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# Aquinas's Miracles and the Luciferous Defence: The Problem of the Evil/Miracle Ratio

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**Abstract** Miracles and the problem of evil are two prominent areas of research within philosophy of religion. On occasion these areas converge, with God's goodness being brought into question by the claim that either there is a lack of miracles, or there are immoral miracles. In this paper I shall highlight a second manner in which miracles and the problem of evil relate. Namely, I shall give reason as to why what is considered to be miraculous may be dependent upon a particular response to the problem of natural evil. To establish this claim, I shall focus upon Aquinas's definition of a miracle and a particular free-will defence, the Luciferous defence.

**Keywords** Miracles · Problem of evil · Aquinas · Free-will defence

## Introduction

What is the relationship between miracles and the problem of evil? Hebblethwaite, Wiles, Keller, and Overall claim that the possibility of miracles actually strengthens the problem of evil. This claim has been supported in two ways. First, one might question God's character on the basis that he does not use miracles to prevent evil from occurring, and, secondly, one might suggest that God himself causes miracles that are immoral. In this paper, I will outline this debate and suggest a new relationship between miracles and the problem of evil. In particular, I will argue that in certain cases, what one considers to be miraculous may be affected by one's response to the problem of natural evil. To illustrate this claim, I shall focus upon Aquinas's definition of a miracle and a certain free-will defence to the problem of evil, referred to as the *Luciferous defence*. Before staking out this new relationship, however, it is necessary to outline the debate as it stands.

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**From Miracles to the Problem of Evil**

The presence of evil presents a particular problem for the theist, for why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God not prevent evil from occurring? A popular response to the problem comes in the form of a free-will defence.[1] This defence stipulates that moral evil—that is evil caused by agents—is required in order for humans to make morally important decisions. As Swinburne states:

> If humans are to have the free choice of bringing about good or evil…then it is logically necessary that there be the possibility of the occurrence of moral evil unprevented by God. (Swinburne 2004: 238)

However, Hebblethwaite, Wiles, Keller and Overall take this response to be somewhat lacking. This is because they believe the free-will defence cannot be employed by the theist, as theism entails the possibility of miracles.

Hebblethwaite points out that often miracles seem to involve God stopping evil from occurring. For example, when Daniel was reluctantly thrown to the lions by King Darius, rather than Darius dealing with the consequences of his actions, Daniel was miraculously saved (Daniel 6). Since God can prevent evil from occurring, Hebblethwaite asks why God does not stop all, or at least the great majority, of it from taking place (Hebblethwaite 1976: 92). One response to this attack is to assert that it is precisely because miracles occur infrequently that humans are able to determine the likely results of their actions, and so remain in a position to make morally important decisions. As Swinburne states, 'If God normally intervened to stop our bad choices having their intended effects, we would not have significant responsibility for the world.'[2] Miracles, therefore, can prevent evil, providing they are performed so infrequently as not to be expected. In response to this defence, Wiles takes a more pointed line.

Rather than suggesting that God is not all-good because he does not miraculously prevent the majority of evil from occurring, Wiles brings into question God's character by drawing attention to particular unprevented and catastrophic instances of evil. As he states:

> …it would seem strange that no miraculous intervention prevented Auschwitz or Hiroshima, while the purposes apparently forwarded by some of the miracles acclaimed in traditional Christian faith seem trivial by comparison. (Wiles 1986: 26)

An example of the type of morally trivial miracle Wiles has in mind is that of the miracle of the coin.[3] On this occasion, despite the fact Jesus believed he should be exempt from the temple tax, he was responsible for his disciple producing a coin from a fish's mouth, which was then used to pay the tax. The occurrence of morally trivial miracles, Wiles suggests, provides some indication that God is not all-good; for if the free-will defence is compatible with some small number of miracles, surely

[1] On this occasion we need only concern ourselves with the response's formulation as a free-will defence (which is offered as a solution to the logical problem of evil). However, the reply can also be formulated as a free-will *theodicy* (which is offered as a solution to the evidential problem of evil).

[2] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p.238.

[3] Matthew 17:24–27 (given a literal interpretation).

God should reserve them for catastrophes such as Auschwitz, rather than frittering them away on the paying of taxes that should not be paid.

Vardy defends the possibility of these so-called trivial miracles, arguing that in order for humans to exercise their free will to make morally important decisions, miracles must not only be infrequent but also unexpected. If God were to reserve his miracles for catastrophes then we might not take the appropriate steps to guard against them. For example, if it were the case that we knew our carbon emissions would eventually cause a global ecological catastrophe, then we might be less concerned about this outcome if God had a track record for averting major disasters. Yet such a result again seems to disrupt our ability to exercise full moral responsibility. For surely the more terrible the event, the more we should strive to avert it. Consequently, miracles 'must be hidden and less than obvious' (Vardy 1992: 112). So, far from being morally trivial, miracles of this kind, by the very fact that they are irregular and infrequent, are the only acts God can perform without encroaching upon our moral responsibility; an encroachment which some might argue would be more immoral than allowing Auschwitz or Hiroshima to occur.

Rather than focusing upon the evil that God permits by not performing more miracles, a second tack is to draw attention to the supposed immorality of miracles themselves. Keller offers this type of argument when he asserts that God unfairly chooses to help the beneficiary of the miracle over those who are equally in need and just as deserving (Keller 1995). For example, whilst the children of the Israelites are helped when the miracle of the Red Sea is performed, the children of the Egyptian charioteers are seemingly disadvantaged.

In response to Keller's charge, McKenzie calls upon the concept of grace (McKenzie 1999). He points out that those who may not benefit directly from a miracle may profit indirectly. For example, whilst the Egyptian nation may have suffered a little when they lost their charioteers to the Red Sea, if God had not killed the charioteers the Egyptian people may have suffered considerably more; for had the charioteers captured and returned the Israelites to Egypt, Moses might have brought about further, and perhaps more terrible, plagues upon the Egyptian people.

The last argument I wish to introduce for the immorality of miracles is given by Overall. She suggests that miracles are not congruent with the character of an all-good God. For if God was all good he would not mislead humanity. Miracles, she contends, are:

> …misleading to human beings who, as knowledge seekers, attempt to understand the world by discerning patterns in it. The extreme rarity of miracles and the difficulties and controversies in identifying them are an impediment to the growth of scientific and philosophical comprehension. A benevolent God would not mislead his people. (Overall 1996: 136)

In opposition to Overall's position, Larmer argues that miracles, rather than impeding our search for knowledge, in fact add to it:

> To call an event a miracle is to explain it; it is to explain it in terms of God's purposes and desires. The believer who calls a particular event a miracle is not simply noting that it is unusual or unexpected but making a claim about its cause. If a miracle occurs and we recognize it to be such, we understand the world better, since we are correctly identifying its causal antecedents. (Larmer 1967: 143)

Larmer's reply does not seem fully to satisfy Overall's concern. This is because Overall is not suggesting that an event *correctly identified* as a miracle does not add to our knowledge of the world, only that the very nature of a miracle makes it extremely difficult for us to identify miracles—and so miracles confuse us rather than solidify our knowledge of the world.

Yet there is a problem lurking behind Overall's and Keller's attempts to establish the existence of immoral miracles. If causing a particular miracle to occur (or not causing a particular miracle to occur, in Keller's case) was acknowledged as an immoral act, this would entail the immorality of God, which, given that God is supposed to be essentially all-good, would prove his non-existence. However, if God does not exist, how could the occurrence of an immoral miracle be attributed to God? It seems the most this line of attack could hope for is to demonstrate that the immoral miracle in question could not have been caused by a being properly called God.

It is interesting to note that the arguments given by Hebblethwaite, Wiles, Keller, and Overall all work in the same direction—starting from premises concerning miracles, to a conclusion concerning the problem of evil. Namely, they hope to demonstrate why the presence of evil miracles, or a lack of evil-preventing miracles, strengthens the problem of evil. I wish now to suggest a new relationship between miracles and the problem of evil, one that operates in the opposite direction—from premises concerning the problem of evil, to a conclusion concerning miracles. Namely, I will demonstrate why a particular solution to the problem of evil, the Luciferous defence, poses a new problem for miracles.

## From a Solution to Evil to a Problem for Miracles

The new relationship I wish to suggest concerns Aquinas's account of miracles and a particular extension of the free-will defence. Before outlining this relationship, however, it will prove useful to introduce Aquinas's definition of miracles by comparing it to alternative accounts. Most definitions of miracles can be reduced to the same basic, or underlying, structure. This structure comprises of a natural effect (that is, an effect within space-time) with a non-natural cause. Where definitions usually differ is in the restrictions they place upon this basic structure. For example, consider both Hume's and Swinburne's definitions:

> *Hume's definition of a miracle*: a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity. (Hume 1975: 115)

> *Swinburne's definition of a miracle*: a violation of a law of nature by a god. (Swinburne 1970: 11)

In order to recognize clearly the underlying causal structure of these definitions, consider the following reformulation:

> *Hume & Swinburne's definition of a miracle*: a natural effect, in violation of a law of nature, with a non-natural cause, which is a god.

It should now be evident that both definitions contain within them a natural effect with a non-natural cause. In addition, they both restrict the natural effect involved to a violation of a law of nature, and the non-natural cause to a god.

Consider next Basinger's definition:

> *Basinger's definition of a miracle*: a permanently inexplicable direct act of God. (Basinger 1984)

This definition also contains within it a natural effect with a non-natural cause. Only this time the natural effect is restricted to those events we cannot explain, the non-natural cause is restricted to God, and the causal link between the relata is restricted to instances of direct causation.

Lastly, consider Larmer's definition of a miracle:

> *Larmer's definition of a miracle*: an event that is specially caused by God, that nature would not have produced had not God intervened to bring it about. (Larmer 1998: 40)

Once again, the same basic structure is evident, with Larmer's definition also entailing a natural effect with a non-natural cause. However, on this occasion, the natural effect is restricted to a supernatural event (an event that could not have been caused naturally), and the non-natural cause is restricted to God.

Larmer, Basinger, Swinburne and Hume, like most, define miracles in relation to the basic structure—making reference to a natural (or spatio-temporal) effect that is non-naturally caused. However, Aquinas's account defies this pattern, for it does not entail the basic structure. In order to demonstrate why, it is useful first to make a distinction between supernatural and super-creational events.

A supernatural event is an event that is 'above' the causal power of nature. This conception of the supernatural is evident in the work of Ernst Keller and Marie-Luise Keller, who claim that if no natural event could have caused Jesus to walk on water, and yet,

> …walking on water has actually occurred, then other forces must have been at work; and if these cannot have been the forces of nature…then the forces must be superior to nature, i.e., supernatural forces. (Keller and Keller 1984: 16)

We can attach the property 'supernatural' to a variety of things, such as events, powers/forces, and agents. We can define a supernatural event as follows:

> *Supernatural event*: an event that cannot be caused naturally.

Following this definition, a supernatural power can be understood as a power that is able to cause a supernatural event, and a supernatural agent is an agent who is exercising, or perhaps simply able to exercise, supernatural power (Luck 2007: 290). Many definitions of miracles, such as those maintained by Larmer (1998: 5), Ward (2002), Dietl (1968), Young (1972: 123), and Geisler (1990), restrict miraculous effects to those that are supernatural; and on first glance, Aquinas also seems to define miracles in relation to supernatural events.

Aquinas states that 'a thing is called a miracle by comparison with the power of nature which it surpasses' (*Summa Theologica* p1. q105. a7). He also draws a distinction between permanently and circumstantially supernatural effects (*Summa Contra Gentiles* b3. q101.s.1-4). A permanently supernatural effect is an effect that can never be caused naturally. For example, if no natural event could cause an object to travel beyond the speed of light, then God's ability to do so might be considered

miraculous. A circumstantially supernatural effect is an effect that nature can cause in some circumstances; however, such circumstances are not present at the time of the miracle's occurrence.[4] A popular example of a circumstantially supernatural event is the Virginal Conception. For whilst it is naturally possible for a virgin to become pregnant, given such techniques as artificial insemination etc., in the circumstances surrounding the Virginal Conception presumably no such possibilities were available.

Every miracle Aquinas cites involves God causing a supernatural effect. Yet Aquinas does not think that all supernatural effects caused by God are miraculous. To understand why we must take a closer look at what Aquinas means by the term 'natural'. Aquinas uses the term 'natural' not to refer to entities that are spatio-temporal, but rather to entities that are 'creational'. We can define a creational entity as follows:

*Creational entity*: an entity whose causal powers are created and sustained by God.

All created entities, Aquinas believes, have secondary causal powers; that is, causal powers that do not originate from the entities themselves, but from God. This is not to say that creational entities have no causal powers (Aquinas is not advancing a doctrine of occasionalism), but only that the powers they do have are provided by God. For example, when I type this sentence, the power of my fingers to press upon the keys does not, according to Aquinas, originate with me, but rather with God. It is God who provides me with the power to type. To avoid confusion, I will continue to use the term 'natural' to refer to spatio-temporal entities and use instead the term 'creational' to refer to entities whose causal powers are created and sustained by God.

Just as we have been using the term 'supernatural' to refer to events that cannot be caused by natural entities, we shall define the term 'super-creational' as follows:

*Super-creational event*: an event that cannot be caused by a creational entity.

Given this definition, Aquinas's account of a miracle can be presented as follows:

*Aquinas's definition of a miracle*: a super-creational effect caused by God.

The stipulation that the super-creational effects be caused by God turns out to be redundant in Aquinas's cosmology. For given that Aquinas maintains that only God can directly cause anything, super-creational effects could not be caused by anything else—a stipulation that leads him to conclude that 'God alone can work miracles' (*Summa Theologica* p1. q110. a4). Also, given that all natural entities (that is, spatio-temporal entities) are creational, any effect that cannot be caused by a creational entity will also be something which a natural (or spatio-temporal) entity cannot cause. Consequently, all of Aquinas's miracles involve supernatural effects. Yet, not all supernatural effects are miraculous. To explain why, consider the presence of angels.

[4] Aquinas distinguishes between two types of circumstantially supernatural miracle: those which nature can cause in a particular order, but such an order is not present (such as living after death), and those which nature can cause given a sufficient duration of time, but such a time has not passed (such as recovering from a heavy fever in a second).

Angels, like humans, animals and the weather, are creational entities. That is, whatever causal powers they have are created and sustained by God. However, unlike humans, animals and the weather, angels are not considered to be spatio-temporal. In other words, they are non-natural. Consequently, angels are in a position to cause supernatural effects. For example, if it is in the power of an angel to levitate a pig, and such an event could not be caused naturally, then an angel would be exercising supernatural power if he were to cause such an event. Yet purely by virtue of the fact that the angel's powers are God-given, the levitation of the pig will fail to qualify as super-creational. In which case, as Larmer states, although angels 'may produce unusual events beyond the power of any human to duplicate…these are not, properly speaking, miracles' (Larmer 1996: vii). But what if God himself were to levitate a pig? Since God's own causal powers are not secondary, should we consider such a feat miraculous? The answer is 'no'.

Miracles, as Davies states, 'do not occur because of an extra 'wonder-ingredient' (i.e., God). They occur when something is not present' (Davies 1993: 192–93). Miracles are not simply defined by what God causes, but also by what creational entities *cannot* cause. As Larmer (1996: vii) and Ward (2002: 741) attest, Aquinas's miracles are events that are beyond the *ability* of creational entities to cause. So although God's levitating of a pig may constitute a supernatural effect, the occasion will fail to qualify as miraculous. For such an effect is not super-creational if it could have been caused by an angel.

Earlier I stated that, unlike most definitions of a miracle, Aquinas's account does not necessarily entail a natural effect with a non-natural cause. This is because Aquinas allows for the possibility of *monistic miracles*, miracles that entail only one substance—that is, they do not entail both natural and non-natural events. To illustrate this possibility, consider the act of God making an angel. If no creational entity could make an angel, then its construction by God would constitute a super-creational effect and, therefore, according to Aquinas, a miracle. Yet this miracle does not involve a natural effect with a non-natural cause. Rather it entails a non-natural effect, the creation of an angel, with a non-natural cause, God. By allowing for the possibility of monistic miracles Aquinas's account is somewhat uncommon, as miraculous effects are usually thought of as natural in kind. If Aquinas is correct, however, not only will we have to abandon this notion, but we will also have to question exactly which natural effects should be considered miraculous. To demonstrate why, let us consider a method by which we often evaluate the suitability of definitions.

One method of determining the suitability of a definition is by applying it to a true instance (or paradigm case). If the definition succeeds in identifying a true instance as an example of the concept it is intended to pick out, it remains a candidate. If on the other hand it does not, then it must be abandoned. For example, if we understood a poodle to be a true instance of a dog, then any definition of a dog that did not apply to a poodle must be false. We shall now apply this method to Aquinas's account of a miracle.

The true instance of a miracle I wish to employ is found in Exodus 7. It involves an instance where God transforms Aaron's staff into a snake. There are two reasons why this event seems like an appropriate instance of a miracle. First,

there exists a strong intuition that the instantaneous transmogrification of wood into a living creature by God is the sort of thing we should consider to be miraculous. Secondly, there is a strong theological tradition that regards this biblical event as miraculous. However, if the transformation of Aaron's staff into a snake is a true instance of a miracle, then Aquinas's definition of a miracle turns out to be false. This is because, although this instance involves a supernatural effect caused by God, it does not involve a super-creational effect caused by God; for it is within the power of fallen angels to cause staffs to turn into snakes, as evidenced by the Egyptian sorcerer's ability to bring about the same effect moments later (Exodus 7:11). Given such an outcome, it seems proponents of Aquinas's account are forced to reject the transmogrification of Aaron's staff as a true instance of a miracle.

The rejection of a singular traditional, and intuitive, instance of a miracle may not seem too high a price to pay for proponents of Aquinas's definition. For traditions and intuitions can be wrong. However, the price becomes much steeper if, in addition to Aquinas's definition, we also adopt a particular solution to the problem of natural evil.

Moral evil, as discussed earlier, is evil that results from the actions of agents, such as murder and infidelity. Natural evil is evil that results from wholly physical processes, such as cancer and earthquakes. The free-will defence is usually applied solely to the problem of moral evil. Yet some have attempted to extend the free-will defence to account for the problem of natural evil. The particular extension I am concerned with here is the Luciferous defence.

The Luciferous defence works by reducing natural evil to a type of moral evil. It does this by attributing events such as earthquakes and diseases like cancer to the corrupting influence of fallen angels. This defence is entertained, in varying degrees, by Lewis (1940: 122–23), Davis (1981: 75), Plantinga (1977: 58), and Boyd (2001: 18). The Luciferous defence can also be expanded to account for the alleged miracles of non-theistic religions.

If the presence of miracles provides support for the truth of a religion, then the miracles of non-theistic religions pose a problem for theism. One solution is to deny the occurrence of non-theistic miracles by bringing into doubt the historical or scientific evidence upon which they are based. However, such a move is problematic. For if the conditions concerning what constitutes good evidence of a miracle become too stringent, then they may equally exclude miracles within the theistic tradition. An alternative solution is to call upon the presence of fallen angels, who are said to perform the 'miracles' of non-theistic religions in order to distract people from theism. This move is particularly attractive since it has considerable biblical support, with numerous passages stating that miracle-like effects will be worked by fallen angels.[5] Yet although this move is popular, it comes with a price.

The more power we attribute to fallen angels to account for natural evil, including the 'miracles' of non-theistic religions, the less logical space there exists for God to

[5] Exodus 7:11, 7:22, 8:7; Matthew 24:24; Revelation 13:14, 16:14.

work miracles. By this I do not mean God's actual power is limited in any respect, only that there are fewer kinds of events we can refer to as miraculous. For example, if we wish to suggest that the natural evil that results when a plague of locusts devours a farmer's crops is the result of fallen angels, then we must also accept that the plague of locusts sent down by God upon the Egyptians (in Exodus 10: 1-20) was not miraculous. This is because, if it is possible for fallen angels, as creational entities, to cause locusts to descend, such an act is not super-creational. I refer to this relationship between the Luciferous defence and Aquinas's miracles as the *evil/ miracle ratio*.

The presence of the evil/miracle ratio makes it difficult for us to identify certain events as miraculous, for to do so we must not only know what events are beyond the power of nature to cause but also what is beyond the power of non-natural entities, such as angels. What is more, Aquinas himself gives us reason to believe that there is little that the angels could not do within the natural world, stating that the whole of nature is 'governed by God through the angels' (*Summa Theologica* p1. q63. a7). Collins affirms this view, stating that 'Angelic power is truly cosmic in its range according to the Thomistic account' (Collins 1947: 328). Aquinas also gives us the impression that the fallen angels are the most powerful, stating that 'the demons' sin was pride; and the motive of pride is excellence, which was greater in the higher spirits' (*Summa Theologica* p1. q63. a7). In which case the epistemic difficulties Overall indicated, when she suggested that miracles confuse our ability to know the world, may be far greater than she suspected.

Because of the presence of the evil/miracle ratio, the theist who wishes to employ both Aquinas's account of miracles and the Luciferous defence is in a bind: the more power she grants fallen angels to account for natural evil and false miracles, the fewer kinds of events she can refer to as miraculous. This is likely to have the unpleasant result of making many seemingly traditional and intuitive instances of miracles, such as God's instantly turning a wooden staff into a snake, calling down a plague of locusts and turning the water of the Nile red, non-miraculous. There is, however, a way for such a theist to avoid this result.

What causal powers creational entities have are both created and sustained by God. Yet, if God is currently sustaining the causal powers of creational entities, then potentially he could temporarily limit these powers when performing a miracle. For example, although it may normally be the case that some creational entities, such as fallen angels, could turn a wooden staff into a snake, God presumably could choose to withdraw their ability to perform such a feat in a particular instance. And if God were temporarily to withdraw such causal powers from fallen angels (and any other entities able to perform the same feat), then presumably God's ability to turn a staff into a snake during this period would be circumstantially super-creational, and as a consequence miraculous. Therefore, it is logically possible for the theist to avoid the repercussions of the evil/miracle ratio given this power-withdrawing strategy. Yet such a move does not seem prudent, as it seems quite *ad hoc* to suggest that God is limiting the power of created entities whenever he causes a miracle.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to outline a new relationship between miracles and the problem of evil. Unlike Hebblethwaite, Wiles, Keller and Overall, who argue from the immorality of the miraculous to the problem of evil, I have highlighted a relationship that operates in the opposite direction—from a particular solution to the problem of evil to a new problem for miracles. To this end I established a distinction between supernatural effects and super-creational effects, a distinction that illustrates why Aquinas's account of miracles is one of the few that allows for the possibility of monistic miracles. I argued that proponents of Aquinas's definition of miracles who also wish to employ the Luciferous defence must be wary of the ramifications of the evil/miracle ratio—a ratio that states that the more power we grant fallen angels to account for natural evil, the fewer kinds of events we are able to call miraculous. The existence of this ratio suggests that many of the traditional and intuitive examples of miracles we currently hold are not, according to Aquinas's account, miraculous. And although I identified a way for proponents of Aquinas to avoid this result, by means of God temporarily limiting the power of fallen angels in order to work circumstantially super-creational effects, this strategy appears to be quite *ad hoc*.

Finally, how important is all of this? One might suggest that, as Aquinas's account is no longer commonly referred to, the arguments presented here are somewhat *de minimus*. However, although Aquinas's account is rarely championed in its full form, many contemporary accounts, such as those given by Hughes (1992: 201), Purtill (1997: 62–63), Young (1972), Swinburne (1970), and Basinger (1984), to name a few, do like Aquinas restrict the cause of miracles to God. This is an important move if one wishes to assert that the occurrence of a miracle is evidence of the existence of God. Yet, as Flew (1967) has argued, for miracles to have any apologetic value, we must first be able to identify them. And although the occurrence of a supernatural event, for example, might indicate the existence of the non-natural, what we need to know in order to be certain that an event was caused by God, rather than an angel, fairy or hob-goblin, is that the event is one that only God can cause. This is where the full ramifications of the evil/miracle ratio come into play. For to assert that a miracle is conclusive evidence for the existence of God, whilst also suggesting that it could have been caused by something else, such as a fallen angel, may be problematic. Consequently, it is not simply proponents of Aquinas who need be wary of the ramifications of the evil/miracle ratio, but anyone who adopts an account of miracles that restricts their cause to God.[6]

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