

## In defence of Mumford's definition of a miracle

MORGAN LUCK

*Department of Philosophy, University of Nottingham, University Park,  
Nottingham NG7 2RD*

**Abstract:** In a recent paper in *Religious Studies*,<sup>1</sup> Clarke criticizes Mumford's definition of a miracle<sup>2</sup> as it fails to recognize a supernatural agent capable of intent. Clarke believes that in order for an event to *qualify* as a miracle a supernatural agent must intend it. It is my aim to dismiss this qualification and demonstrate how Mumford's intent-neutral definition is less problematic. I will do this by examining each of the three cases against Mumford's definition and give reason to reject Clarke's criticism and his own definition of a miracle.

### Introduction

Mumford defines a miracle as 'a natural event with a supernatural cause'.<sup>3</sup> Clarke believes this definition lacks one crucial element – intention. Clarke defines a miracle as 'an intended outcome of an intervention in the natural world by a supernatural agent'.<sup>4</sup> Although both definitions agree that miracles involve a natural event with a supernatural cause, Clarke makes a clear distinction between those supernatural causes that are intentional and those that not. I have termed a natural event with an unintentional supernatural cause a *superbloomer*, and a natural event with a non-intentional supernatural cause a *superfunction*.<sup>5</sup> Clarke believes it is intuitively wrong to regard superbloomers and superfunctions as miracles, and offers three cases to substantiate his argument.

- (1) A supernatural agent entity accidentally causing a natural event (superbloomer).
- (2) A supernatural agent being forced against its will to cause a natural event (superbloomer).
- (3) A supernatural thing causing a natural event which is religiously insignificant (superfunction).

I will now offer reasons to suppose that these cases should be regarded as miracles.

**A supernatural agent being forced against its will to cause a natural event (superbloomer)**

Clarke's second example is of a necromancer using an incantation to force the supernatural agent Beelzebub to part the Red Sea, although it is not what Beelzebub intended.<sup>6</sup> Clarke believes this example is more akin to 'an instance of magic',<sup>7</sup> as 'the intentions of the supernatural are characteristic of the miraculous, distinguishing it from the magical'.<sup>8</sup> By this, Clarke is inferring that all superbloomers are magical, not miraculous. I will centre upon this distinction to demonstrate, through the biblical example of Mark 1. 24–27, how Mumford's definition correctly identifies Jesus as a miracle worker, whilst Clarke's does not.

I will now apply the distinction Clarke makes between magic and a miracle to a common biblical miracle – the casting out of evil spirits in Mark 1. 24–27. Here Jesus encounters a possessed man.

'Be quiet!' said Jesus sternly. 'Come out of him!'  
The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.  
The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, 'What is this? A new teaching – and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.'<sup>9</sup>

Let us apply this scenario to Clarke's distinction. Jesus commands the evil spirit to leave; the spirit did not intend to leave, but is forced to by Jesus' authority. Therefore, Jesus causes a supernatural agent to do something unintentionally, which by Clarke's definition makes Jesus a magician and not a miracle worker. Clarke's understanding of magic doubled with his definition of a miracle does not, in this case, produce the correct evaluation. I will now offer an alternative definition of magic which, when doubled with Mumford's definition of a miracle, does produce the correct evaluation.

Although I appreciate the distinction between magic and the miraculous, I do not believe Clarke's onus on intention is warranted, or that his understanding of magic is correct. Different religious traditions often attribute their own supernatural interventions as miracles, whilst denouncing other religious traditions' supernatural interventions as magic.<sup>10</sup> This distinction has nothing to do with intentions. On the contrary, in the Christian tradition the opposing religion accused of dabbling in magic is often informed that its supernatural interventions were manufactured by demons that are *intending* to deceive it from the true religion. My main contention with Clarke's concept of magic, however, is that it supposes a superbloomer alone constitutes magic: 'Although cases of supernatural intervention in the natural world which are not intended by supernatural agents are logically possible, these should not be counted among the miraculous because they are more appropriately described as instances of magic.'<sup>11</sup> I reject this claim, as I believe the term magic would be out of context without a natural causal origin, a spell or Indian rain dance for example. Magic refers to the art by which the supernatural is utilized by the natural to influence the natural. This is

quite distinct from a superblooper. I would like to propose that in order for an act to be considered magical its causal sequence must begin and end in the natural world, with the supernatural acting as an intermediary. This understanding of magic differs from Clarke's in two important ways. Firstly it makes a clear distinction between superbloopers and magic, and secondly it contains no reference to intention.<sup>12</sup>

To further illustrate my definition of magic I will now apply it to the given biblical example. This sequence begins with Jesus commanding a supernatural entity to leave the body of a man. I have termed this a *reverse miracle* – being a supernatural event with a natural cause.<sup>13</sup> The evil spirit is then forced out allowing the man to regain control of his body: this being a natural event with a supernatural cause, which according to Mumford constitutes a miracle. My definition of magic therefore, involves a miracle being caused by a reverse miracle.<sup>14</sup> In this case, it seems that Mumford's definition of a miracle, doubled with my definition of magic, produces the correct evaluation – being that Jesus could work miracles. Whilst Clarke's definition of a miracle doubled with his understanding of magic gives an incorrect evaluation, being that Jesus could not work miracles.

### **A supernatural agent entity accidentally causing a natural event (superblooper)**

The first case that Clarke levels against a superblooper being regarded as a miracle, is that of an Egyptian deity accidentally parting the Red Sea.<sup>15</sup> According to Clarke, this is also an instance of magic, as the supernatural agent did not intend to cause the natural event.<sup>16</sup> As I have previously stated why a superblooper alone can not constitute as magic, I will now turn to the issue of religious neutrality. Clarke's inclusion of the qualification of intent immediately subscribes it to a particular religious standpoint; one that assumes the supernatural realm contains agents who share the human trait of intent. In the interests of religious neutrality one should posit as little as possible about the supernatural. For example, some Hindus may not be willing to define their major god, Brahman, in relation to intention, as it is *nirguna*, that is, 'without attributes'.<sup>17</sup> This sentiment is mirrored in Mumford's definition: 'This is because it seems best to make as few claims as possible about the nature of the supernatural causes involved though, clearly, any supernatural cause would be regarded as miraculous *qua* outside intervention in the natural world.'<sup>18</sup> By personalizing the supernatural, Clarke's definition becomes less accessible to religions that are unwilling to reduce the supernatural to human terms. In the interests of religious neutrality, therefore, intention should not be a deciding factor.

**A supernatural thing causing in natural event that is religiously insignificant (superfunction)**

Clarke's third case is that of a supernatural machine randomly swapping the location of two krill in the Antarctic Ocean.<sup>19</sup> Clarke is implying that, since it is possible for a superfunction to result in a religiously insignificant natural event, it must be intuitively wrong to regard superfunctions as miracles. I reject this argument for two reasons. Firstly, Clarke's argument seems hardly directed against superfunctions as, given Clarke's previous two cases, it seems equally possible that a superblooper could cause a religiously insignificant natural event, or a superfunction could cause a religiously significant natural event. Rather than arguing against superfunctions *per se*, Clarke is suggesting that all miracles are religiously significant. However, since it is also possible for a supernatural agent to cause *intentionally* a religiously insignificant natural event, Clarke's definition fails by his own standards.

Secondly, Clarke is proposing that there is nothing intrinsically religiously significant about a natural event with a supernatural cause. Instead, Clarke is of the opinion that religious significance is mind-dependent, as it must be 'interpreted by natural agents'.<sup>20</sup> In which case, the creation of the universe was not a miracle until humans were created to imbue it with religious significance. However, it seems intuitively wrong to state that the creation of the universe was at some point religiously insignificant. I believe Clarke is confusing epistemology with metaphysics, with dire theological repercussions. Regardless of the impact a supernaturally caused natural event subsequently has upon the natural world, I believe the event itself is imbued with religious significance. Clarke's condition of religious significance, therefore, results in both his own definition being called into question, and the creation of the universe being branded religiously insignificant. However, by acknowledging religious significance as intrinsic to a natural event with a supernatural cause, both Mumford's definition of a miracle and the creation of the universe remain unscathed.

**Conclusion**

It has been my aim to dismiss both Clarke's criticism of Mumford's definition of a miracle, and his intent qualification. I have done this by examining each of the three cases Clarke pits against Mumford's definition. Through his second case, I argued that Clarke's understanding of magic is incorrect, as a superblooper alone cannot constitute magic. I also demonstrated, through the biblical example of Mark 1. 24–27, that Mumford's definition of a miracle, doubled with my definition of magic, correctly identifies Jesus as a miracle worker, whilst Clarke's does not. Through his first case, I gave reason to suppose that Clarke's intent qualification may not be religiously neutral, whilst Mumford's clearly is.

And through his third case, I demonstrated that supernatural intent does not guarantee religious significance, that Clarke's proviso is equally loaded against his own definition, and that it is problematic to make religious significance mind-dependent. Instead I gave reason to suppose that religious significance is intrinsic to any natural event with a supernatural cause. It is due to these stated reasons that I believe Clarke's criticism of Mumford's definition is unwarranted and that intention should not be included within any definition of a miracle.

## Notes

1. Steve Clarke 'Response to Mumford and another definition of miracles', *Religious Studies*, 39 (2003), 459–463.
2. Stephen Mumford 'Miracles: metaphysics and modality', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 191–202.
3. *Ibid.*, 192.
4. Steve Clarke 'Hume's definition of miracles revisited', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (1999), 54.
5. A superblooper is characteristic of a supernatural agent capable of intent causing a natural event contrary to its intentions, whilst a superfunction is characteristic of a supernatural thing, not capable of intent, causing of a natural event.
6. Clarke 'Response to Mumford', 461.
7. *Ibid.*, 463, n.9.
8. Clarke 'Hume's definition of miracles revisited', 56.
9. Mark 1. 24–27.
10. For an example, see Exodus 7.8–11.
11. Clarke 'Hume's definition of miracles revisited', 55.
12. For example, the unintentional breaking of a mirror may have an effect on the supernatural agent responsible for causing natural agents bad luck.
13. A reverse miracle by itself cannot constitute magic. For if the evil spirit had managed to resist Jesus' command, no impact would have been made upon the natural world.
14. Not all miracles however, are part of a magical sequence. If a miracle was not caused by a reverse miracle, then this is simply a miracle. God, for example, acting by Himself upon the natural world constitutes a miracle, not an instance of magic.
15. Clarke 'Response to Mumford', 460.
16. *Idem* 'Hume's definition of miracles revisited', 55.
17. 'Kena upanishad', in *Upanishads*, Patrick Olivelle (transl.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
18. Mumford 'Miracles: metaphysics and modality', 192.
19. Clarke 'Response to Mumford', 461.
20. *Ibid.*, 460.