as we have seen, supposed to be 'above' nature in some significant sense. And it seems plausible to think that there are possible nonnatural agents and entities that are not 'above' nature in any significant sense. So the supernatural does not exhaust the possible nonnatural.

¹⁶ Forrest, P. 'Mark Wynn's Defence of "The Supernatural"', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 75 (2001) 101–104, p. 104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁸ Forrest, P. *God without the Supernatural: A Defence of Scientific Theism*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). A theological opponent of the supernatural is Paul Tillich. See Tillich, P. *Systematic Theology. Three Volumes*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963), vol 2. 5 f.

¹⁹ Winch, P. *Simone Weil: 'The Just Balance'*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²⁰ Cockburn, D. 'The Supernatural', *Religious Studies* 28 (1992) 285–301, p. 289.

Suppose we take R.W. Sellars' or Armstrong's naturalistic account of natural, introduced earlier. From these points of view, God the creator would count as a supernatural being. As the creator of the natural Universe He is above nature in a relevant sense. Consider, however, a possible world that is wholly unconnected to the natural world and is not based on a spatio-temporal system at all. Such a world is simply different from the natural world and is not above the natural world in any relevant sense. Therefore, it is a nonnatural and non-supernatural world. It seems that we must recognize the possibility of the nonnatural that is inclusive of the supernatural and the nonnatural that is exclusive of the supernatural. The natural and the supernatural are contraries, but they are not contradictories.

Another philosopher who holds that the natural and the supernatural are contraries but not contradictories is Peter Forrest. Motivated, as we have seen, by a liberal Christian concern to make God accessible to potential believers, Forrest develops a series of ingenious arguments to support the conclusion that Christianity requires belief in the nonnatural, but not belief in the supernatural.²¹ Forrest holds that Christian belief is warrantable on the basis of a series of inferences by analogy from well-understood features of the natural. He argues, for example, that we are entitled to infer to the existence of a nonnatural God by analogy to human consciousness and we are able to infer to the existence of an afterlife by analogy to our current lives. All core features of Christian belief are treated in this fashion by Forrest.²² According to him, these inferences are not inferences to the existence of supernatural beings and states of affairs. Instead, they are inferences to the existence of nonnatural beings and states of affairs that are also non-supernatural. For Forrest, the term 'supernatural' designates a category of possible nonnatural beings, entities and states of affairs that are radically disanalogous with the natural.

Note that Forrest is not arguing that the supernatural is not possible. Instead, he is arguing that we are not warranted in inferring to the existence of the supernatural. It is possible that the afterlife might be radically disanalogous to natural lives. It is possible, for example, that we would not exist as individuals in the afterlife but as parts of a greater being. For Forrest, such a hypothesis would presumably count as a supernatural hypothesis that is possible but not warranted.

Reconsidering the Definitions

We have recognized distinctions between the nonnatural, the supernatural and the nonnatural that is non-supernatural. I will refer to this last category as the 'merely nonnatural'. These are distinctions that have not hitherto been recognised by the various philosophers who have appealed to the supernatural in their definitions of the miraculous. Having recognized these distinctions, we should re-examine prominent instances of the two types of definitions of miracles that are currently influential and see if and how they require modification.

²¹ Forrest (1996).

²² Ibid.

Let us begin with Mumford's causation-based definition of miracles.²³ Causation-based definitions of miracles part company from intention-based definitions of miracles in allowing natural events that result from a supernatural cause, but which are not intended by a supernatural agent, to count as miracles.²⁴ On Mumford's definition of miracles, a natural event that was caused by an intention-lacking supernatural machine would count as miraculous, whereas on an intention-based definition of miracles the occurrence of such an event would not count as a miracle.²⁵ It seems, however, that we can make a distinction between a supernatural machine and a merely nonnatural machine and that both might be capable of causing natural events. Suppose that there was a nonnatural machine involved in the creation of the natural world. Plausibly, such a machine is 'above' nature in a relevant sense and therefore a supernatural machine. Consider, however, the case of a nonnatural machine that has no significant relationship with the natural world before its intervening in the natural world. *Prima facie*, it seems that there is no good reason to count such a machine amongst the supernatural, so it is merely nonnatural. On Mumford's definition of the miraculous, the interference of this merely nonnatural machine in the natural world, not being supernatural activity, would not count as a miracle.

Should proponents of Mumford's causation-based definition of miracles be happy that, on their favoured definition, an instance of the interference of a merely nonnatural machine in the natural world would not count as a miracle, whereas an instance of the interference of a supernatural machine in the natural world would count as a miracle? It seems that they should be unhappy about this state of affairs and should be willing to modify Mumford's causation-based definition of miracles accordingly. There are two reasons for this conclusion. The first reason is that there do not seem to be any good grounds that can be discerned from the writings of either Mumford or Luck, to motivate inconsistent treatment of the supernatural and the merely nonnatural. If we accept that the interference of a supernatural machine in the natural world counts as a miracle, then it would seem deeply mysterious if we were to fail to count the interference of a merely nonnatural machine in the natural world as a miracle as well.

The second reason is that this would tell against the inclusiveness of Mumford's causation-based definition of miracles. An attractive feature of Mumford's causation-based definition of miracles, identified by Luck, is that this definition can be utilised by the advocates of a wider range of religions than intention-based definitions of miracles can; in particular, it can be utilised by advocates of religions that do not conceive of the supernatural as having intentions.²⁶ It seems that, all things being

²³ Mumford (2001).

²⁴ See Clarke, S. 'Response to Mumford and Another Definition of Miracles' *Religious Studies* 39, (2003) 459–463.

²⁵ Mumford (2001), p. 192; Clarke (2003), p. 461; Luck (2003), p. 468.

²⁶ Luck (2003). Luck uses the term 'religious neutrality' as a synonym of 'inclusive'. However, I have avoided using the term religious neutrality here because it is liable to be understood in other senses. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out this problem.

equal, it is desirable that the definition of a term allows it to be used by advocates of all of the actual religions that may have a use for the term, so it seems that Luck is right to point to inclusiveness as an attractive feature of Mumford's causation-based definition.²⁷

If the category of the miraculous was taken to exclude cases of natural events that have a merely nonnatural cause, then we would fail to be as inclusive of some actual religious perspectives. God, as understood by Peter Forrest and like-minded anti-supernaturalists, is a merely nonnatural agent. It seems possible that this merely nonnatural God could deliberately intervene in the natural world and such interventions would not count as miracles on Mumford's unreformed view.²⁸ However, this seems absurd. Surely God's deliberate interventions in the natural world are core instances of miraculous activity. The problem is solved by amending Mumford's causation-based definition of miracles to make it inclusive of the merely nonnatural and the supernatural. This is done by making reference to the inclusive term 'nonnatural' in the definition. So the amended definition will read:

(D) a miracle =_{df} a natural event E with a nonnatural cause E_s

What of intention-based definitions of miracles? If authors of intention-based definitions of miracles are motivated by considerations of inclusiveness, then it seems clear that they should also revise their definitions of miracles by referring to the inclusive term 'nonnatural', rather than the exclusive term 'supernatural'. I am an author of an intention-based definition of miracles who is on record as advertising the inclusiveness of my definition.²⁹ Therefore, it seems clear that my definition of miracles should be revised to be inclusive of the merely nonnatural and should now read:

A miracle is an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a nonnatural agent.

As for other authors of intention-based definitions of miracles who make mention of the supernatural, we would need to know more about their desire or lack of desire for inclusiveness, and we would need to know more about the details of the particular religious position that they wish to promote, before we will be able to see how they can be expected to handle intended outcomes caused by the intervention of

²⁷ However, causation-based definitions of miracles are not entirely inclusive of different religions. They do not accommodate proponents of religious causal anti-realism, such as proponents of the Mādhyamika (middle path) school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. See Clarke, S. 'Luck and Miracles.' *Religious Studies* 39, (2003a) 471–474, p. 472.

²⁸ Because Forrest (1996) and other anti-supernaturalists wish to diminish the degree to which God is distinct from the natural world, they may well be reluctant to accept the interpretation of any particular events as counting as actual miracles. However, I take it that they have no argument against the bare possibility of God's intervention in the natural world. Therefore, they will need to accept miracles as a category of the possible.

²⁹ In Clarke (2003a), pp. 472–473 I follow Luck (2003) in using the term 'religious neutrality' as a synonym for 'inclusive'.

merely nonnatural agents in the natural world. If, like myself³⁰ and Luck³¹, they are motivated to be maximally inclusive of different religious positions, then it seems that they should make reference to the nonnatural, so as to be inclusive of miracles caused by merely nonnatural and supernatural agents. However, it may be that such authors only wish to include instances of events that are caused by agents who are ‘above nature’ as miracles, in which case they should continue to make reference to the supernatural. It is also possible that they will, like the anti-supernaturalist Forrest,³² conceive of God as being nonnatural and non-supernatural. If authors of definitions of miracles wish to include instances of natural events that are caused by nonnatural agents who are not ‘above nature’ as miracles, and exclude instances of natural events that are caused by nonnatural agents that are ‘above nature’, then they should definitely not make reference to the supernatural, but should make reference to the merely nonnatural in their definitions.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Luck (2003).

³² Forrest (1996).