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THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MIRACLES

Traditional discussions of miracles focus primarily on the issue of whether miracle reports are credible, either in fact or in principle, and whether they could be used as the foundation for theistic belief. Some commentators (such as Hume¹ and Mackie² decide that such reports are not credible; others decide that they are, or at least that they can be (Swinburne,³ Davies⁴). All parties to this dispute presuppose that there is a coherent concept of miracle about whose application we might sensibly dispute. A good example of this assumption explicitly stated is found in a recent book by Davies. Davies implicitly takes over Hume's definition of a miracle as 'a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity',⁵ and, after making clear that he is using 'impossible' in the sense of 'logically impossible', he comments

...it is hard to see that miracles are impossible when considered as violations of the laws of nature...it is hard to see that there is any contradiction involved in saying that they [miracles] have happened. Where would the contradiction lie?⁶

Davies does not attempt to answer this rather plaintive query. But there are good grounds for thinking that the traditional concept of a miracle which he and most other commentators use is indeed incoherent.⁷ For what is incompatible with a truth is itself false. If, therefore, it is a true statement of a law of nature that all A's and B's, it follows that any miracle report which says that there is an A which is not a B is false. It is thus logically impossible for any assertion that a miracle has occurred to be true.

Can this extremely simple argument be evaded? We might try imagining a situation in which the law-like statement is not true. If that is the case, it will certainly be possible for there to be an A which is not a B. But then the claim that there is an A which is not a B will not violate any law of nature and hence will not report a miracle.

A second possibility would be to take a different view of laws of nature.

¹ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

² J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford 1982).

³ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 1982).

⁴ Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 1982).

⁵ David Hume, op. cit. sec. 10.

⁶ Brian Davies, *Thinking About God* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), p. 53.

⁷ Others to define 'miracle' at least in part in terms of the violation or transgression of laws of nature include: J. C. A. Gaskin, *The Quest For Eternity* (Penguin, 1984) and Paul Davies, *God and The New Physics* (Penguin, 1983).

Suppose that their form is not 'All A's are B's', but rather 'All A's are B's unless God intervenes to make an A that is not a B'. The truth of such a statement certainly allows the existence of an A which is not a B (provided it is produced by God). But such an occurrence cannot count as miraculous, for it involves no violation of any law of nature. The occurrence of an A which *is* a B clearly does not violate a law of nature so construed; nor by parity of reasoning would the occurrence of an A which was *not* a B (provided it was produced by God). For comparison: a black Australian swan does not violate the generalization 'All swans are white except for black Australian ones'.

It may be that it was something akin to this second possibility that Mackie had in mind in his defence of the coherence of the concept of a miracle. He wrote:

...we might determine that something *is* a basic law of working of natural objects, and yet also, independently, find that it was occasionally violated. An occasional violation does not in itself necessarily overthrow the independently established conclusion that this *is* a law of working.¹

But Mackie is simply wrong here. If the laws he is thinking of have the form 'All A's are B's', then there cannot be a true statement of the form 'There is an A which is not a B'. Of course, 'All A's are B's' might be a very good approximation to a law of nature; and in that case there could indeed be an A which was not a B. But the occurrence of an A which was not a B would not then be a violation of a law of nature (but only of an approximation to one) and hence could not be miraculous. If the laws that Mackie is thinking of are statistical or probabilistic, they presumably have the form 'Some proportion of A's are B's'. This again allows that 'There is an A which is not a B' could be true. But by the same reasoning as above, it could not be a report of a miracle.

A similar confusion vitiates Swinburne's discussion of this point. He tells us:

To say a generalisation 'all A's are B' is a universal law of nature is to say that being A physically necessitates being B, and so that any A will be B – apart from violations.²

He then explains that by 'violation' he means 'non-repeatable exception'. So a law of nature, on Swinburne's account, has the form 'All A's are B's, unless there is a non-repeatable exception'. Suppose then that a non-repeatable exception occurs: there is an A which is not a B, where the A does not belong to a Class A* such that it is true that all members of A* are not B. How does such an A constitute an exception to, or violation of, the law in question? The answer is that it does not. It would only be an exception

¹ Mackie, *op. cit.* p. 21.

² Swinburne, *op. cit.* p. 229.

to a law of the form 'All A's are B's'. So Swinburne's account secures the possible truth of such claims as 'There is an A which is not B' but only at the cost of making it impossible for them to violate laws of nature. He thus makes it impossible for them to be genuine miracles.

The theist may seek to evade the force of this argument by dropping from his definition of 'miracle' any reference to the violation or transgression of the laws of nature.¹ But if he does this, he makes it impossible for miracles to perform the function which theists have traditionally supposed that they could perform, namely, providing evidence for the existence of God. For if an alleged miracle does not violate the laws of nature, it will be explicable in terms of those laws. In that case, there is no explanatory work to be done by the hypothesis that the miraculous event was caused by God. After the natural scientist has done his work, there is nothing left unexplained which requires the theistic hypothesis.

The position then, is this: a miracle is by definition something which violates a law of nature. To say that an occurrence violates a law of nature means that the claim that there has been such an occurrence is incompatible with a statement of the laws of nature. Since these statements are by definition true, necessarily every such claim is false. Necessarily, therefore, there are no miracles. That is the ground for saying in answer to Davies's question that it is contradictory to think that there *could* be a miracle. There is nothing exciting or original in this argument. Something very similar to it can, for example, be found as far back as Mill's *A System of Logic*.² But since it is ignored by so many modern writers, it is worth giving it a modern restatement.

¹ Among those who have taken this line, or at least toyed with it, are Ninian Smart, *Philosophers and Religious Truth* (SCM, 1964), p. 38; R. F. Holland, 'The Miraculous' in D. Z. Phillips (ed.), *Religion and Understanding* (Oxford, 1967), p. 155f; and J. C. A. Gaskin, *op. cit.*

² J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, Bk. III, ch. 25, sec. 2: 'We cannot admit a proposition as a law of nature, and yet believe a fact in real contradiction to it. We must disbelieve the alleged fact, or believe that we are mistaken in admitting the supposed law'.